

Gazing at the Male/Female Gaze:

GWYN HELVERSON

The Composition of Gender as Seen in the Work of Six Neo-nihonga Artists;

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Abstract

This paper studies the recent phenomenon of *neo-nihonga* art in Japan; that is, artworks made using traditional Japanese materials and/or incorporating traditional imagery, but invigorated with modern themes from, for example, hip-hop and *otaku* (geek) culture. The theories of feminist art historian Chino Kaori, who challenged essentialist notions of art in the categories of [onna] (woman), [Nihon] (Japan), and [bi] (beauty/aesthetics), are applied. The artists were questioned and their works analyzed not only using these categories but also via an additional [otoko] (man) category.

The male artists discussed here deliberately choose *nihonga* as their medium to challenge Western ethnocentric aesthetic notions of Japanese art as inferior. They seek to promote essentialist Japanese notions of [woman], [man], and [Japan] through sometimes violent images of Japan reclaiming its power in the world. The female artists in contrast have, to date, no overt political imagery in their work. They claim that the use of *nihonga* is simply a means to the end of personal expression. However, they also indicate that sexism within Japan causes this impulse to heal via painting. Their choice of *nihonga* is thereby an unconscious but symbolic protest against the essentialist concept of [woman].

Since Chino and other anti-essentialist art historians would describe the male artists as being 'doubly-colonized,' the females then are 'triple-colonized' by the culturally-based essentialist prejudices of both the West and Japan. Ironically, however, the international success of *neo-nihonga* indicates the existence of universal aesthetics beyond cultural bias.

Introduction

The artists of contemporary *nihonga* (Japanese-style painting with mineral pigments and animal-based glues on handmade papers) seem to fall into a few main categories: those who paint imagery of women, flowers, Mt. Fuji, and so on in traditional style,¹ and those who have gone abstract.² However, the six artists to be discussed in this report have been chosen because they belong to yet another group: they use some combination of traditional figurative imagery

and/or technique while consciously or unconsciously illuminating gender issues in Japan in the contemporary age.

The theoretical basis for this report is contemporary feminist art historical theory from both Japan and the West. From the 1970's onward, Western art historical feminist researchers had labeled the existing canon "male" to much attack by mainstream art historians who claimed that the historic lack of female artists was not the result of structural gender-based bias, but just "natural".³ The 'natural' view was essentially white, Euro-American, "heterosexual, privileged, and above all, male"⁴ in which women artists "had been lost, or forgotten, or simply dismissed as insignificant because female".⁵ In addition, non-Western art being seen as inferior, with non-whites being "doubly colonized",⁶ was challenged as a form of "cultural myopia at best and cultural imperialism at worst".⁷

The Japanese art historian Chino Kaori applied similar sociological viewpoints, such as gender, class, or race, while noting that the identity of the viewer affected a works' impact.⁸ Studying Japanese art from the viewpoint of, for example, gender, would correct the historic imbalance, thereby negating the need in the future to apply the category.⁹ Power relationships between those who produce an artwork, commission it, and 'consume' it were also to be studied.¹⁰ In Kumakura and Chino's groundbreaking work entitled *Onna? Nihon? Bi?: Aratana Jenda- Hiron ni Mukete* (Woman? Japan? Aesthetics?: Towards New Gender Critiques), the categories [woman], [Japan], and [beauty/aesthetics] are seen as not universal but as fluctuating according to the sociopolitical conditions of any era,¹¹ currently being used to justify sexist and neo-nationalist policy.¹² Accordingly, the six *neo-nihonga* artists here will be studied to ascertain how, when, and why they depict females in their art, and for what kind of viewers. A new category will be added; [*otoko*] or [man], and subjected to the same path of inquiry in order to challenge its essentialist base as well. Examining how 'natural' gender roles appear in art will in fact reveal those gender roles to be contemporary cultural constructions, thereby initially proving Chino's theory to be correct. Attempts will be made to remain aware of feminist art history's potential shortcomings such as the enforcement of structural bias in applying pre-existing categories¹³ such as [man] and [woman], as well as ethnocentricity¹⁴ in applying the Western versus Japanese art historical binary.

