

# KAMIKAZE KITTENS

Childlike charm and gratuitous violence are often entangled in contemporary Japanese art, reflecting a neurotic nation that has been unable to grow up since the atom bomb

By Andrew Lee

On my living room wall there is a poster by the Japanese artist Makoto Aida, called "Harakiri Schoolgirls". I bought it in Tokyo a few years ago and it has fascinated me ever since. In the centre of the image stands a certain type of Japanese schoolgirl, a *kogyaru*, wearing loose white socks bunched around her ankles and her skirt hitched up so it's extra short. She has a fake tan and bleached blonde hair, and is raising a Samurai sword above her head ready to strike. At her feet kneels another schoolgirl who has just cut open her own stomach, *harakiri* style. She grasps the leg of the standing girl and waits for the *coup de grâce*.

Around them five other schoolgirls are all in various stages of suicide – all smiling. One thrusts a sword through her neck and a rainbow appears in the blood spurting from her wound. Another lies on the ground cutting her exposed intestines with a dagger; blood flows into a drain, past discarded tissues and a karaoke bar flyer. A curious kitten looks on, and the head of an eighth girl lies decapitated in the corner.

It is a horrific, even misogynistic, image. But it's also beautiful. The juxtaposition of comic-style cuteness and ultra-violence is strangely alluring. It draws you in despite the horror. But what does such a gruesome image say about modern Japan?

The violence in this work is at odds with the perception of Japan as one of the "safest" countries in the world. But Aida's painting exemplifies many of the attributes that make contemporary Japanese art so distinctive. Aida is one of a number of artists in the past decade who have combined childlike innocence with violent or sexual themes. Whether this is political or simply aesthetic, the particular mix of cuteness, violence and sex has become the dominant trend in Japanese art. The question is, why?

In recent years Japanese pop culture has been gaining popularity in the west. Japanese cartoons, or *anime*, get mainstream movie distribution as standard.



"Harakiri Schoolgirls", by Makoto Aida

The films of Hayao Miyazaki, such as the Oscar-winning *Spirited Away*, are challenging the likes of Disney for the hearts of western children. Major bookstores now have *manga* sections and you can buy Hello Kitty products in Harrods and Top Shop. Most of these things appear very "cute", or *kawaii*.

In Japan *kawaii* is big business – and is the most over-used word in the language. Everything from beagle puppies (understandable) to the emperor (not so obvious) is labelled *kawaii*. It defines an industry of childish imagery that has become synonymous with Japan. Today it seems that even in the west there's no escaping from *kawaii* characters such as Pokémon.

This is just one side of *kawaii* – the kind we are used to seeing outside Japan. But in Japan the sweet and innocent is often mixed with something darker; and it is this more sinister side that shocks many foreign viewers of recent Japanese art.

In the 1990s Japan changed forever. The bubble economy burst, and with it the illusion of a secure life of riches and prosperity. An apparently safe and wealthy society, which had tried so hard to suppress the negative aspects of its past, suddenly saw salary men committing suicide because they had lost their jobs,

while their children seemed to be running wild. A 14-year-old murderer left the head of his 11-year-old victim on a school gate, and schoolgirls prostituted themselves in order to buy Prada bags. But it was in 1995 that the crisis came. First, the Kobe earthquake killed more than 5,000 people, proving their homes weren't earthquake-proof after all. And then the Aum Shinrikyo cult gassed the Tokyo subway.

It was in the second half of the 1990s that this anxiety, fear and anger started to appear in contemporary art. Although most Japanese artists refuse to be labelled "political", they appeared at a political and social moment in their country's history. There is confusion and tension in their work. Making the horrific "cute" is perhaps a means to minimise anxiety about the future; if something is childlike it's less likely to be taken seriously, less likely to be feared.

Takashi Murakami is the Japanese artist who has done most to bring this new art to a broader audience. The reigning champion of the Japanese art scene, Murakami holds the record for the highest price paid for a piece of Modern Japanese art. His *Miss Ko2*, a 74in statue of a voluptuous cartoon waitress in a mini-skirt was sold at auction for \$567,500. But he is probably best known for his recent collaboration with Louis Vuitton and the current collection of LV bags with "cute" flowers and eyes on them.

Frustrated by the hierarchy of the Japanese art world, which he saw as an imported western concept, Murakami propounded his "Superflat" theory of art in 2000. The term refers to both the flatness of traditional Japanese painting styles and the lack of emotional depth in Japan's modern consumer society. He rejected the distinction between the high and low art by incorporating his own cartoon character, Mr Dob, into his more "traditional" gallery art. Originally created in 1993, Dob has since mutated through several forms. It is his cute eyes that stare out from the Louis Vuitton bags. Recently Murakami has given Dob several companions, which the artist uses to prove that anything can be made cute – even something as horrific as the atomic bombing of Japan. In his

"Eco Eco Rangers Earth Force" several of his new characters fly around two rising mushrooms clouds, one of which has a big, friendly smile and large black eyes. It is this image that opens his current exhibition at the Japan Society in New York.

