

NEW PERSPECTIVES IN DRAWING

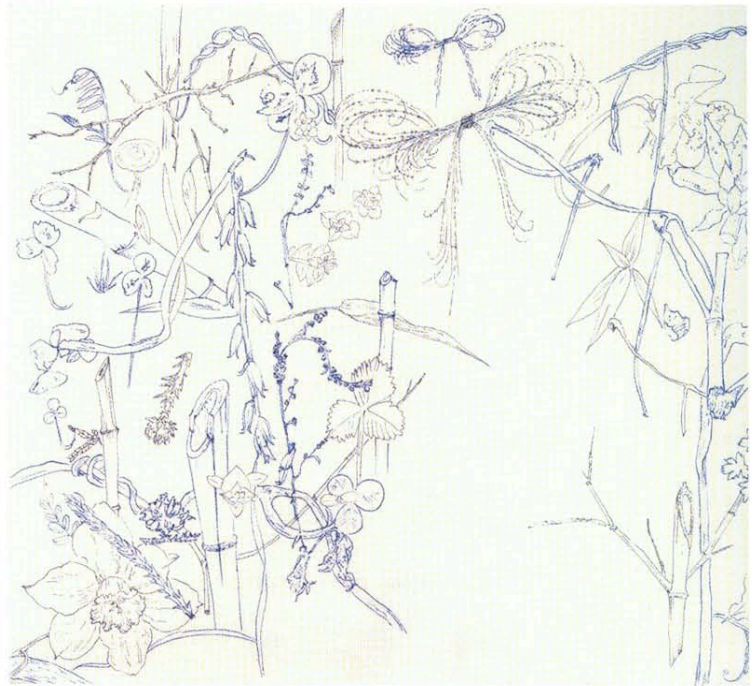
RYOKO AOKI's unabashedly figurative drawings (the artist has also worked with sculpture, painting, installation, and animation) have had their references traced back to high and low sources in Japanese culture, both contemporary and ancient: from *manga* to traditional calligraphy, from kimono craftsmanship to what curator Betti-Sue Hertz has identified as references to *e-maki* pictorial hand scrolls of the late Heian and Kamakura period from the second half of the thirteenth century.

The drawings' recurrent atmosphere is one that is feminine, even "girly," though not necessarily autobiographical. The delicate, often florid imagery presents a young female character exploring her blooming identity and sexuality, immersed in a very private and idiosyncratic world populated by obviously female bodies and plants, whether depicted in fragments or whole. Yet in what at first seems to be a dreamy, fairy-tale setting, figures take a particular critical posture: The recurrent mood is bittersweet. If, on the one hand, Aoki is unafraid to tackle the most stereotypical of figures associated with femininity, she does so both by conveying an infatuation with it and by exuding a keen sense of giving new, more complex, and perverse meanings to that classic of girls' favorite things: the flower. Aoki's common motif here is the blossom—rendered in India ink, watercolor, pencils, and markers of different colors; carbon copies, collages, or as cut-outs; appearing alone, in bunches, or in an all-over pattern; dead or alive. The recurrent themes here are bodies and plants, hiding and seeking, life and death.

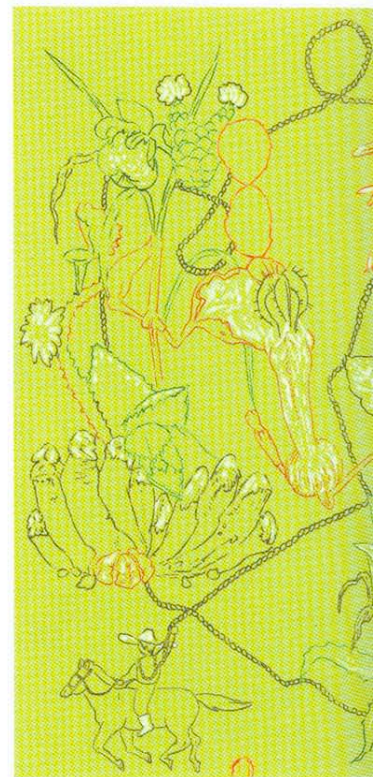
Dead Grass (2003) is a case in point: a seemingly simple drawing made in black ink of a decaying flower, its imagery recalls traditional botanical illustrations or sketches. The stems and leaves are collapsing in decay, and thus compose an unusual design that gives the drawing an odd formal twist. However, a closer look may yield a pair of legs, perhaps belonging to a young girl (or so her frilly, feminine socks suggest), intertwined with the flower's drooping leaves.

Yet what gives Aoki's drawings distinction are her deft formal abilities. Aoki's lines, traces, and decorative patterns are precise and dainty, and at times seem almost to fade, providing a sense of fragility to her figures and settings. The works reveal a handmade quality and, above all, a sharp concern with composition. *Sewing Factory* (2001) depicts a scene where several women are working with sewing machines on multicolored fabrics. The drawing is made with colored markers, yet the women's bodies and architectural surroundings are left blank. What remains is a series of patches and points of many colors, some of them geometric, others more pointillist. In some areas, the women's clothes, their machines, and the fabrics that they sew all become undistinguished from one another. In a Marxist reading, the theme could be said to be "women's work," yet its depiction has been fragmented to the extent that the workers, their machines, and their products have been dissolved and pulverized into each other by means of one of Aoki's favorite weapons: sharply colored patterns. —Adriano Pedrosa

(1)



(2)



- (1) *Dead Bamboo Flower*, 2003, ink on paper, 10 x 14 inches, 25.3 x 35.5 cm
- (2) *Cowboy*, 2004, ink on paper, 5 3/4 x 4 inches, 14.7 x 10.5 cm
- (3) *Dead Grass*, 2003, ink on paper, 11 x 8 1/4 inches, 28.2 x 20.8 cm
- (4) *Flower Chaff*, 2001, ink, felt-tip pen, and watercolor on paper, 7 x 5 inches, 17.6 x 12.4 cm
- (5) *Circle*, 2004, ink and felt-tip pen on paper, triptych, each 14 1/4 x 20 3/4 inches, 36.5 x 52.4 cm
- (6) *Bodhisattva*, 2004, ink and felt-tip pen on paper, diptych, each 11 3/4 x 8 1/4 inches, 29.7 x 21 cm
- (7) *Sewing Factory*, 2001, felt-tip pen on paper, 6 3/4 x 9 1/2 inches, 17.2 x 24.1 cm



(4)