Nihonga, [Japan] and [Aesthetics]

Japan is said to have adopted Western art to demonstrate its power at succeeding internationally, while reorganizing Japanese art from the Meiji Era on as *nihonga* to guarantee

its cultural independence in an increasingly internationalized world.¹⁵ However, this resulted in Japanese art being looked down upon by the dominating culture's theory of [aesthetics] as 'feminine': its emphasis on line and two-dimensionality were seen as being too decorative and delicate,¹⁶ while politically some Japanese came to symbolically see modern Japan as a woman dominated by the West.¹⁷ In addition, some scholars warned about *nihonga's* potentially dangerous neo-nationalistic tendencies,¹⁸ its rigidity about technique and subject matter another manifestation of *nihonjinronism*; that is to say, held up as uniquely Japanese and therefore incomprehensible to 'foreigners'.¹⁹

Nihonga, [Woman] and [Man]

A popular *nihonga* subject has been *bijin*, or portraits of non-confrontational, idealized, mostly anonymous beautiful women. Bryson writes that Japanese and Western males found a common ground in objectifying women in art; images of the eroticized Western female nude in oils and the passive, kimono-clad Japanese "good wife, wise mother" of *nihonga* as "quasi-available sexual objects" were exchanged to "smooth political relations" during the Meiji Era.²⁰ Later, the ideal female beauty in rural life painted by artists such as Bakusen Tsuchida was used to promote "racial purity" and the "golden future of fascism".²¹ After World War II, mother and child and/or images of *bijin* from other lands were depicted as a kind of universal ideal²² which may smack of exoticism, but also reflected a government policy towards the 'ideal' wife/mother of the nuclear family in support of peaceful consumeristic society.²³

A contemporary subgenre of the *bijin* seen not only in art but in the mass media in general is the *shoujo*, in which girls are depicted as possessing a "budding sexuality",²⁴ attractive and non-threatening. Hasegawa claims that this focus on 'pink' (or cuteness) is the result of a crisis of masculinity stemming at least in part from World War II; a form of incomplete identity which stimulates the feeling of wanting to protect purity and innocence.²⁵ Rush, however, is less optimistic, noting that this trend results in a need for both protection and submission from adult women.²⁶

The *bidan* phenomenon; that is, portraits of males made solely for their sexual attractiveness and/or to promote ideal 'male' characteristics has been and still is less developed in *nihonga* although it has been popular in *ukiyo-e* (woodblock prints).²⁷ The *bishonen*, or beautiful young male under 18, is depicted as elegant and androgynous,²⁸ often with heroic superpowers, in manga for young female readers,²⁹ and is beginning to be seen in contemporary erotic art by Japanese women.³⁰

Neo-nihonga, Erotic Imagery, and Consumerism

Another theme not directly related to the history of *nihonga* per se but prevalent in the work of these *neo-nihonga* artists is erotic imagery. *Shunga* (mass-produced erotic woodblock prints), traditional Shinto fertility props, a lack of Judeo-Christian taboos about sex,³¹ and cultural attitudes towards sexuality in gender roles all influenced a variety of sexual materials in Japan. Genitals engaged in heterosexual activity were blackened out of all imagery according to Western-influenced laws of public decency from the end of the Second World War.³² This law nonetheless allowed for the development of *yaoi manga* for females in which male homosexual sex, a taboo in the Christian West, was depicted.³³ Currently, Japanese art historian Yamaguchi Yumi champions Japan's lack of censorship which allows artists to depict "grotesque" and "violent" sexual images.³⁴ Although this focus on sex in general is described as a metaphor of the violation of the national psyche as "a form of dissent, transgression, or disobedience" in that it rejects the West by returning to Japanese tradition,³⁵ no further analysis of sexual violence is given. The causal model of violent visual depictions as inspiring actual violence,³⁶ the fantasy model of violent sexual depictions as escapist and preventing actual violence,³⁷ and the sociopolitical model of violent media as both a symptom and perpetuator of various injustices³⁸ could be further debated in relation to Japan's current situation. Nonetheless, this transition in visual imagery from the *bijin* into the *shoujo* of consumerism³⁹ is said to delineate the infantilization of Japan⁴⁰ into a society in which impulses are geared solely towards the consumption of goods in support of the capitalistic economy.⁴¹

Tenmyouya Hisashi: Gender-inclusive Neo-nationalist with a Vision?

