New Japanese Art: Retrospective and Evaluation

By ***Matsui Midori***

SINCE his engagement with Louis Vuitton and the installation of his sculpture *Mr. Pointy* at Rockefeller Center in 2003, the artist Murakami Takashi has become a household name. His participation in many prestigious exhibitions, including the 50th Venice Biennial in 2003, attests to his recognition overseas. Nara Yoshitomo, another Japanese artist who enjoys unfaltering popularity, has a solo exhibition touring five venues in the United States.

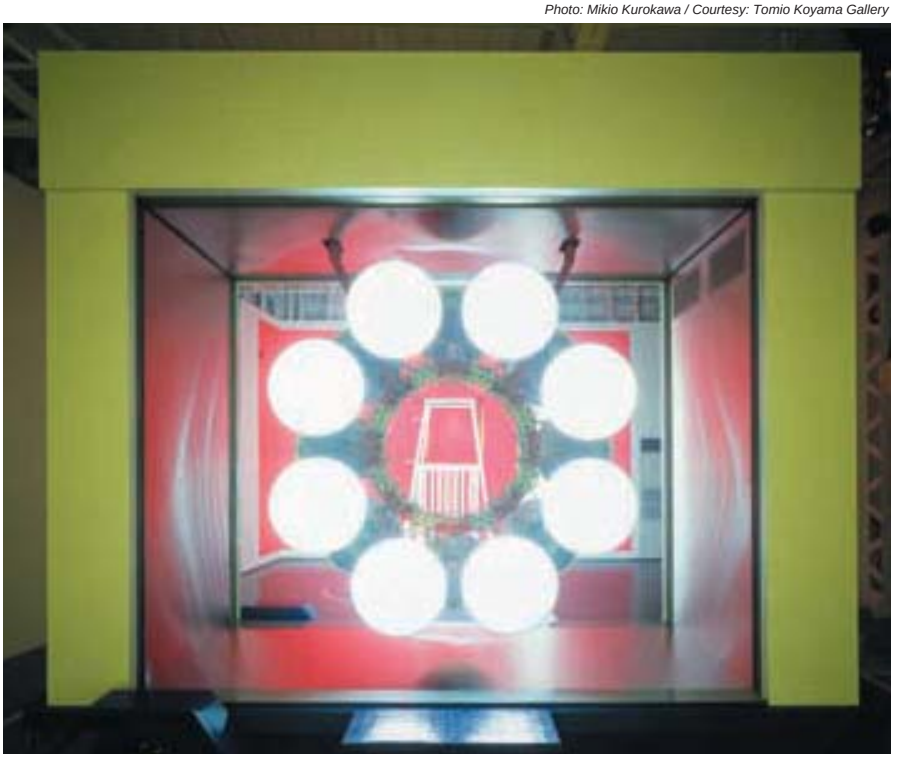
Murakami and Nara represent the Neo-Pop tendency, creating a unique artistic style that modifies the influences of American cartoons and animation through techniques and compositional eccentricity learned from traditional Japanese painting, or illustrations of children's books in the 1930s, themselves inspired by the École de Paris painting. In their expressions, legacies of traditional aesthetics and childlike excess of contemporary subculture are inextricably bound, reflecting the interaction between high and popular expressions that characterizes contemporary Japanese culture.

Although in a vastly different form, the same interpenetration of conceptual awareness and empathy with vernacular reality is demonstrated by the works of Ozawa Tsuyoshi, Sone Yutaka and Aida Makoto, the slightly younger contemporaries of Nara and Murakami. Ozawa's and Sone's relational or interactive works, revealing the significance of Japanese everyday experience, have won international recognition, finding entries in such prestigious shows as the Munster Sculpture Project in 1997, Cities on the Move in 1998 and the 50th Venice Biennial, where Sone represented the Japanese Pavilion and Ozawa participated in the Zone of Urgency section. Aida's consistent focus on abject emotions and marginalized activities which slip from official Japanese representations of its modern history is steadily gaining interest in the recent resurgence of Multiculturalist art.

One could characterize the uniqueness of contemporary Japanese art in terms of its "hybridity," a concept developed by Homi K. Bhabha, the foremost theorist of postcolonialism and globalization. Beyond an eclectic blending of Western and non-Western cultures, the term indicates a new "third" culture and self-awareness of the non-Western subject, shaped through efforts to transform the received political and cultural structures of the modern West by utilizing its theoretical and technological resources. The cultural products thus created are neither purely Western nor Asian, but include the indeterminacy and ambiguity of an identity, reflecting needs, desires and conflicts caused by the indigenous culture's encounter with modern Western systems.