Curated by Murakami, *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture* is an exploration into the subculture that has influenced the artists whose work displays this cute/violent theme. *Little Boy* was the code name for the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima but it also refers to the mental state of Japan today, says Murakami. The premise for the exhibition (and the 448-page catalogue that accompanies it) is that during the post-war era Japanese society suppressed the emotions of losing the war, bottling up the anxiety and fear caused by having atomic bombs dropped on them. Rather than deal with reality, the Japanese chose to remain children in an adult world. The issue of "the bomb" was absorbed into a subculture of children's cartoons and monster movies, the subculture of the *otaku*. Often translated as "geek", *otaku* actually stems from the formal Japanese word for "your home" – most *otaku* are recluses obsessing over the minute details of *anime*, *manga* and other parts of Japanese pop-culture. Murakami believes the *otaku* – and the Japanese in general – are still interested in childish things. Japan, says Murakami, has been unable to grow up.

Murakami is a friendly well-fed man in his forties with round glasses and a ponytail. Dressed in shorts, a T-shirt and sandals, he appears, as you might expect from his musings, very childlike. His "Kaikai Kiki" studio in the suburbs of Tokyo, where we meet, has become legendary as the home of Japanese Neo-pop. He greets me in English and slips in and out of Japanese as we talk. In his view, the Japanese do not need to grow up. "I think Japanese society is really similar to the story in the *Matrix* movies," he says, comparing postwar Japan to a postapocalyptic Earth. "People cannot rise up or wake up because they are sleeping protected in a capsule. We already found out that *that* society is not real. But it is our normality. Perhaps this is why Japanese subculture has been so strong these 20 years. Maybe if we can keep our minds really childish we can be free."

In his New York exhibition, Murakami supports his argument with examples of the television *anime* and *manga* his generation was exposed to as children. The theme of apocalyptic annihilation is



"Eco Eco Rangers Earth Force", 2005, by Takashi Murakami

## The issue of "the bomb" was absorbed into a subculture of children's cartoons and movies

ubiquitous, from *Time Bokan*, a morning cartoon for infants, which ended each episode with an atomic mushroom cloud destroying the baddies, to *Akira*, an *anime* that shows the destruction of Neo-Tokyo by psychic children.

The juxtaposition of cute and horrific is not exclusive to Japanese art, of course – the British artists Jake and Dinos Chapman are notorious for the black humour in their artwork, for example. But the approaches are different. Japanese artists tend to take the very images that appeal to children, and the child inside us, and pervert them. Western artists, in contrast, typically take adult concepts and make them childish. The Chapmans might put a phallus on the face of a child to shock us but the result is not childish in any way.

Art in which children or childish things have adult sexuality or violence thrust upon them is obviously shocking. But in Japan these distinctions are slimmer. So works by Japanese artists that shock western audiences may actually seem fairly mundane to other Japanese.

Murakami, who likes to make grand analogies, compares these differences in perception to different computer operating systems (OS). "So think of a computer's

OS as people's awareness of 'war' and of 'country'," he says, claiming the Japanese have stopped thinking about these ideas altogether. "When people from the UK see a violent *manga* they think it's violent and they're shocked. But because Japanese people don't have this OS they need something even more shocking, even more extreme to shock them."

For Japanese who have grown up in a society dripping with saccharine Hello Kitty-style characters and sticky pornographic comics, these cute/sexy/violent images seem almost normal. Or if not normal then at least commonplace.

The best place to see this phenomenon is in Tokyo. That Japanese of all ages read comics is nothing new. But walk past Tokyo stores displaying pile upon pile of brightly coloured *manga* and it's soon apparent that although these comics may share certain traits with innocent cartoons like Kimba or Astro Boy, they are not for kids.

Pornographic *manga* are everywhere, often hilariously so. More than 10 years ago on a train in Tokyo, one literally fell into my lap from the luggage rack where a businessman had left it. Anyone who has been to Japan has probably had a similar experience – these types of images are not exactly hidden away. In the electronics district of Akihabara, for example, stores filled with the latest high-tech gadgets have whole floors devoted to cartoon (*anime*) pornography. This is where the cute and the perverted mate. *Anime* DVDs showing cartoons of young girls being raped, tortured or worse must send many >>

>> tourists running, their “Fujiyama” image of Japan tainted for life.

But these pseudo-paedophilic images are not just the product of a misogynist, paternal society. One female artist who has been heavily influenced by this kind of sexual imagery is Mahomi Kunikata. Currently part of the *Little Boy* exhibition, Kunikata has a penchant for drawing violent erotic *manga*, or *ero-manga*.

