

Bye Bye Little Boy

by [Adrian Favell](#)

Miwa Yanagi: *Geisha (Akiyo/Mai/Hitomi/Noriko)*, 2002, from the series “My Grandmothers,” C-print, Plexiglas, text panel, 70 7/8 by 94 1/2 inches.

Courtesy of the artist, and Yoshiko Isshiki Office, Tokyo.



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It is just six years since the Japan Society in New York put on Takashi Murakami’s “Little Boy” exhibition, a stylish sampling and remix of Japanese contemporary art produced since the early 1990s. Acting as curator and star of his own show, Japan’s best-known contemporary artist put pedophilic images on pristine white walls and plastic elephants and dung in Central Park. The catalogue he edited is a DIY sociology of postwar Japan as reflected by comic strips and the culture of sci-fi obsessed *otaku* (nerds). The Japan Society had a smash hit on its hands, riding a wave of neo-Japonisme that for a while made manga, anime and J-pop the hippest things in town. No one stopped to wonder if Murakami’s selection was representative and good enough, or indeed if his clever packaging of Japan wasn’t really all just © MURAKAMI, as his later world-touring solo retrospective was called.

“Bye Bye Kitty!!! Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art” is an ambitious new survey on view at the Japan Society, one seeking to re-evolve, then overturn, some of the assumptions established by “Little Boy.” The Sanrio corporation’s iconic cat, Hello Kitty, here takes the fall for endless cute cartoon characters and bizarre sexual mores that now elicit fatigue. The lukewarm reception of the recent retrospective at New York’s Asia Society by Murakami’s only real Japanese peer in global celebrity, Yoshitomo Nara, further points toward the expiry of *kawaii*(cute) and *kuru* (cool) Japan.

David Elliott, the independent curator of “Bye Bye Kitty,” suggests in the show’s catalogue that Murakami’s ironic attitude toward the trashy and risqué was meant to be a homeopathy for the country’s passive-aggressive postwar psyche, dominated by U.S. popular culture as much as by its military power. But whatever the critique smuggled in, it was the blatant Warhol- and Koons-derived commercialism that everyone remembers. While recognizing similar sources, “Bye Bye Kitty” takes a different tack, offering a more critical, socially diverse and politically engaged look at recent Japanese art. An unspoken motive behind the show seems to be the desperate wish to steal back some attention for Japan—global notice that has long since moved on to China, Korea, India and other, hotter, Asian locales.

The Japan Society could not have done better than placing this task in Elliott’s hands. Not only is he an acknowledged scholar of postwar avant-garde Japanese art, but he was also once an important player in Tokyo art circles. Back in the early 2000s, Japanese contemporary art

seemed on the cusp of a major international advance. Elliott was headhunted to become the first-ever Westerner to hold a major curatorial position in the country: director of the new Mori Art Museum, atop the spectacular Roppongi Hills commercial and residential complex. The year he arrived, 2001, saw the successful launch of the Yokohama Triennale, and the massive triumphant homecoming exhibitions of Nara and Murakami after their breakthroughs abroad.

The Japanese media dubbed 2001 “The Year of Narakami,” but in the shadow of their fame the local art scene was buzzing too. A brace of artists propelled by the same 1990s Tokyo cultural explosion were hitting their creative peaks, new galleries were opening, and there was a sizeable upsurge in the sales and critical recognition of Japanese art worldwide. Elliott was on hand to soak it all up, translating what he found into a series of important shows at the new museum, which opened in late 2003. He was a key part of the social scene, too, which took shape in the shadow of Roppongi during raucous openings and late-night drinking parties at a scruffy warehouse gallery owned by Sueo Mizuma, a dynamic collector and dealer with a taste for provocative art that employs traditionalist styles, and at journalist Chie Sumiyoshi’s legendary Traumaris bar in the similarly rough-hewn Complex gallery building. What Elliott saw and heard while hanging out made for a rather more powerful brew than the fizzy soda served up by Murakami. It concerned art drenched in a much more caustic and adult popular culture, alert to social and political disappointments. This work grew out of a bitter, local, “Asian” (i.e., anti-Western) and bloody-minded discourse. And, as Murakami’s star rose in the West, the talk in Tokyo was resentful. Elliott’s curatorial choices were essentially born here, in this very specific local environment.

