

The Philosophy of Superflat: by Takashi Murakami (Based on *Superflat*, exhibition catalogue published in 2000 for the Walker Art Center exhibition, Summer 2001)

Below is a summary of the different sections in the manifesto, pages 4 - 25. Direct quotes when helpful are in “quotes,” my comments or asides are in brackets, and I have paraphrased throughout to shorten the summary (though it is still long). At the end I have added web sites for two of the Edo Pop contemporary Japanese artists in the exhibit – Emily Allchurch and Aoshima (she has two images in the Superflat catalogue). Note: The two artists-in-residence, Camilla D’Errico and Joshua Dysart provided a discussion at the MIA on November 17, 2011 that clearly showed the diffusion of anime and manga worlds into the media of Western artists. They discussed their work on graphic novels in a session titled “Mange, Anime, Comics & Pop! Contemporary Practices Rooted in Japanese Tradition.”

Overall: The Superflat Manifesto (A Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art)

The manifesto states that the future of the world might be like Japan now, super flat. This refers to society, customs, art, and culture all as two-dimensional. Murakami argues that this sensibility has been beneath the surface of Japanese history and reviews both high and low art in the essay to convey this feeling. As he states:

“I would like you, the reader, to experience the moment when the layers of Japanese culture, such as pop, erotic op, otaki [manga figurines] and H.I.S.-ism [travel company] fuse into one!”

This sensibility has contributed and continues to contribute to the construction of Japanese culture, linking the past with the present and the future [evidenced in Edo Pop]. “‘Super flatness’ is an original concept of Japanese who have been completely Westernized.”

1. “Japan” and “Art”

He views art as wanting to see the future, that the expression of something artistically includes that expression’s background, motivation, and premises.

2. “Super Flat” in Images

The historical grounding of superflat is based on the Japanese art historian, Nobuo Tsuji whose book titled “The Lineage of Eccentricity” introduced the concept of eccentricity, key to understanding post-war Japanese art history. Derived from expressionistic tendencies of the Edo period, the shared characteristic was the

production of “eccentric and fantastic” images. The six artists included are Iwasa Matabei, Kano Sansetsu, Ito Jakuchu, Soga Chohaku, Nagasawa Rosetse, and Utagawa Kuniyoshi. Tsuji implies a similarity of contemporary manga and poster art. The sequel, “The Categories of Eccentricity,” covers the works of Katsushika Hokusai and Ito Jakuchu with a theory of “decorative culture.”

Murakami notes that Japanese television animation links to his interest in these artists. The common formula for composition structure of both relates to the movement of the observer’s gaze. Specifically a picture controls the speed of an observer’s gaze, the course of the gaze, and the control of information flow. The structural methodology of the “eccentric” artists made the observer aware of the images’ extreme planarity. Murakami descriptions include Jakuscho’s “A Group of Roosters (18th c),” Shohaku’s “Lions (1765-68),” and Sansetsu’s “Old Plum Tree (1647)” and “A Mountain Bird on a Plum Tree (1631).” He links Jakusho’s technique in this art work to Chuck Close, referring to the grid of colored squares that upon closer inspection has a block for each independent shape – creating an optical illusion through a planar work.

The following provides a summary of Murakami’s discussion of Ito Jakushu’s “A Group of Roosters” which is somewhat similar to “Rooster, Hen, and Hydrangea” (1757, Hanging Scroll, see Penelope Mason’s *History of Japanese Art* page 323) as an example of the desire of the artist to move the observer’s gaze. The second example I have included from his discussion is Sansetu’s “Old Plum Tree.” [I picked the first example from the Superflat book since we can view the similar hanging scroll in the docent lounge book and the second as a classic Japanese scroll.]

[Note: Stokstad, vol 5, pages 869 - 870, indicates that Murakami’s work derives from the ukiyo-e tradition and has taken Japan’s manga and anime art forms as an inspiration for painting and sculpture. She states “The emphasis on undulating lines and flat forms – to the point of a denial of pictorial space – also has its root in that Edo period style. Murakami’s floating motifs reference anime and at the same time satirize its international consumer culture.”]

In the first example above, Murakami notes that one rooster faces us directly, calling our attention to the rooster and obstructing our line of sight; the other roosters are only shown in profile. The observer’s gaze moves from the rooster at the top downward, zizzagging until it arrives at the forward-facing rooster at the base. The rooster’s eyes “fix the image and make the layers of the zigzagging scan fuse into one.”

In “Peasant and Plum Tree” the observer’s gaze moves across the panels (four sliding doors). Balance is created through design and again a zigzagging

movement in the placement of the trunk and rocks; bamboo leaves are used to break up linear movement. Directness and gaze movement in a single movement are captured by these “eccentric” artists.