Contemporary Japanese art provides a superb example of hybrid cultural production, clearly reflecting the influences of postmodernism. International interest in Japanese culture as an experimental field for defining postmodernity goes back to the late 1980s. In 1988, the *South Atlantic Quarterly* published a special issue on Japanese postmodern culture, examining the relation between Japan's hyperconsumer society and overblown popular expressions.[1] While the older philosopher Karatani Kojin expressed anxiety about the decentering of rational subjectivity in postmodern language games, the younger philosopher Asada Akira defended cultural diversity, especially the application of poststructuralist high theory to the rich

Photo: Mikio Kurokawa / Courtesy: Tomio Koyama Gallery



Murakami Takashi, "Sea Breeze," 1992, mixed media, 350 x 480 x 250cm

Courtesy: Ota Fine Arts

Ozawa Tsuyoshi, "Nasubi Gallery - Kusama Yayoi Exhibition," 1996, mixed media, 33 x 19.5 x 15cm

chaos of contemporary Japanese subculture.[2] Although generating intellectual excitement, the attempt to account for the hybrid nature of the emergent Japanese "post-modern" culture did not make a lasting influence on younger Japanese creators, partly because scholars' postmodern speculations were done mostly through the medium of the Japanese novel, while the dominant expressions of the contemporary spirit were increasingly conducted through visual media.

Symptomatically, a new tendency in contemporary Japanese art emerged in the late 1980s. Such artists as Morimura Yasumasa and Dumb Type represented a nascent critical reflection on the acceleration of commodity fetishism and dissolution of identity in Japan's hyperconsumer society. Morimura, especially, pioneered a new discursive tendency in Japanese art that acutely reflected the dilemmas of Japanese life and cultural production. In his series of computer-modified photographic tableaux reinterpreting the history of modern painting, Morimura inadvertently responded to the fashion in American art criticism and cultural studies to examine art as a representation of modern ideology, asserting the "other" perspective from feminist, gay, or non-Western positions. Inserting his own image as a character of Manet paintings, as *Olympia* or *A Boy with a Flute*, Morimura indicated the heterogeneity of a Japanese presence within the white-dominated system of Western art.

Morimura's art, completely disinherited from the derivative but self-contained conventions of the post-war Japanese avant-garde, found peers in Miyajima Tatsuo and Sugimoto Hiroshi, who showed a fertile mixture of a meditative mood and technological mastery, with a light sculpture consisting of light-emitting diode (LED) randomly flickering out combinations of numbers without zeros, or with a photographic series of old-fashioned movie theater screens, which appeared as empty rectangles radiating bright light. Assimilating Post-Minimalist inventions of Dan Flavin, or James Turrel, their works grounded the perceptual or conceptual stimuli in everyday situations. Such a mixture of criticality and attention to the everyday characterized artwork selected for the 1989 group show "Against Nature," curated by Nanjo Fumio, Kohmoto Shinji and Kathrine Halbreitch, which toured in Japan and the United States, introducing a new generation of Japanese artists actively responding to the technological or economic changes in Japanese society, with manipulation of such technical media as photography, video and computer graphics.

Neo-Pop is a development of this tendency. It also attempted a critical reflection on the infantilization of the Japanese mind immersed in mass consumption of goods and "cute" *anime* (animated films) images. The artists conducted their critique by simulating the style and methods of popular images that captivate the Japanese mind. Yanagi Yukinori used hundreds of action figures of *Ultraman*, a children's science-fiction hero, to compose a circle evocative of the Japanese national flag. Nishiyama Minako built an ornate dressing room decorated with pink flowers and frills, with "magic mirrors" that let the audience see through the room. These artists ingeneously evoked the process in which images of loyalty, femininity or dominance circulated among and were absorbed by Japanese people through pervasive "popular" images.

Murakami Takashi's early work also participated in this clever attack on the Japanese cultural industry. Nevertheless, with his 1992 *Sea Breeze*, a gigantic sculpture with eight stadium floodlights arranged in a circle adorning each side of a rectangular container, Murakami made a breakthrough to a more ambiguous, but richly allegorical expression. The eight holes emitting intense heat, scorching the audience's eyes to no particular gain, conveyed his self-irony about the lack of purpose or true effect in Japanese art practice, within a society that, for all its production of goods and images, has no direction.