Tenmyouya (b.1966) grew up in a working-class family in a suburb of Tokyo and takes pride in being a mostly self-taught artist, saying that famed samurai "Musashi Miyamoto learned his skill on his own, and beat everyone...I feel similar".⁴² He became well-known outside the art world for his World Cup Soccer poster showing two Japanese players in samurai armor and helmets on the playing field, an image in which he displayed one of his main themes: that the modern Japanese [man] should re-embrace the warrior ideal to triumph both domestically and internationally.

In another image called *Present Status of the Land from whence the Sun Rises*, an eagle figure (a symbol for the U.S.) teases a defeated mythological lion figure (a symbol of Japan) with a banana on a rope, one of numerous images criticizing Japan's current political situation. Tenmyouya sees himself as a transformer of "weak" modern Japanese⁴³ through images such as this in his self-proclaimed *neo-nihonga* genre.⁴⁴

Most of Tenmyouya's portraits are anonymous samurai, idealized male nudes, or flashy but tough *boso-zoku* (members of Japanese motorcycle gangs⁴⁵). While such *boso-zoku* portraits are predominantly of men, in all images, including those of female bikers, the figures fill up the picture frame and employ the same low stance, aggressively glaring down at or directly into the viewer's eyes in confrontation. Similarly, in the series *Japanese Spirit*, muscular, idealized males and females ride machines said to embody foreigners' stereotypes about the Japanese.⁴⁶



Tenmyouya Hisashi (2002), *Chiba Low-Rider Girls from Notorious Street Group Series*, acrylic on paper, 22.7x26.8cm.

© Tenmyouya Hisashi. Courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery.

Tenmyouya also produces work featuring ghosts, and these predominately depict female figures. The ghosts are all taken from *kabuki*, *rakugo*, or *ukiyo*e stories: women treated badly who come back from the dead to avenge themselves. Once again, in these images Tenmyouya seems to be allowing women a directness of expression and a reclaiming of their power that is rarely seen, although in these stories, the females do have to die to take revenge on their enemies. Given Japan's difficult modern history, could these images and others like them convey an unconscious longing for revenge by a feminized Japan against a masculinized oppressor?⁴⁷

Both Tenmyouya's general female images and the female ghost images are to be noted for their lack of the "slightly confused, dreamy...look of 'seductive vulnerability'"⁴⁸ typically seen in contemporary *shoujo* images. In his response to a questionnaire about ideal [men] or [women], Tenmyouya repeated predictably that he admired samurai-like types who honor "duty, humanity, and morals", qualities he claims modern Japanese (both men and women) "lack".⁴⁹ However, his ideal woman was "Yamato Nadeshiko",⁵⁰ a euphemism for the stereotypically modest, humble Japanese woman seen in traditional *nihonga* portraits.

Tenmyouya draws strength for his artwork and philosophy from hundreds of years of Japanese history, but to date there seem to be no images of Japan's colonial and war eras. He has subverted the cliched images of the insecure, post-war Japanese businessman, the docile *bijin*, and the innocent but sexualized *shoujo* with his equally powerful, unsexualized, contrarian men and women. He symbolically adheres to [Japan] in his neo-nationalistic art, seemingly without contemplating the consequences, leaving if and/or to what degree he is willing to accept actual violence for a strong Japan and Japanese people unknown.

Aida Makoto: The Master of "Sensational, Horrifying, and Shameful"⁵¹ Parody?