The sense of needing to show Japanese contemporary art as it is, not as it has been selectively represented in the West, runs through Elliot’s exhibition (which opened on Mar. 18, after this article went to press). This means that “Bye Bye Kitty” prominently features, as it should, the man most likely to be at the center of the late-night action, Makoto Aida. It was Aida, not Murakami, by common consent, who was the young Japanese artist of the ’90s in Japan. His work dominated the big retrospective show “Ground Zero Japan” at Mito Tower, in the city of Mito, a landmark show organized at the turn of the millennium by leading critic Noi Sawaragi. Particularly striking was Aida’s “War Picture Returns” series, melodramatic paintings on traditional folding screens, mixing contemporary pop-cultural references with the nationalist style of Japanese war paintings from the ’30s and ’40s. “Ground Zero Japan” (which also included Murakami) explored the anguish of a now economically declining Japan, which saw its financial bubble burst in the early ’90s, followed by the massive Kobe earthquake and the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway by the Aum Shinrikyo group, both in early 1995.

In contrast, Murakami’s original “Super Flat” exhibition, first mounted in the Parco Supermarket gallery in the Shibuya district of Tokyo in early 2000, was a lightweight and rather frivolous roundup, encompassing unknown girls, pop culture icons and hip graphic designers. Yet due to Murakami’s American connections—notably with the rising Los Angeles gallery Blum & Poe and Museum of Contemporary Art curator Paul Schimmel—it was “Superflat” (its title now streamlined into one word) that made it to the U.S., arriving at L.A. MOCA in early 2001. Several years later, when New York’s Japan Society decided to mount a contemporary survey, Alexandra Munroe, then director of the gallery, knew it was “Ground Zero Japan” that should be shown in the West. Talks were held with Sawaragi, but his ideas, intensely focused on Japan, were too difficult to translate. Instead, Murakami’s show—in its revamped version, “Little Boy”—came to define the young Japanese art of the

1990s for global consumption. Aida and many of his most important contemporaries were practically airbrushed out of the story.

Aida, Mizuma gallery's leading artist, is still producing extraordinary works. The new wall painting in "Bye Bye Kitty," *Ash Color Mountains* (2011), showing infinite slag heaps of gray discarded salarymen, is just the kind of work that might inspire the audience to take a closer look into his portfolio. Aida is not really a first- or even second-tier global name. Practically the only attention he has ever had in the U.S. is the minor scandal caused when his *A Picture of an Air Raid on New York City* (1996) was shown at the Whitney Museum in 2003. The painting, made five years before the 9/11 attacks, depicts a Möbius loop of Mitsubishi Zeros circling over a bombed New York skyline. Yet much of "Little Boy"—named after the bomb that flattened Hiroshima—was Aida lite. Murakami is a brilliant theorist, strategist and showman, but it was Aida who, in the 1990s, pushed *otaku* obsessions and perversions further, grappled more compellingly with the nightmares of war and terrorist violence, and doused these themes in a more raucous humor, drawing on Japanese stand-up comedy traditions. Moreover, his command of classical Japanese styles and techniques, reworked as conceptual art in myriad paintings, installations, videos and performances, is breathtaking. Aida is a one-man operation, not a Koons-like production team akin to the one behind the Murakami brand. His output can look scattered compared to the seamless work of his rival. Yet the two recognize that they share the same roots in postwar Japan.

The art-historical importance of Aida is taken for granted in Japan, but he is one of several artists in this show who, as Elliott points out in his essay, need a lot of contextualizing. Easier to grasp are the three other typical Mizuma artists—Akira Yamaguchi, Manabu Ikeda and Hisashi Tenmyouya—making, with Aida, a full quarter of the show from this one gallery. Each produces attractive, minutely detailed graphic work in the neo-Nihonga style: updating classical motifs and techniques using postmodern irony and contemporary cultural references. Their selection here seems a way of making Aida's brutal visions more palatable.

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In works like the vividly graphic *Harakiri Schoolgirls* (2002), Aida can sometimes seem misogynistic, so Elliott takes care to balance male and female artists in the show. Murakami and Nara have worked rich seams—following both traditional Japanese convention and Western taste—by consistently infantilizing women. Murakami took this further by becoming a Svengali figure for any number of handpicked young female artists, employed and represented by his Kaikai Kiki organization. These are his "Tokyo girls," plucked out of nowhere art schools or his regular GEISAI amateur art competitions to become stars via his "Superflat" and "Little Boy" shows.

Elliott's riposte has been to include in "Bye Bye Kitty" several rather more grown-up women artists, very much in control of their work and their representation. Women in fact make up half the show. Appearing with installation artist Chiharu Shiota and neo-Nihonga artist Kumi Machida, Miwa Yanagi is perhaps the most representative. In his essay, Elliott couples Yanagi with Aida as the main entry point to the show. Her elaborately staged photographic works play with the iconography of popular culture in baroque, grotesque, and often disturbing ways. Elliott wanted the bizarre and gargantuan "Windswept Women": those Amazonian figures with bulbous thighs and shriveled breasts, looming against a mythical

fairy-tale background, which bombed at the Venice Biennale in 2009. No one was sure where to place them in current curatorial trends; they also sit uneasily with theoretical feminism. So instead, with space a problem, Elliott chose a few safer options from the series “My Grandmothers” (2000-04), in which young women imagine their lives when they are old, wrinkled and gray.

