

PRESSBOOK

Mr.

Modern Painters

January 2019

Mr.'s Mirthful Kitsch at Perrotin in Paris



Courtesy Photo: Claire Dorn ©Mr./Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

“Get Mr.’s hairstyle on Snapchat!” it reads under the title of the latest exhibition at [Galerie Perrotin](#) in Paris, “[Mr.’s Melancholy Walk Around The Town.](#)” If art and social media are increasingly conflated, the Japanese artist Mr. is doing nothing to draw a boundary. Text bubbles and Instagram proliferate in his paintings and drawings, which are on view until March 9.

Having come up during the Superflat movement pioneered by Takashi Murakami—whom Mr. assisted for years—the artist uses a visual language that draws heavily from manga and animé like his mentor, in addition to digital technology, silkscreen printing, and street art. He cites as influences Japanese gadgetry, like the washlet toilet (an electronic bidet commonly used in Japan), and day-to-day touchstones, like convenience stores and takoyaki (a fried Japanese snack made from octopus). His canvases are peppered with emoticon iconography: kawaii bunnies and cherries and ice cream cones. Amidst what the [curator](#) Rafael Schacter refers to in the presentation text as “ceaseless stimuli” and “visual babel,” Mr.’s universe seems untouched by, or perhaps willfully indifferent to, the roiling realities of today.

“People outside of Japan can’t 100 percent understand the references,” the artist said through an interpreter before the opening of his show last Friday. In 2018, Japan was a “guest country” in France, bringing an influx of Japanese art to French museum-goers; in July, the artist will show his works at Musée des arts asiatique-Guimet in Paris in a carte blanche presentation. Asked to what degree Japanese culture is misunderstood in Europe, Mr. posited that Westerners “misinterpret, but it doesn’t matter.” He feels viewers can extract what they want.

Still, Mr. started using Western references four years ago, thinking about how to game the system outside his native context, to feel better understood. “It is strategic to attract attention from people outside of Japan,” he acknowledged of adding hamburgers and donuts to his roster of recurrent icons. He also added English words throughout his pieces: “dope,” “homeskillet,” “howdy,” “to be absent-minded,” “Ruby Tuesday.” These are perhaps less about the West and more about a borderless and universal youth culture. Mr. himself looks more junior than his 50 years, and would sartorially not be out of place with the skaters whizzing around Place de la République. He wore a black cap with “Mr” embroidered in white letters—the moniker refers to the national baseball superstar Shigeo Nagashima, whose alias is also “Mister”—and sported a colorful varsity-style jacket, with a shimmering gold-and-black sweater beneath.

Alongside the cheery foodstuffs and animals that dot Mr.’s canvases are impish girls in miniskirts: they sport barrettes and ribbons in their colorful hair; the irises and pupils of their eyes are clouded by stars and daisies and hearts. They evoke the ambivalence of Henry Darger’s Vivian Girls, were they to wander into an emoji-filled alternate universe with Rubik’s cubes and ’80s fonts. While the conversation around gender and sexuality is changing in the art world and beyond, it doesn’t seem to have altered anything for Mr. (he expressly dodged a question asking about this shift). His work has been deemed Lolicon—a portmanteau of the “Lolita Complex” that designates a young girl fetish—and, in this light, might be uncomfortable viewing for some. (His 2010 “First Time Hopping,” depicting a little pigtailed girl holding a pogo stick, comes to mind.) The critic Roberta Smith wrote somewhat acidly, in her New York Times review of a 2007 show, that Mr. “alternates between treacle and creepiness”; in 2012, at the time of Mr.’s show “Give Me Your Wings” at Lehmann Maupin, The Huffington Post dwelled on “his particular stew of neurosis and cheer.”

“Neurosis and cheer” do seem apt descriptors for his bright, almost frantically exuberant works, as in “Don Quijote” from 2018—the canvas’s Day-Glo hues and floating figures, superimposed on a muted minimart background, have an almost dizzying effect. Samples from Mr.’s notebooks show a gentler and more nimble hand. The tactile gesture of pencil and pen provide an interesting counterpoint to his otherwise color-saturated, computer-articulated vision. His 2016 work “Like a Flower,” a collection of female silhouettes on a single page in pen and pencil, is noticeably less cartoonish. “I want to show pages from my sketchbook that are quite rough,” he said. “These drawings are finished quickly, and are dynamic compared to a bigger picture.”

Mr. starts all his pieces with sketches by hand. A selection are then put into a computer in order to easily edit the compositional choices; he consults with fellow members of the art agency he belongs to, [Kaikai Kiki](#), before any final decisions. Once he has printed his work out, his five-person staff executes the piece to a near-finished stage, and Mr. always completes the final touches. He was, in fact, finishing a painting by hand at Galerie Perrotin the morning of the opening, perfecting the lines so that they were unimpeachably clean.

An exception in the mix of his works displayed at Perrotin is “Journey,” an acrylic-painted cotton and canvas work completed in 2006 that he purposefully burned (the act of setting it on fire can be seen in an adjacent video clip shown on loop). The charred fabric has a deeply textured surface relative to the two-dimensionality of his other works: The “cute” aesthetic is scrambled in the crusting and crackling of the aftermath of the flame.

Concurrent with the exhibition, the gallery's bookstore is showcasing and selling a capsule collaboration Mr. did with the whimsical Paris-based designer Mira Mikati. She is a collector of his work; he admired her previous collaboration with KAWS on a set of three bomber jackets. In an Instagram photo, Mr. playfully christens their teamwork as #rainbowgang. They are clearly kindred spirits, creating insouciant worlds of spirited graphics and mirthful kitsch.