Aida (b.1965) was typically middle-class, and he knew, as with almost all of the artists studied here, that he would become an artist due to inherent skill from a young age.⁵² He speaks of an alienating "adolescence...plagued by extreme shyness toward women".⁵³ Aida wet his bed and developed an obsession with/phobia of cute young girls, a complex magnified by his older sister whom he jokingly calls "Satan" for displaying his soiled underpants to friends.⁵⁴ He describes his mother as a "*feminizuto*," or feminist, so he naturally became the opposite in reaction.⁵⁵ She prohibited violent, pornographic manga at home, so Aida says he had to draw his own for purposes of masturbation.⁵⁶

Aida seems to be a stereotypically postmodern artist with characteristics including a biting

sense of satirical humor, and conscious mixes of 'high' and 'low' art, Japanese and Western art, and modern and traditional imagery;⁵⁷ for example, painting images of cockroaches on gold screens in a parody of *nihonga* motifs. In *A Picture of an Air Raid on New York City (War Picture Returns)*, Aida has made a screen-like painting showing Japanese zero planes bombing New York City to display what he calls "the deeply hidden desire in most Japanese souls" for revenge against the U.S..⁵⁸ Aida is equally critical of Japan in regards to the war, as *Ge-to bo-ru (Sensōga RETURNS)* (Gateball (War Picture Returns)) shows, in which aged Japanese people play a form of croquet using Asian heads for balls.

Aida may criticize the male work ethic in Japan with images such as *The Ash Color Mountain*, which shows Mt. Fuji as a gray pile of broken computers and businessmen, but he does not explore the motivation for his numerous misogynistic images in any depth. Aida explains that *osu* and *mesu* (the words for males and females usually used for animals, not humans) simply see things differently.⁵⁹ Similarly, in his answer to a questionnaire about his ideal man or woman, Aida takes the question to be a sexual one, and in his answer reveals a fascination with pubescent girls.⁶⁰ *Blender* (2001) is one of Aida's technically brilliant but infamous works indicating this fetish. It is "a gruesome childhood fantasy in which thousands of smiling young female nudes are liquefied inside a massive blender".⁶¹ Aida is quoted: "Blender is an image that came to me when I was 14. Originally, the image had all 1.8 billion women of the human race in the blender. If you are a delicate, shy and young adolescent boy, I'm sure there are a number of people who'd imagine this sort of image without having orientation towards perversion or brutality. Men are such animals".⁶² Note that Aida has changed all of the women of the world into *shoujo* in this artwork.

Japanese and Western intellectuals claim that Japanese males love the *shoujo* heroine because she is a symbol of freedom that they cannot have in strict Japanese society.⁶³ In cases where she is abused, they claim that this is resentment against her freedom.⁶⁴ Moreover, the *shoujo* heroine is often "part Barbie-doll and part GI Joe doll", both sexually passive and pure but with supernatural powers so that males can both find her sexually attractive but nonthreatening while identifying with her other traditionally masculine skills.⁶⁵ Aida's political images critique violence in general and/or Japan's control by the West, yet in others he shows young girls as, for example, bonsai being pruned by the male/artist. Aida's *shoujo* are either blank-faced or smiling like girls in ads for cola in obvious parody. Doyle claims that this makes the violence palatable for the viewer since the victim doesn't appear to be feeling any pain.⁶⁶ An additional reason for this presentation could be that the girls' expressions re-enact for Aida his experiences of being too shy to approach girls when he was young. Furthermore, Aida is in part surely using violent and sexual imagery to make the "social regulation of art as a 'bourgeois construct' visible"⁶⁷ including

a comeback to cultural colonization by the West with its puritanical taboos.⁶⁸ Aida is ambiguous about such violence when he states that he tries to make the most “terrible” images he can possibly create so that both he and his viewers “learn something”, the results of which may vary from work to work but whose acceptance by the audience will continue.⁶⁹ There does not seem to be much motivation for Aida to analyze his more disturbing artworks in their potential to depict colonization of the female body,⁷⁰ since these works, which he claims make up only a small percentage of his oeuvre,⁷¹ get the most attention and command the highest prices.⁷²

Aida criticizes the hypocrisy and violence of [Japan] while at the same time longing for a re-birth of nationalism. He attacks all [men], particularly businessmen, for their mindless acquiescing to societal norms. He challenges the concepts of Japanese and Western [aesthetics] with his postmodern mixture of imagery and technique. Yet as is seen in contemporary arts and media in Japan, [women]; or in Aida’s case, [*shoujo*], are despised for their perceived power, for which they are subtly threatened or violently eliminated. Despite the initial shock of Aida’s images, they are in fact unchallenging to essentialist notions since Aida wishes for their complete return, rather than offering alternatives.

