



'Crayon' by Mahomi Kunikata: Crayolas have never been the same since.

Manga has taken on a new post-Murakami neurosis. And the artistic results are no mere power puff.

'DID HE WHO MADE THE LAMB MAKE THEE?'

By Karina Hof

In the late 1700s, William Blake published a collection of mystical poems expressing his view on the two polarities of the human soul. *Songs of Innocence and Experience* would become canonical, not merely as an example of early Romantic English poetry, but testament to art's tireless negotiations between novelty and been-there-done-that, and—thanks to postmodernism—been-there-done-that-and-will-do-it-again-with-novel-self-consciousness.

Over two centuries later, the opening

of Mahomi Kunikata's exhibition, *March of the Absent Friends*, testifies to artists' continuous chiselling away at the innocence/experience dichotomy. The 27-year-old Japanese artist currently on show at the Reflex New Art Gallery does this vibrantly and violently in the 48 pieces comprising what is her first solo gallery exhibition ever.

Kunikata's medium is manga, and her mentor is Takashi Murakami, Japan's top pop artist, perhaps most famous for, in 2003, whitewashing the classic Louis Vuitton handbag while technicolouring its traditional LV-mono-

gram design. Rainbow is the new black in the world of Murakami and his six protégés who form the Kaikai Kiki collective and work together in a factory outside Tokyo. According to Reflex Gallery curator Alex Daniëls: '[Kunikata's] is a pretty new world for Amsterdam to see. We may be shocked by the content indeed, but the form is also very new for Europeans.' (Over half the pieces in *March of the Absent Friends* have already been sold.)

At first glance, Kunikata's paintings and drawings appear to be quintessential manga. The protagonists are globe-headed, long-limbed figures with an enviable fashion sense. Flying saucer-size eyes do all the emoting on faces with barely any indication of other mucus membranes, much less mood. Yet, this isn't manga à la *Sailor Moon*: it's the X-rated material of otaku. 'Otaku' is the colloquial Japanese word for 'geek' and since the '60s, has come to refer to a subculture of mostly young, male and girlfriend-less fans of erotic manga and its movie form, anime. Their zealous devotion has produced a uniquely Japanese subculture serious and subversive enough to—in a Western context—make Trekkies appear as mainstream as Oprah viewers.

Kunikata's larger canvases place characters in detailed narrative scenes whereby everyday life—particularly that of female adolescence—is fraught with pernicious encounters and grotesque images.

'Suzumi-chan's Christmas memories' is a comic-strip-like collage recounting the time when the bare-chested, baby-blue-pantied manga character was kidnapped by boys dressed as Santa and Rudolph. Kunikata explains how they 'stripped her down completely, tied her up with Christmas tree decorations, and placed cakes on her body, licking her all over until the cake was gone. While they didn't rape her or anything, the experience was traumatic nonetheless.' Coloured Christmas lights are used to bind her legs and a star-shaped ornament or cookie serves as a gag, all the while stuffed animals and phallic ephemera (from candles to bowling pin) witness the molestation.

'Crayon' could well be taken as the exhibition's mascot piece. With a crotch

for a vanishing point, the painting is an otaku's wet dream. Yet, the piece is meant to critique more than arouse. As Kunikata explains: 'There are a lot of people who look at my drawings and say, "looks like she really likes otaku." So, I started to think about the differences and similarities between a girl who looks like she really likes otaku and the characters in my drawings, and I came up with this drawing, which is my interpretation of a girl who "looks like she really like otaku."'

As one of the smaller frames on display, the painting captures, Vermeer-like, a stunned moment in the world of a blue-haired girl whose form-fitting school uniform, pink headband and enormous eyes make her the epitome of Hello Kitty-cute. But the girl's face competes with what lies beneath: her legs are spread-eagled, one hand supporting her left thigh, the other holding a pink crayon up to her matching pink labia, prominently revealed by white panties wedged to the side. 'Crayon' is a self-reflexive embodiment of artist-drawing-artist-drawing, germane to Kunikata's sympathy with the subversiveness of manga and, simultaneously, her own post-feminist way of emasculating otaku.

As she said, communicating through an interpreter, on the evening of her opening: 'I don't think that otakus would like me. I think the otaku taste is for a very perfectly shaped, perfectly proportioned girl without a single pimple, or anything like that, and there's very specific types that the otaku have. Some otaku people don't even like real people, they're so obsessed with these cartoons.'

Indeed, a gentle and warm Kunikata seems worlds away from the otaku fantasies she creates. Her amorphous figure, even when dressed in a tailored, all-black suit as on the night of her debut, is nothing like the sharp neon angularity of manga. Kunikata does have an edge, but it's a shy one that must be drawn out by—and in—her work. If innocence is earnestness, Kunikata herself appears a lamb. But her artwork undeniably bleats with painful experience. **W**

March of the Absent Friends runs until 4 November at Reflex New Art Gallery (Tues-Sat 11.00-18.00), Weteringschans 79A, 423 5423. A second solo show for Mahomi Kunikata is being planned for the near future.

Artists open their doors at P/////AKT and Zeeburg this weekend.

A CHANCE TO MEET THE HUURDERS

By Mark Wedin

Three years ago, an old paint factory on Zeeburgerpad was transformed into another budding *broedplaats*. All walks of creative life moved in, got to work, and called their new home P/////AKT.

Of the 15 individual and group initiatives working there, three are most visible: AX710, De Parel and Aim. Aside

from their own artwork, the three groups are continually organising regular exhibitions in—and out of—P/////AKT, usually for young, unknown and controversial artists.

This weekend is the annual P/////AKTotaal, where all the tenants of the building will file out into the 400 square-metre exhibition space and show off their wares. Included in this group are the band Ghost Trucker (who share their lead singer with popular guitar band Caesar) and DJ Kid Goesting. Both are performing Friday night, and both guarantee a party to last as long as you do (P/////AKT got one of those snazzy all-night permits for special events).

But aside from the music and fun, the weekend is simply a chance to meet

the *huurders*, who work in various fields from writing and painting to theatre and dance. One of them, Patrick Minks, is an experimental film-maker and editor. Among his many projects, he's edited much of Jos de Putter's documentary work. Minks has been at P/////AKT since the beginning, and he's quite happy with the environment. 'Most of the work I do, I do alone,' he says. 'So it's nice to have a place where other people are around. There's another film editor down the hall and we work with a lot of the same people. That's nice because you can share each other's experiences.'

For the exhibition, Minks will be screening a work in progress called *Splijtstof*. 'It's a collaboration with a sound

designer,' he explains. 'What we did was to create images and sounds without knowing what the other person was doing.' They based the work on a piece by American composer/writer Paul Bowles, and they added certain rules, like limiting the film's duration to two minutes.

Alongside meeting the P/////AKT tenants, you can also follow the nearby cultural route called C-burg, a bike path that's laid out to lead you towards the various open ateliers in the nearby Zeeburg community. With this many artists' doors open, you ought to step inside and say hello. **W**

P/////AKTotaal runs from 6 until 8 October, P/////AKT, Zeeburgerpad 53, www.pakt.nu, www.c-burg.nl