In truth, major women artists in Japan are still less numerous than men, although the art world there is increasingly influenced by women curators and dealers. And female artists, empowered by picking up cameras since the early 1990s, have recently featured as leaders in Japan’s cutting-edge photography scene. Elliott has selected two other formally distinct exemplars, Rinko Kawauchi and Tomoko Yoneda. Kawauchi shares something of the throwaway esthetic of Japan’s popular “girly photography”—street snaps of everyday scenes or objects made by girls with handheld cameras. Her work, like theirs, was produced first for best-selling books, not gallery walls. Yoneda, on the other hand, is a cerebral conceptualist who uses documentary research and carefully composed images to capture the absence left behind after history moves on from locations of great violence or drama: here, a series of almost blank photos taken in an abandoned South Korean military headquarters.

Beyond this, Elliott lays his bets on artists like Motohiko Odani, fresh from a major success at the Mori Art Museum, represented in “Bye Bye Kitty” with a series of grotesquely altered Noh masks. Missing, though, is the also very gothic and commercially appealing video installation artist Tabaimo. Well known for her hypnotic animated narratives, which deal directly with many of the dysfunctions and anxieties of Japanese society since the disasters of the early ’90s, she was listed in early previews of the selection. But perhaps she has simply become too big—or too busy—for the group show, given that she will have the Japanese pavilion to herself at the Venice Biennale this year. Whatever the story, there’s a hole, since her work illustrates so well many of the themes Elliott advances.

Tabaimo and Odani are archetypal artists of the “floating generation,” as Tokyo cultural commentator Tetsuya Ozaki calls it in his essay for the catalogue. These artists turned to an esthetic very different from that of the pop- and sub-culture obsessed ’60s generation of Aida, Murakami and Nara, who grew up surrounded by consumer toys and imaginative possibilities. Anyone who left college in the early ’90s or after, in contrast, came of age in a world where opportunities and hope had been dashed. This moment is easiest to see in the refined, cool and rather clinical style of Hiraki Sawa [see *A.i.A.*, Mar. ’11] and Kohei Nawa, as they explore the anachronistic potential of evolving technology. Pop sensibility has given way to a slow, almost scientific analysis in the white glow of Sawa’s video screens, traversed by wry, illogical fantasies, and in Nawa’s installations of objects acquired from Web auctions and artificially pixelated with plastic. Nawa also often works with architects, sharing the same experimental methodologies, and emphasis on new materials and sustainable ideals, that have animated Japan’s “post-Bubble” architecture.

So is the Japan Society seeking a repeat performance, or quietly absolving itself for the laughing, *manga*-eyed pop monster it created in 2005? This question lies at the very heart of the struggle to represent Japanese contemporary art. Elliott, as a rare foreign curator who was around long enough to know the true story of the 1990s and after, offers a better-grounded alternative. Yet the real action today in Japan is far more ambitious than this show suggests. Much of it is taking place far from the city museums and galleries, in community art festivals and rural revitalization schemes, such as the international Echigo Tsumari and Setouchi festivals, which in recent summers have brought a host of artists and visitors to largely

abandoned islands and crumbling villages. Art is finding a role for itself in ways that reflect contemporary Japan's most urgent theme: how a society comes to terms with itself some 20 years after the economic bubble burst, after Japan, Inc., ceased to present the vision of an alternate Asian modernity.

The fact is that, however brilliant contemporary art may be in Japan, it will go international only if there are cultural entrepreneurs who are smart and energetic enough to make it happen. This was Murakami's great success, in alliance with his Western curators, dealers, collectors and fans. Back home in Japan, many people are tired of playing the global game. Murakami is famous there, yes; but he is neither loved nor much respected. Increasingly, the Japanese contemporary art world is content to simply talk to itself. And, despite what is implied in the catalogue foreword by the Japan Society's president, Motoatsu Sakurai, the "Bye Bye Kitty" artists are not the next generation after Murakami. There is nothing new or fresh about Aida and Yanagi, or even Odani and Nawa. They have been around for years, working without much international recognition. For some of these very fine Japanese artists, it may be now or never.

Currently On View "Bye Bye Kitty!!! Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art," Japan Society, New York, through June 12.