



Q&A with Asuka Ohsawa

by Ion Birch

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Ion Birch: I often think of art as the protracted physiognomy of the artist, your work seems to reflect this idea.

Asuka Ohsawa: Well, since a piece of art and its creator are often inseparable, I suppose your statement is true. There are certain aspects of myself (such as my cultural heritage, my obsession with stripe socks, Mary Jane shoes, bunnies, textiles, etc.) that I consciously incorporate in my work, and I'm sure there are some other personal traits that show up without my conscious effort or intention. What about you? I know your drawings are often described as the portraiture of your own personal sexual fantasies. Is that an accurate description of your work?

Ion Birch: My work is not really about sex it's an investigation into human behavior, culture, social stereotypes... in short it's about the world as I see it. I noticed that you also deal with anthropomorphic themes, can you tell me what your ideas are behind this?

Asuka Ohsawa: Ever since I was a little kid, I have been an avid reader of fairy tales and fantasy tales (yes, I'm nerdy), and quite naturally I have a life-long affinity for anthropomorphic characters. Also, I'm highly influenced by the works of 19th-century Japanese artist Kuniyoshi Utagawa and his disciple Kyosai Kawanabe. They both produced a large volume of images with anthropomorphic themes - sometimes they were satirical, and sometimes they were simply witty and fun. Under the disguise of child-like imagination and the sense of innocent wonder, these images can convey the incredibly brutal reality of the time or humorous adult contents, and such subversive allegorical images inspire me. By the way, I really like your "Mr. Penis" character. Usually I'm not a big fan of anything phallic, but Mr. Penis is undeniably attractive. Perhaps it's his very proper attire and mannerism that makes him so charming. I also like the fact that he's an independent being with his own will.

Ion Birch: The figure you mention is meant to symbolize several things, among them the phalocentric aspect of our culture, your remarks remind me that there are almost no male human characters in your recent work. Is this a gynocentric utopia or a narcissistic dream world populated with Asuka Ohsawa clones?

Asuka Ohsawa: It was only the past year or so that I began to work with human characters (prior to that point, I had been working exclusively with animal-human hybrid characters), and I had a very hard time working with male characters. No matter how hard I tried, they always appeared utterly devoid of individual personalities, and I just didn't like them at all. Coming up with intriguing characters requires a good amount of preliminary work, and I think I wasn't interested in investing that much time and energy in developing boy characters. Coincidentally, last year was also the year in which I began to think quite a bit about the social conventions and expectations imposed upon girls, in part because of my five-year-old niece who is so eagerly absorbing all of these stereotypical ideas about what girls should be and do. I love her dearly, but her hyper-girliness drives me really, really crazy. Anyway, partly because of my interactions with her, the exploration of the concept of femininity has become one of the central themes for my new narratives, and I realized that these narratives didn't require the presence of male characters (thus I got rid of boys from my work). So, yes, I am creating a fantasy world inhabited by girls and their friendly animal pals, and in this regard, perhaps it is "gynocentric". Your question about my clone inhabitants is an interesting one, for it is related to your first question about the notion of self-portrait. Technically speaking, a clone is genetically identical to its ancestor, meaning that the clone needs to look identical to its ancestor, right? Well, I certainly don't look like my own characters, although I do wear knee-high stripe socks and Mary Jane shoes like my characters do. I certainly don't wear pink skimpy outfit, you know? On the same note, what they do in my work reflect my own desires, wishes, and worldviews, and hence they inevitably represent some aspects of myself. So they're more like my "avatars" than "clones", I suppose. What is your relationship with your own characters?

Ion Birch: Most of what I draw is culled from memory or invented as I go along. The characters are often vague self-portraits and fantasy figures, which develop meaning and build a kind of narrative. The entire work comes to represent some idea, a problem, a dilemma, or just a poetic notion, which bears weight for me. It's all basically a reflection on my predicament, social, cultural, biological whatever, which leads me to my next question about your work. Why have you chosen to embrace your cultural heritage in such a direct manner by incorporating these Japanese tableaux?

Asuka Ohsawa: I actually resisted the idea of including my cultural heritage in my work for a long, long time. A non-Western artist using the aesthetics of her/his native culture often invites an oversimplified reading of her/his work, which is very unfortunate, and I really wanted to avoid the label of "a Japanese artist doing a Japanese thing". Then Takashi Murakami came along, and I got very intrigued by his theory of Super Flat, which is built upon the critical work of Japanese art historian Nobuo Tsuji. Both of their work offered me a new way to look at and understand the traditional visual culture of Japan, which led me to a deeper investigation into the pre-20th century Japanese art. The more I got to know the history, the more fascinated I became about the way each generation of Japanese artists appropriated and transformed the aesthetics of the previous generations. So, in short, it is my fascination with the pre-20th century Japanese art that caused me to engage in a dialogue with the visual tradition of the past.

Ion Birch: Well I think it's a good choice, there is so much important Japanese art that has not been looked at closely enough, and of course I'm especially interested in the erotic tradition in Japanese art, which is very unique. Your new work seems to comment on this tradition. Can you talk about this and how it relates to the show's title *XX*?

Asuka Ohsawa: The decadence of *shunga*, or Japanese erotic prints, certainly interests me. Also, the *shunga* were often meant to invoke laughter more than sexual arousal, and I'm interested in the comedic aspects of sexually provocative images. I think my recent obsession with the culture of burlesque and old pin-up images is related to this, though my images don't contain the depiction of penis and vagina – somehow they don't intrigue me all that much. I'm more into the subtle suggestion of sexuality. I get more excited about nipple pasties, long gloves, and spiky heels – perhaps that's fetishistic? Hmm...that's a whole new territory that I haven't even explored. The title *XX* simply refers to female chromosomes, but I like the fact that it suggests so many other things.

Asuka Ohsawa's solo show *XX* is on display at SUNDAY in the Lower East Side between the dates of April 13, 2007 – May 13, 2007.

Ion Birch is an artist who lives and works in Brooklyn; his solo show *The Spiraling Sun* is on display at Freight + Volume in Chelsea between the dates of March 30 – April 30, 2007.