3. The “Super Flat” Lineage

Yoshinori Kanada, an animation artist in the 1970s, molds his images after these early artists. His taste moves toward explosions and strange poses and movements of humans and robotics -- with the cresting wave image of Hokusai’s “Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji” drawn in human form. This generation tended to integrate images made by multiple animators for TV. Under Kanada each animator asserted his or her individuality in contrast to the system of elimination of variations. Given his popularity, the journal “Animage” was founded after the success of “Space Cruiser Yamato.” According to Murakami, Kanada produced effects like those of Shohaku and Hokusai in images of warships, tanks, robots, and girls. The battle scene of one work, “Galaxy Express 999,” was said to have influenced the liquid metal motif of the later film, “Terminator 2.” His special effects resulted in a succession of special scene animators as the centerpieces of many works. This approach is seen as Japanese “with single-perspective painting never crossing their minds. Instead they constructed their images along vertical and horizontal lines. ... This movement of the gaze over an image is key concept in my theory of the ‘superflat.’”

4. Changes in “Art”

According to Kitazawa, in talking about “art” there are two related terms: 1) *geigutsu* or technique and learning; and 2) *bijutsu* or the technique of creating beautiful things, a term developed in 1872 at the time of the Vienna Exhibition. Today Murakami uses the term *geigutsu* to refer to all forms of art. *Bijutsu* refers to the visual arts and is divided into Japanese painting, Western painting, and sculpture. The term *geigutsu* refers to “the state of that of a newborn, ... a blank slate.”

The popularity of outsider art and of Picasso’s later works related to the Japanese view of art in which non-discriminating “freedom” equals “art.” The art boom in Japan began with the economic growth of the 1960s. Sales of Japanese painting, Western painting, pottery and craft grew steadily; department stores showed and newspaper companies sponsored Western paintings. Japanese paintings in a Western style fell out of favor with these exhibitions, since they showed the differences in ability. Original Japanese art, ceramics and painting, then attracted attention. The ceramics world linked with the tea ceremony world to maintain high prices and resultant status.

With the bubble of the 1980's the prices rose too high and discount travel brokers such as H.I.S. appeared facilitating travel abroad where famous works were directly experienced. Murakami refers to the money game of both Japanese and Western art that protected the system and its organizations. The art industry subsequently collapsed.

“Eroticism and nonsense, which the West looks for in the realm of art, have always been a part of the Japanese subculture and manga; perhaps excessively so.” Youth, in search of an identity, shifted to music. The latest trend is celebrity art, or art about a celebrity. These include lithographs of special effects illustrations with the motifs of celebrities, anime, manga, and godzilla. [As an aside, the artist in residence, Joshua Dysart, at the MIA lecture noted he would love to do writing in collaboration with an artist on for godzilla.] “Happy illustration art” has been popular since the mid-1990s. As Murakami notes “seeing the art scene at the height of its confusion was a valuable warning for individual artists and probably acted as encouragement.”

5. The Real in Postwar “Art”

A clear line was drawn between avant-garde art in the Western conception and folk art such as domestic Japanese painting and crafts, supported as art by a mass audience. Factions on the scene at the Yomiuri Independants exhibition included “Neo-Dada Organizers,” “High Red Center,” “Concrete” and “The Zero Dimension.” They linked up with underground theater and dance as well. Their activities were swallowed up into the 1970 Osaka World's Fair where “art” became a celebration, and artists entered mass society as entertainers. Murakami references the printmaker Masuo Ikeda and the writer Katsuhiko Otsuji (pen name). Avant-garde artists have now moved their artistic pursuits into the popular media, allowing them to enter Japanese society; art and entertainment are now being fused.

[Interestingly Murakami states that there has been a shift from a Japanese conception of art (*bijutsu*) to a Western conception, yet we now strongly see the influence of Japanese art forms on Western art, such as manga and anime.]

6. The Shared Center of “Art” and Entertainment”

The concept of “entertainment” and “profession” have existed in Japan historically, but the imported term “art” created confusion between them since the Meiji period. Otaku figurine creators [from what I gather these are figurines based on anime] see their “art” as a “profession,” although Murakami views them as avant-garde “artists.” Japanese art education also leads to this ambiguity. He notes that instead of the educator's view of Picasso's art as superior in technique

or related to temperament the following questions should be asked [here are a couple of examples]: “How did the avant-garde movement shatter the existing conception of that role? What sort of history emerged from this reconsideration?”