Yamaguchi Akira: Pre-pubescent Escapist?

Yamaguchi (b.1969) seems to have had a typical middle-class background in a ‘normal’ family during which he revealed his tremendous talent with his drawings of space-age rocket ships and humanoid-warriors.⁷³ His fine art work, rather than being influenced by *nihonga* per se, is often referred to as new *Yamato-e* painting; that is, painting from the pre-Meiji era.⁷⁴ Yamaguchi says that when he was young he didn’t know the difference between Western and Japanese art,⁷⁵ but now is criticizing the embrace of Western ideas during the Meiji Era by promoting “anarchy” in art.⁷⁶ Despite the insecurity of modern life, says one viewer, looking at Yamaguchi’s works results in a feeling of positive excitement⁷⁷ perhaps for a fantastic future in which Japan proudly combines the modern gadgetry of the *otaku* (geek) with the traditional militaristic prowess of the samurai.

Yamaguchi’s most famous works are busy scenes of the past and present: a fantastic Tokyo in which happy people enjoy their free time in the metropolis. The bird’s eye viewpoint, not only a Japanese technique but also used by Brueghel, a Western artist Yamaguchi admires,⁷⁸ increases the sensation of fantasticality; of being a giant omnipotent creator looking down upon an alternative mini-version of reality. The figures and objects are drawn according to laws of perspective, a traditional characteristic of Western art, but exist in a realm of space which defies

such rules, an interesting combination of aesthetics from both cultural traditions. Yamaguchi enjoys making up non-existent Chinese language characters to decorate his artworks, causing even Japanese viewers confusion.⁷⁹ He also includes only Japanese in some exhibits,⁸⁰ claiming that in any case foreigners don't understand his art at more than a simplistic level.⁸¹

These pictures are also characterized by a distinct lack of females. In works such as *People Making Things* the figures are almost all men. There may be some females serving drinks, middle-aged women chatting together, or a few foreign sightseers, but approximately 70-90% of the figures in these images are of individualistic men of varying ages and professions, clearly indicating who has made what in Yamaguchi's version and/or actual experience of Japan.⁸²

Like Aida, who illustrated the Marquis de Sade's *Father Jerome* for the Horror Doragonia series of books with images of young girls as pet dogs on leashes, Yamaguchi illustrated two Horror Doragonia books, *Kikutodai* (2003) and *Bakuen* (2004). These illustrations are the only known examples of any overt sexuality in Yamaguchi's works, perhaps because he was meeting the requests of his editors. The images include androgynous young warriors and heterosexual sex with the female's genitalia objectified as a gas tank. One motif appears, that of a female, sometimes a middle-aged woman, sometimes a teenager, leaning over a naked boy reaching for his genitalia. The male seems uncomfortable at being molested in some images (as in the text), and in others a pleased participant. In general, both these images and Yamaguchi's mostly middle-aged females indicate that his version of [woman] may relate to the *maza-con* (mother complex), not that of the [*shoujo*].

Another theme of Yamaguchi's work is warriors, some real historical figures, some anonymous, and some skeletal. There are young, idealized *bidan* samurai types seen from eye-level (an indicator of equality and/or intimacy) or from below (the viewer being made less powerful than the figure). Some images show "subtle mechanical additions" such as machine guns or motorcycle wheels, "jarring" the viewer with their incongruence as he/she studies the artwork over a period of time.⁸³ One of Yamaguchi's latest works is an installation of full-sized, individualistic, mature, male warriors, viewed at eye-level after one pops one's head through a white veil into the exhibition space.⁸⁴ They gaze away from the viewer in a non-threatening manner, but the trick of perspective which makes them seem to continue on into infinity creates an awe-inspiring sight evoking the history of Japan's military prowess, and suggesting its potential for the future.

