

## Chiho Aoshima and Aya Takano: New Japonisme, Feminism and the Orientalist Self

### ABSTRACT

The internationally acclaimed artist Takashi Murakami organized *Tokyo Girls Bravo* in 2004 at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York, featuring the work of ten female artists from Japan, with the goal to “provide insight into Tokyo Pop art from the female perspective by presenting it as a form of escapism, distraction and entertainment within a culture known for its strict social codes.” The exhibition helped launch the careers of Chiho Aoshima and Aya Takano. This paper will examine the broader socio-historical politics, including the paradoxical nature of identity construction, in relation to the work of these two artists.

The strategic use of female Japanese identity is not unlike *Japonisme* in the late nineteenth century, an image of Japan based on selected exports. However, while the embodiment of this form of Orientalism, or self-Orientalism, bears the potential risk of limiting the understanding of Japanese female identity, seeking a renewed or revised Japonisme can also be regarded as a subtle and subversive exploitation of the previous (Western) Orientalism that serves to align Japan with the West as a cultural power. For example, the qualities of cuteness and femininity became a cultural phenomenon in the mid-1990s and were seen to demonstrate a “soft rebellion” (Kinsella 1995) when employed by such artists as Aoshima and Takano.

Aoshima’s subject matter addresses the conditions of globalization by exploring the overlapping of the artificial and the natural, and her work appears simultaneously disastrous, surreal and sublime. Her mixture of cultural references includes crosses and other religious symbols, decorative tribal jewelry adorning figures, koi goldfish, snakes, teary-eyed angelic girls and zombies. Her work can be connected to late Edo aesthetics marked by extreme (super) flatness, narrative compositions and subject matter of the natural world, merging past, present and future. Armed with a vast vocabulary of images and a mastery of computer illustration techniques, Aoshima presents panoramic views of sensual adolescent goddesses, creatures of other worlds or dreams, and post-apocalyptic scenes of vivid skies, luscious trees, colorful animals and human hybrids. Women in Aoshima’s world are fantastically complex, exhibiting a sense of wild rage with authority, or choreography in chaos.

A graduate of Tama Art University with a degree in art theory, Takano’s postmodern sensibility has earned credibility in Europe and the United States and further extends the depiction of female youth as having a connection to nature and an affirmation of life. The fluidity of the human body in her drawings suggests a fusion between realms of fantasy and reality. In addition to her visual art practice, she is an established graphic designer and science fiction writer. Her psychologically rich work has absorbed Japanese comic styles and Western science fiction and evokes a sense of nostalgia for childhood or innocence lost, while also looking to a future, where female sensibilities recover and revitalize a once-destroyed landscape.

Aoshima and Takano are important examples of newly established genres in visual art and identity, and viewing their work as a strictly Japanese phenomenon or cultural product can be seen as a failure to contextualize the work within the dynamics of contemporary globalization. Furthermore, characterizing the artists as female for exhibition highlights a discrepancy in contemporary artistic identity. The result of this gendering and cultural commodification, however, is a perceived authenticity, which also serves to enhance the transnational positions inhabited by women artists in a late capitalist and emerging twenty-first century context.