Neo-Pop was an equivalent of the "American Neo Geo," a conceptual art of the late 1980s that actively adopted commodity or kitsch images in order to expose or allegorically refer to the process of cultural confinement in contemporary society. With its rational critique underlying an apparently infantile appearance, Neo-Pop was less alien to international artistic standards. It was natural that Murakami was included in the 1999 Carnegie International, while making his first solo exhibition at New York's Bard College of Curatorial Studies.

Between 1992 and 1995, artists who did not choose to simulate the smooth and glittery surface of contemporary products and pop images practiced a different kind of conceptual art. In 1993, Ozawa Tsuyoshi carried out his first public project of Nasubi Gallery, placing a wooden milk-bottle box in a corner of Ginza, a district with many expensive commercial galleries, as a private and movable "gallery" containing his own or friends' art work. Sone Yutaka, in his 1993 performance *Her 19th Foot*, pre-

Photo: Shigeo ANZAI / Collection Art Tower Mito, Japan

Sone Yutaka, "Her 19th Foot," 1993

sented a monstrous vehicle consisting of 19 connected unicycles, making the performers tumble over one another as they tried to ride together. In 1995, Aida Makoto built a cardboard castle in an aisle of Shinjuku Station inhabited by homeless people, in sympathy for their will to survive. Using modest materials and everyday objects to estrange their conventional usage while evoking their ties with domestic Japanese life, their art asserted the significance of a marginalized life or pure childlike play, which could not be totally integrated with or explained away by theoretical structures derived from Western philosophy. While representing the specificity of a Japanese experience, however, the works of Sone and Ozawa were appreciated as relational sculpture and an interventionist public project.

Nara Yoshitomo emerged in 1995, as an antidote to this hard conceptual tendency, triggering a comeback of figurative painting which assimilated influences of Neo-Expressionist allegory, evoking the innermost emotions and memories of childhood, presented through a personally mythical veneer. Nara's emergence paralleled a similar tendency in the United States, as the expressionistically painted portraits of rock stars by Elizabeth Peyton and a refined mixture of kitsch images of American commercial art and vernacular painting by John Currin reawakened an enthusiasm for figurative painting.

Thus in retrospect, the international acceptance of a new Japanese art is not encouraged by their exoticism. Artists are accepted for their conceptual treatment of the influences of Japanese subculture and everyday life as the expression of a contemporary Japanese sensibility. This, in turn, indicates Japan's active involvement in the process of a capitalist economy and the global spread of the information network, with the result of training younger artists in their ability to take advantage of the products and situations of postmodernity in order to critically distance them, and produce unique expressions, to claim their positions of freedom. What we have today is not a new Japonisme. Rather, it is a new Japanese art. Even Murakami's "Superflat" aesthetic, which apparently exploits the ornamental vocabulary of traditional Japanese painting, and crosses it with anime distortions, derives its true strength from his ability to unite two different cultures to create a hybrid, modifying the formalism of modern painting with a new visual vocabulary drawing on the non-representational decorativeness of traditional Japanese painting. He revives the spirit of estranging reality through geometrical forms that underlies Modernist paintings since post-Impressionism.

New Japanese Art reawakens interest in globalization's influence on cultural expression which has been suspended since the late 1980s. With the international recognition of the significance of the first and second generations of new Japanese artists, it provides a field of possibilities for younger ones. While an emphasis of expression shifts across generations, the enactment of a hybrid sensibility, which has characterized Japanese culture through its encounter with Chinese or Western cultures, is both its unique attraction and the source of its strength. **JS**

Bibliography

1. *South Atlantic Quarterly* (Summer 1988), Vol.87, No.3, Duke University Press

2. MATSUI, Midori "(De)Constructing Where There is No Structure?: The debate over Postmodernism in the 1980s in Japan and the Formation of the New Critical Trend in Visual Art," in Marbel Lee and A. D. Syrokomla-Stefanowska (eds.), *Literary Intercrossings: East Asia and the West*, Sidney: Wild Peony, 1998, pp.80-90

Matsui Midori is a Tokyo-based art critic and a scholar. She has written extensively on contemporary Japanese culture and art and American and European artists.