Yamaguchi discusses the influences on his identity as a male in detail; for example, saying that when he was young he idolized all adult males as being *ichiban erai* (the most distinguished

or the greatest), including the young man who worked in his neighborhood sweet shop because Yamaguchi envied his tallness.⁸⁵ Yamaguchi's father had *igen*, or dignity/majesty, always existing alongside his loneliness as he took care of his family.⁸⁶ Yamaguchi writes that because of the number of *ikatsui* (rugged and strong people) in the world, he wished he could be bigger and stronger himself, and the mass media with its focus on gender rights and feminism "repulses" him.⁸⁷ His ideal man would be someone who is courageous, considerate, lively, and capable of deep and serious thought.⁸⁸ His ideal female is cheerful, modest, quick-witted, and sensible.⁸⁹ From the contents of this letter, written in a personable way by hand, Yamaguchi's idolization of the strong, traditional [man] as superior to the traditional ideal of a supportive [woman] becomes evident.⁹⁰

Nonetheless, Yamaguchi dislikes the so-called contemporary corporate warrior; the businessman, and wonders for what he is 'fighting'.⁹¹ Sometimes misanthropic, he has commented that humans are not even capable of managing their own garbage, and that the wrong tools are dangerous in the wrong hands.⁹² Yamaguchi's fantasy world gives the impression of pre-pubescent male *otaku* sketching; for example, a temple/warship, triple-decker planes which seem to contain mini-cities, or a funicular/hot spring spa contraption. Yamaguchi seems to have reversed his insecurity and frustration by becoming a 'big' artist; that is, an artist with a bird's eye view on a world filled with happy people enjoying their fantastic creations. In addition, the absence of women is not just a reflection of Japanese society in an era during which they were actually much less visible than men - or as Skov and Moeran note, 'invisible' because their contributions were not valued⁹³ - but reflects a pre-sexual focus before the common contemporary phenomenon of women as decorative sexual objects could be adopted by the artist.

Matsui Fujiko: Tortured Feminist or Reverse Sexist?

Matsui (b.1974) grew up in a small-town ancestral home inhabited for 14 generations⁹⁴ and her mother was a tea ceremony teacher,⁹⁵ indicating that she was probably exposed to traditional Japanese arts from a young age. At university, Matsui shifted away from oils to *nihonga* which is "fundamentally strong, cool-looking," and "fearsome," eventually becoming the first woman in Japan to earn a PhD in *nihonga*.⁹⁶

Matsui paints in a macabre style reminiscent of the old Western masters she emulates, such as Heironymus Bosch and Lucas Cranach, noting that there is no other work like hers existing now and that is in part why she makes it.⁹⁷ Themes include twists on the mother and child

and *bijin* motifs through which she says she is trying to show the superiority of women,⁹⁸ in part detailed symbolically through depictions of flowers such as wisteria petals, reminiscent of female genitalia. She says that she paints emotions caused by the abject suffering of females to “kill”⁹⁹ those emotions. Matsui has mentioned that she experienced domestic violence¹⁰⁰ which might explain her attitude towards men.

Via painting her trauma obsessively, Matsui not only ‘performs’ her gender,¹⁰¹ but has become wildly successful, appearing on numerous TV shows, winning *Vogue Nippon’s* Woman of the Year Award in 2006, and earning nearly 10 million yen for individual artworks.¹⁰² She is known as a real-life *bijin*, even as “too beautiful”,¹⁰³ doing fashion photo shoots and appearing at the openings of designer stores, but is also alternatively praised or criticized for ‘using’ her looks to get ahead.¹⁰⁴

In a debate with the artist Sasaki, he accused her of painting ghosts, often described as without legs in Japanese cultural history, because she doesn’t have the skill to paint human legs.¹⁰⁵ He criticized her palette as too dark and her works as too small, implying that both were done deliberately to mask her lack of skill.¹⁰⁶ When Sasaki heard of her drastic hairstyle changes in her university days, he told her that she’d make a terrible wife who would run away for no reason.¹⁰⁷ Sasaki, himself an oil painter, also asked Matsui if she chose *nihonga* because the world of oil painting is just too competitive for her.¹⁰⁸ Given the beauty and “power”¹⁰⁹ of both her sketches, reminiscent of the drawings of Albrecht Durer, and her flowers, equal to those seen in traditional *nihonga*, such complaints about a lack of skill seem to be unfounded. Borggreen writes that, historically, female artists were often treated in the following discriminatory ways: 1. they were limited to expected ‘feminine’ imagery and themes and attacked if they did not conform; 2. they were attacked for being too good, too precise, or too unusual; 3. they were labeled feminine and derided even though male artists doing similar kinds of works were not; 4. their own looks were the subject of much discussion, particularly as sexually attractive objects.¹¹⁰ Matsui seems to have been subject to at least numbers 1, 2, and 4 in this interview alone, in which she gave her opinions clearly, but at the end responded politely to the senior artist Sasaki by thanking him for his advice since she had “learned” from it.¹¹¹ Was Matsui treated in a similar fashion when studying to be the first woman to earn a PhD in *nihonga*? Although sent a questionnaire in which she was asked directly about her experiences, Matsui said that it would take “more than a full day” to answer, and being too busy, unfortunately declined to do so.¹¹²