In Japan, art is a medium of “groundless freedom” according to Murakami, and has been attached to “an idea of a creative Japanese original “entertainment.” At the Osaka World’s Fair Japanese art was connected to celebration and entertainment. As an example at the otaka festival to sell manga, run by volunteers and known as the “Comic Market,” 450,000 people participated. “The willful ignoring of both copyrights and sexuality censorship created an intentional chaos that is representative of the radical nature of contemporary “art” in Japan.”

7. The Super Flat Image “Japan”

In this essay Murakami has fused images together similarly to the “eccentric “painters and the animator Kanada, and calls it “Japan.” The following is directly quoted from Murakami as it links the various artistic modalities in Japanese culture through the “superflat” image.

“At the center of the image is the thick trunk of Japan’s eccentric, secular, grotesque “sub-culture.” Moving up the trunk to the upper left of the image, you see a small bird representing a meaningless “hierarchy,” but you can ignore that. After moving your gaze slowly along a horizontal path to the left, there are “celebrations” and media frenzies that produce a sense of speed that zigzags up and down, but when you look at the extreme left you see a small branch growing up. At the end of the branch are two small blossoms, “eroticism” and “grotesquerie.”...Your gaze then fixes on the two dark eyes of the creature, which you recognize as an “otaku.”...Along this creature are bamboo leaves known as “manga” and anime,” which have been scattered about to diffuse their power. Returning to the thick trunk of “freedom” and “childlikeness,” you see that it slides off to the right before curving down suddenly. Beside the trunk is the rock of “pop,” whose trunk is deformed “cheap ticket” moss, which sets the tempo. All along the bottom, the scattered cosmos of “entertainment” are blossoming out of season. At the top of the image are gilded clouds, above which “the West,” “History,” and “Art” are only partially visible. The image is, as you would imagine, very eccentric, and it is hard to say that it is beautiful. As it is done in a “super flat” style, though, it is also extremely “avant-garde” and “original.”

8. The Birth of “Super Flat” –ism

Chaos surrounding “art” in Japan continues to be the source of energy for its production. The “avant-garde” lineage of eccentricity from this chaotic history is embodied in Kanada’s animation . From that image Murakami extracted the

concept of “super flat” that integrates artists and works with a unique Japanese sensibility. “Superflat” is like other “isms” (Cubism, Surrealism, Minimalism, Simulationism), but is one the Japanese (“we”) have created, and is the “budding saplings of a new future.” [at this time, 2000, Japanese avant-garde was alternative and underground].

Below are web sites linked to two of the contemporary artists in the MIA Edo Pop Exhibition: Allchurch and Aoshima:

Emily Allchurch, contemporary artist in the Edo Pop MIA exhibition:

<http://www.japaneselondon.com/events/tokyo-story-after-hiroshige-emily-allchurch-japan-house-gallery>

Examples of her digital lightbox images that are now at the MIA Edo Pop exhibition:

<http://www.diemarnoblephotography.com/exhibition/tokyo-story-photographs-by-emily-allchurch/>

Chiho Aoshima, City Glow 2005, contemporary artist in Edo Pop MIA exhibition

City Glow 2005

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WoAeTMElkbQ>

City Glow 2007:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BX0ZXU9fSMM>

City Glow at Union Square:

http://www.nycsubway.org/perl/artwork_show?117

Image from City Glow similar to MIA:

<http://www.google.com/imgres?q=chiho+aoshima+city+glow&hl=en&client=firefox-a&sa=X&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&biw=1019&bih=600&tbm=isch&prmd=imvns&tbnid=mXkB3qIVmqqhGM:&imgrefurl=http://neoiyouwe.net/blog/archive/2007%3Fpage%3D12&docid=TE5-aUiev0rE8M&imgurl=http://www.neoiyouwe.net/blog/attach/1/2320804933.jpg&w=500&h=321&ei=JZq0TuXiAeTciQKMn8BV&zoom=1&iact=hc&vpx=698&vpy=306&dur=108&hovh=180&hovw=280&tx=214&ty=97&sig=1150949432340>

[65286024&page=6&tbnh=116&tbnw=160&start=88&ndsp=18&ved=1t:429,r:5,s:88](#)

City Glow images with photo of the artist: had been displayed in NYC subway:
<http://bestuff.com/stuff/chiho-aoshima>

Installation was in NYC in May 2011:

Chiho Aoshima: City Glow

American Museum of the Moving Image

3601 35th Ave Astoria, New York 11106

'City Glow' was a temporary installation of a five-panel video panorama by artist Chiho Aoshima.

***City Glow clip from Museum of the Moving Image

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zP7I932ftgU>

MOCA Museum of Contemporary Art LA: Overall City Glow 2005 image:

<http://www.moca.org/pc/viewArtWork.php?id=72>