



Bye Bye Kitty: The Dark Side of Art in Japan

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On the face of it, Japan's cute if infantile kawaii pop culture — embodied by its most famous icon Hello Kitty — has nothing to do with the country's recent misfortunes. But an exhibition at the Japan Society Gallery in New York City, entitled "Bye Bye Kitty!!! Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Art," not only offers an insight into contemporary Japanese art and society — it also constitutes a frighteningly prophetic vision of catastrophe.

In a lecture delivered on February 17, a month before the March 11 earthquake and tsunami, curator David Elliott said that "One of the things that is interesting [about the show] is its apocalyptic nature," and argued that the mood of foreboding in the works on display was "based on the artists' experience" but also "based on their living in an earthquake zone — that something bad could easily happen."

Sixteen artists are featured, split evenly between men and women, and the show is divided into three sections. "Critical Memory" examines the role played in the Japanese psyche by classical art, including the traditional painting forms of ukiyo-e and nihon-ga. "Threatened Nature" looks at environmental crisis. Finally, "Unquiet Dream" reveals the artists' inner anxieties with works of haunting beauty and gallows humor.

Grimness percolates through much of the work. Manabu Ikeda's "Ark 2005" depicts a rotting, entropic city (which eerily presages the area surrounding the Fukushima nuclear power plant, now an irradiated no-man's land), while Akira Yamaguchi's fastidiously rendered views of Narita airport evoke the flattened spaces of classical Japanese painting and its misty golden clouds, but in fact are a depiction of the toxic smog and spoilage of the urban landscape.

Akira's parody of classical Japanese painting is typical of the way in which many of the artists attack tradition. "What I'm always struck by about Japan is the weight of history and tradition and how critical so many artists are about this weight — they work with it but they also pull it apart in so many ways," says Elliott. "I think the work of Makoto Aida is typical of that," he adds, referring to Aida's 23-foot-wide painting "Ash Colored Mountains." At first glance, it looks like a traditional landscape. Zoom in, though, and one discovers the mountains are actually massive piles of dead salarymen, their corpses slumped over pieces of office equipment. Hisashi Tenmyouya's tattooed warriors and phantasmal creatures (executed in the nihon-ga style), and Motohiko Odani's creepy takes on the masks used in Noh theater, are similarly macabre and subversive takes on classical Japanese aesthetics.

As well as the death and destruction, there is a sense of change and social flux in many of the works. Miwa Yanagi's digitally manipulated photographs and videos take the changing role of Japanese women as their theme. Her "My Grandmothers" series asks young women to imagine the course of their lives over the next 50 years. None of the respondents envisions a family life and bringing up children. Meanwhile, Tomoko Shioyasu's stunning, sprawling work, "Vortex," could almost be a dramatic visualization of change, with its paper-cut swirls and whorls creating a sense of uncontrollable motion.

"I really wanted to show a self-reflective, thoughtful and critical contemporary culture, and lay bare the bones of how things are," says Elliott. Lying exposed is a new breed of Japanese artists, straddling heaven and hell, beauty and horror, and seized with a sense of impending catastrophe — but hopefully not harbingers of any more disasters to come.

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