Matsui’s so-called “feminist ghosts”¹¹³ are connected to the Japanese tradition of *yurei-ga*, not normally considered to be ‘high art’ by many Japanese scholars,¹¹⁴ and as such have subverted the *bijin* of *nihonga*. Matsui’s *Yamosho* (Nyctalopia) shows “the spirit of a jealous,



Matsui, Fuyuko (2005), *Yamosho (Nyctalopia)*, minerals on silk, 138.2x49.6cm. Courtesy of Naruyama Gallery.

revengeful woman dressed in a tattered white-filmy kimono with long unkempt black hair and no feet” carrying a plucked bird.¹¹⁵ This motif of the vertical scroll painted with long unkempt hair, human or animal, is a theme which reappears often. This motif may represent her mental machinations, the long strands of hair like strands of thought ending in a near-tangle. Even in an image where the long hair is conspicuously absent, such as *Eternal Almighty Medicine for Perfect Happiness*, Matsui explains that it shows a woman who has obsessively scratched her hair off through to the brain because the one she loves does not return her affections,¹¹⁶ both a parallel and contrast to the apparent mother-complex of Aida whose most satisfying hobby is to have his wife scratch his head for him every night so that he can sleep.¹¹⁷

“Sometimes I want to provoke people just to show how aggressive I am. But more importantly this is purification, catharsis for me. It’s my identity,” Matsui has said.¹¹⁸ The issue of identity reappears often, since the female character Matsui repeatedly paints seems to be partially a self-portrait, partially a rather generalized Japanese face, and partially an imitation of Mona Lisa’s features, *Mona Lisa* being one of the paintings which inspired Matsui to pursue art when she was in elementary school.¹¹⁹ *Keeping up the Purenness* is perhaps her most famous work with that same ambiguous face. In a “misty field of lilies, poppies, and moss”¹²⁰ lies a young woman’s dead body with its “hypnotic stare towards the viewer”.¹²¹ Her stomach has been sliced open

to reveal “jewel-like organs” and a fetus which Matsui defiantly describes as “beautiful.”¹²² When first seeing the work, one art historian was confused by the “proud” and “satisfied” expression on the woman’s face, thinking that she had been murdered by a male attacker,¹²³ a thought pattern revealing the expectation that violence against women is usually perpetuated by men. Matsui, however, explains that she painted this image of a woman who has committed suicide to show the superiority of women; that their “capacity for sympathy” is “a special attribute of individuals with wombs who can produce eggs and create a child”.¹²⁴

Overall, Matsui’s images seem to be of two main types; a female figure gazing directly at the viewer in confrontation (even in death) or a woman under attack but gazing elsewhere. Despite the artist’s intentions, Matsui’s *bijin* depict the lower position of women in the contemporary gender binary system: the only way they can reclaim ‘power’ is to run and/or self-destruct, taking their unborn children with them.

