

Flash Art

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JAPANESE INNOVATORS FRUITFUL TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE MODERNIST AESTHETIC

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Between 1995 and 1997, the Japanese art world enjoyed a brief boom in figurative painting. This found expression in the emergence of young artists who painted evocative images from every-day encounters and childhood memories. These painters, headed by Yoshitomo Nara, were enthusiastically embraced by art journalists and gallerists, as a healing antithesis to the “bad boy” aesthetic which had dominated the Japanese art scene in the first half of the 1990s.

The ideological background for this phenomenon is similar to that surrounding the sudden rise to fame of such New York painters as Elizabeth Peyton, John Currin, and Rita Ackermann between 1995 and 1997. The reassertion of the domestic or “outsider” elements in painting certainly functioned as a driving force in this unexpected painting boom. Many of their Japanese “counterparts,” however, succumbed to commercialism. Meanwhile, a new generation of painters emerged with more specific formal concerns. Together with the survivors of the previous “boom,” they explored individual ways of making painting a conceptually challenging medium, all possible “experiments” having been tried.

Yoshitomo Nara (b. 1959) still maintains his initial emotional appeal, with his trademark images of sloe-eyed children with enormous heads. Nara’s paintings have been championed for their acute observance of the psychological violence of which children are capable and to which they are susceptible. His paintings mix fantasy and reality with boldly elliptical narrative gestures, doodle-like drawing, powerfully symbolic use of strong colors like red, purple, and yellow, and part-lyrical, part-slogan-like letters incorporated into the picture plane. In his recent paintings, Nara frequently puts an isolated figure of a calm child in an empty space suffused with subtle gradation of light; the isolation attains an icon-like quality, aided by the luminosity of the painted surface. Nara’s painting maintains its conceptual edge by consciously playing on conventions—including kitsch—of popular painting that have long been assimilated into the subconscious flow of human desire.

Hiroshi Sugito (b. 1967) shares Nara’s evocation of childhood memory. Unlike Nara, he creates a visual space that reconstructs the perceptual experience of a childhood reverie, instead of evoking it with symbolic images, Sugito achieves the effect of looking into the depth of memory by frequently putting a “frame-within-a-frame,” drawing curtains on the sides of his picture plane, or a grid or box-like structure. Sugito’s precise manipulation of lines, color planes, and half-abstract, half-figurative images functioning as structural elements of his autonomous pictorial space, ensures his experimental spirit which relies on no alliance with any existing “avantgarde” school. Sugito’s aesthetic reflects the influence of two dominant characteristics of traditional Japanese painting: a strong inclination towards autonomous pictorial spaces independent of the laws of verisimilitude, and the functional use of decorative details as structural elements of the pictorial design.

The same influences are found in the enigmatic paintings of Yoshie Sakai (b. 1965). Her paintings can be called “symbolic colorfields,” the entire canvas being covered with a spread of blue, green, or yellow, evoking water, sky, and mountains. While the thickly applied paint and exploitation of the symbolic power of simple colors and modified geometrical composition reveal Sakai’s affinity with the decorative sensibility of traditional Japanese landscape painting, the intrusive presence of the fragmented human body signifies a violent disruption of the self-contained space of formal design, a metaphor for Japanese painting’s encounter with Western Humanism.

Takashi Murakami (b. 1962) endeavors to negotiate the discordant demands of traditional Japanese painting and contemporary art. He has increasingly turned to painting since 1995. His invention of the original cartoon character DOB was an initial motive for this move. Nevertheless, he used DOB as both his pictorial signature and negative point of departure for freer decomposition of the image and reconstruction of the purely flat, ornamental picture plane. In many of his pictures, bright colors are arbitrarily applied to insignificant details, leading the eyes as to bring about a new perception of space. An astute theoretician of his own aesthetic, Murakami claims that

there is a fundamental affinity between traditional Japanese painting and contemporary Japanese animation. Both contest modern Western rational representation by playfully transforming human and natural figures with decorative distortions.

Paintings by Tom Ochiai (b. 1968) and Jun Fujita (b. 1971) are true products of cultural hybridization. Ochiai's artwork bears the subtle imprints of the downtown New York aesthetic: he was a student and novice to art in New York in the early to mid 1990s. Whether with a "canvas" featuring a plastic shopping bag bearing the logo of Agnes b. pitched over a handmade framework, or a "white painting" with an elusive figure of a young girl drawn with a fragile pencil line, Ochiai confronts the difficulty of painting after abstract expressionism, from his uniquely marginal, "minor" position of a foreigner and a latecomer. Instead of grappling with the problem as a "heroic" painter, Ochiai learned to transfer the painterly sensibility to a different medium. In his recent video, a girl being made-up melts, drips, and suffuses the TV screen, evoking various manners of modern abstract painting, while paying fey homage to the New York underground film.

Jun Fujita, the youngest of the breed, challenges the critique of modern abstract painting as "wallpaper," by filling canvases with orderly repetitions of geometric forms placed in or forming grids. Fujita distances his craftsmanship by masking his handpainted images with thin mending tapes that create a wallpaper-like surface. But the subtly fluctuating lines of his circles and broken squares, asserting the individuality of each form, evince a rhythm of techno music, in which discrete sounds rise above a computerized beat without being integrated into a preconceived structure of meaning. In spite of their "ornamental" appearance, Fujita's paintings use geometric shapes as a means of disrupting conventional expectations of the audience, in order to transform visual perception into something more like auditory experience.

Bringing a uniquely Japanese aesthetic sensibility to the field of painting while remaining completely "contemporary," these painters' works exemplify fruitful transformations of modernist aesthetic in the non-Western world without conforming to formulaic avant-gardism or entirely falling back on regionalism.

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