Overweight with a self-confessed eating problem, Kunikata used to draw erotic manga with her older brother until he died of *karoshi* (overwork). Her younger brother has learning difficulties and her father has an unusual job for modern Japan: he’s a hunter. Kunikata seems nervous as she shows me a couple of her sketch books, filled with rough hand-drawn *manga*. The characters all have the stereotypically cute wide-open eyes and the tiny little mouths that are so much a part of Japanese cartoons. Miffy the rabbit and other *kawaii* characters are even present – but the stories are sexual and violent.

In a shy voice Kunikata says: “In my head I have both cute images and very scary images. If I was to draw only one of them I’d be lying to myself so I have to draw both.” A fairly simplistic answer which suggests that art is a kind of therapy, in her case at least.

Murakami calls this “New York-style psychological maintenance” and says all Japanese need it. “I think, people who have a hurt heart or hurt soul tend to go for extreme or masochistic kind of things to become excited,” he says. “Because something is missing from them. It’s in people’s nature to keep looking for some kind of possibility when they feel something is missing inside of them. So people who create this kind of violent and extreme art want to know what it is inside that makes them want to create this, and the process of creation is their own kind of question and answer system towards the answer.”

While art as therapy is nothing new, this cathartic need to express their inner knife-wielding child is something several artists claim feels natural. Junko Mizuno, author of the cult *manga* novel *Pure Trance*, says: “No one creates art work with only one emotion or one style. Nothing is only cute, it has to have something extreme, I think that is more natural.”

Mizuno’s own work is like a Hello Kitty vibrator (which do exist). It’s cute, sexy and fun. The similarities to other Japanese artists who combine the *kawaii* with the *ero* are obvious, but the women in Mizuno’s work are less passive.



“Butcher Shop”, 2004, by Mahomi Kunikata

## The need to express their inner knife-wielding child is something several artists claim feels natural



Detail from “Pure Trance”, by Junko Mizuno

“Japanese people like the image of a ‘strong/weak’ character,” she tells me when I ask about the trend of schoolgirls with swords. “For example in Sumo, if a very small sumo wrestler is able to beat a bigger sumo wrestler he is very popular. So the idea of women who look weak but are actually very strong is very popular in Japan.” So is this evidence that women are getting more powerful while the men remain childlike? “I think that women have actually gotten stronger,” she says. “But looking at the *manga* drawn by men lately, I think they seem to be in a state of struggle or are confused.”

Perhaps all this cute/sexy/violent art is proof of that confusion. From the outside Japan is generally seen as relatively safe and prosperous. Even when you visit Tokyo it’s hard to believe that it is a country in recession; schoolgirls still shop for Prada and buy Murakami’s Louis Vuitton bags. But the art tells a different story.

When I asked Makoto Aida about “Harakiri Schoolgirls” he told me that the connection between violence and beauty in his work was mainly “to challenge deep-rooted ideas about Japanese beauty and show the grotesque”. He had “intentionally drawn a series of works trying to disturb/unsettle people this way.”

In Aida’s current London show, he continues to juxtapose the innocuous and the disturbing. “Untitled” for example is a pattern of computer-drawn people-carriers. Inside the cars sit bubble-headed people with emoticons for faces (like this >\_<). Next to them are traditional *shichirin* cooking stoves. It makes a nice wallpaper-like image. But when it becomes apparent that this is Aida’s comment on the recent spate of internet suicides in Japan, the implications are more sinister. Those who are suicidal log on to special websites to find like-minded people to die with. They then arrange to meet, tape up the windows of their car, take some sleeping pills, put charcoal on the small portable stove they have brought with them and wait to die.

The other works in Aida’s show share this dark approach. So perhaps there is another possible reason for all disturbing art. Yumi Yamaguchi, author of *Cool Japan: The Exploding Japanese Contemporary Arts*, says I’m looking too deep for an answer and she suggests that the juxtaposition of cute and sexy or violent is a gag. Over dinner with several of the artists in her book she tells me, “the most important thing in art is to make people laugh.” The other artists present tend to agree, telling me that their work is a parody of contemporary Japan. But as rips slowly appear in the fabric of their well-ordered society, perhaps it’s a case of if you don’t laugh you’ll cry.

“*Little Boy: The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture*” is at *The Japan Society in New York* until July 24. The catalogue is published by Yale University Press, \$60, 448 pages.

“*Pure Trance*” by Junko Mizuno, published by *Last Gasp*, \$19.98, 192 pages.

Makoto Aida’s solo show “*Donki Hôte*” is at *Man in the Holocene* at *Ibid Projects*, 210 Cambridge Heath Road, London E2, to July 31.