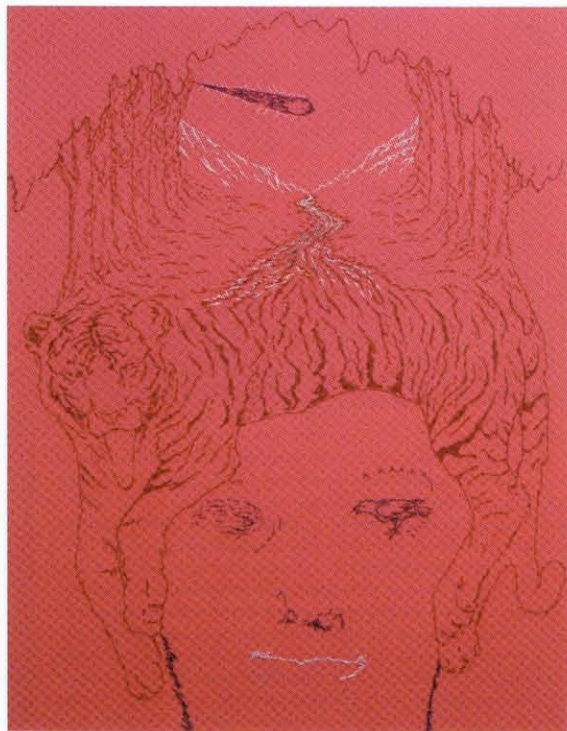


## First Take

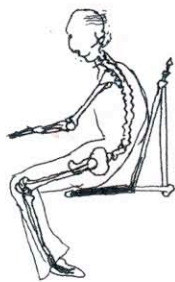
At the beginning of each year, *Artforum* asks a seasoned group of critics, curators, and artists to introduce the work of up-and-comers they feel show special promise for the future. The following pages feature their picks for 2005.

When I first saw artworks by the Kyoto-based couple Zon Ito and Ryoko Aoki at the 2001 Yokohama Triennale, I couldn't tell which was which or who did what. Both in their early thirties, they have located themselves somewhere to the left of the cultural sphere dominated by economic, if not industrial, models of efficiency, investing instead in labor-intensive practices such as embroidery, beading, and handcrafted books, as well as notions of modesty, frailty, and the quotidian. The combination is not unlike the cinema of Hiroyuki Oki or Apichatpong Weerasethakul, or the music of Daniel Johnston, Andrew Bird, and Momus. All are energized by a desire to slow things down in order to revitalize an aesthetic *maquis*, a kind of "rear-garde." This nonmonumental, nonheroic attitude may be one of the most difficult positions for an artist to adopt today.

It was not until I saw Ito and Aoki side by side installing Ito's work in the Walker Art Center's "How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in a Global Age," 2003, that I understood that they are the feminine and masculine counterparts of one artistic practice. The two *are* actually one but remain distinct, their work never revealing the line between feminine and masculine sensibilities. For his part, Ito works primarily with embroidery on fabric, clay sculptures, and



Zon Ito, *The End of the Neighborhood*, 2000, embroidery on fabric and wood panel, 45 1/2 x 33 1/2".



handmade books, but also makes strange animated films with hallucinatory landscapes whose morphing human figures and twisted wildlife scenes are so precious, awkwardly narrative, and obsessively crafty that one might wonder what they could possibly have to do with any contemporary artistic discourse. In fact, his aesthetic is informed by Japanese tradition, 1980s video games, underground illustration, and youth culture, and his program seems to be charged with a deliberate and juvenile withdrawal from the modernist dogma of Cartesian rationality and efficiency. Rather, his visions, often dark and pessimistic, seem fished from the stream of consciousness. In *Dried Persimmons*, 2002, an embroidered diptych on fabric, realism, hypersubjectivity, memory, and dreams seem to drift freely together in a chaotic liquid

world, intermingling forms resembling those of a Surrealist *cadavre exquis*.

Aoki's drawings, installations, collages, animated films, and books—recently seen in Los Angeles at Marc Foxx Gallery—share a similar sense of a rotten Eden. With comparable grace, she depicts microscopic, decrepit floral worlds that suggest the irreversible erosion of being and put a poetic face on the normally imperceptible, as in *Radiowave Observation*, 2004. Occasionally her world is also one of interrupted fairy tales with a meditative, melancholy take on "girly" vanities. In works such as *Pelvis Contortion*, *Back Bone Contortion 1*, and

*Back Bone Contortion 2*, all 2004, her iconography seems borrowed from both Dürer's intricate and codified woodcuts and children's books like *Where the Wild Things Are*, the latter targeting an audience emancipated from innocence but not yet stifled by intellectual immobility.

In their collaborative animated films, Ito and Aoki's aesthetics merge to create a third sensibility. Overall they share a detached, dreamy attitude toward the surrounding turmoil, a sensibility that allows for indeterminacy—what philosopher François Jullien has called "the propensity of things"—to guide their acts. In *Children of Veins*, 2004, the fluidity suggested by their respective works coalesces in movements of concentration, dispersion, and dilution, with forms reminiscent of water changing state from liquid to solid to steam. In *Psychic Scope*, 2001, a salamander becomes a girl who becomes a



river, and in *Breeding Wall*, 2001, the head of a young boy becomes a tiger before disappearing into bushes—giving birth to a microcosm as vast as the greatest macrocosm, as if a single speck of dust contained the whole world. Such morphing imagery suggests an absence of permanence, a series of metaphorical visions, a book of changes, a world where nothing is actually achieved or stable yet is constantly and complexly shifting between becoming, being, and withering. □

Philippe Vergne is senior curator at the Walker Arts Center, Minneapolis.

Clockwise from top: Ryoko Aoki, *Radiowave Observation*, 2004, felt-tip on paper, 9 1/2 x 21 1/2". Zon Ito and Ryoko Aoki, *Children of Veins*, 2003, stills from a video animation, 5 minutes 50 seconds. Ryoko Aoki, *Back Bone Contortion 2*, 2004, felt-tip on paper, 7 1/2 x 5".