Although Matsui seemingly ignores the issue of [Japan] politically, instead mining its art historical world for inspiration, she reacts against the Aidas and Yamaguchis who would debase and/or ignore her because she is female. Matsui refuses the “ornamentality, passivity, and whimsicality” of the modern *shoujo* but does choose “mystery...dreaming, and narcissism”,¹²⁵ particularly in the form of self-portraiture not traditionally seen in Japanese art, but a product of the modern era in which identity is in crisis.¹²⁶ Matsui suffers from the “the paradox of being both artist and object at once”,¹²⁷ challenging the traditional dismissal of feminist intellectual work as ‘merely’ an extension of hysteria¹²⁸ by emphasizing hysteria itself.¹²⁹

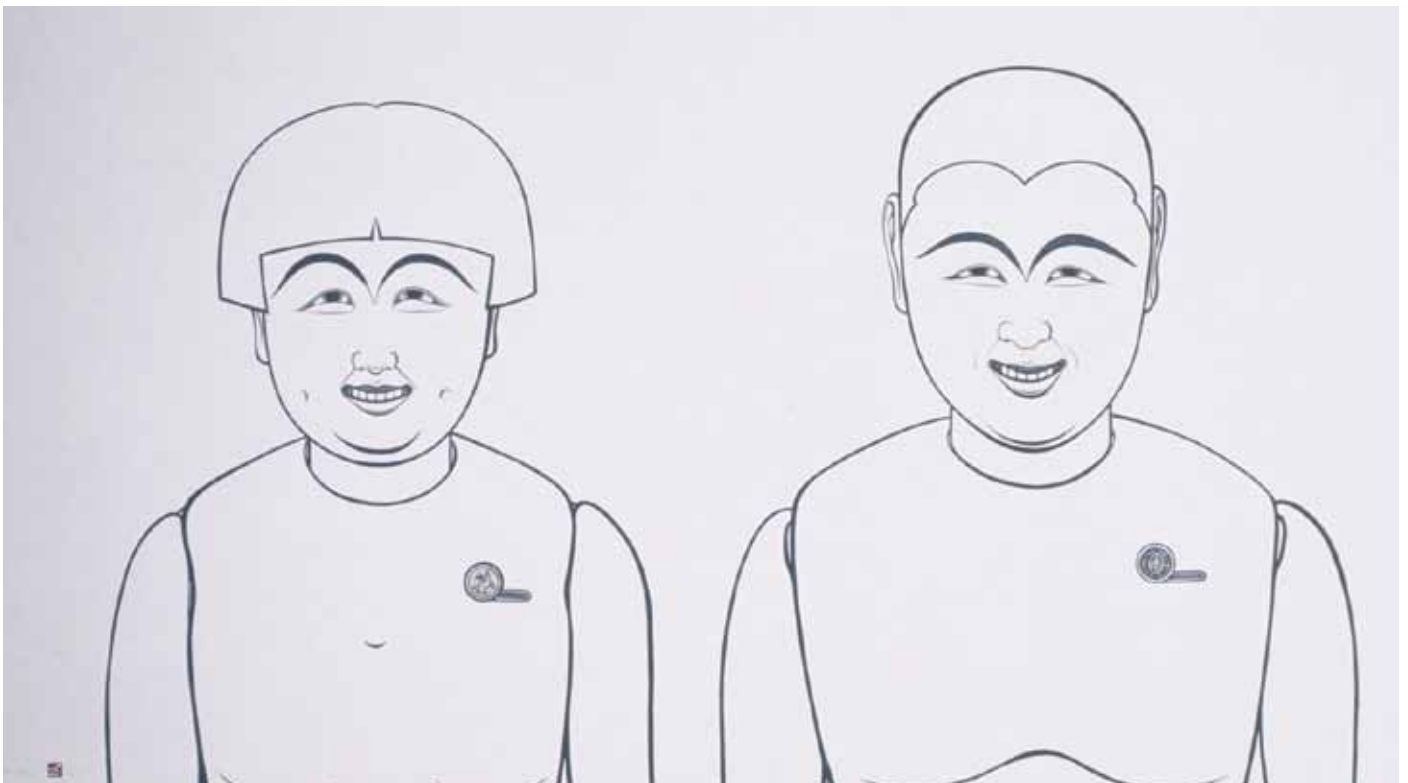
Machida Kumi: Trauma Transcended, Gender Transcended?

Machida (b.1970) also seems to have come from a fairly typical middle-class background of the era, except that her childhood was troubled.¹³⁰ Her “disturbing” work showing “deformed dolls,”¹³¹ often expressionless¹³² was initially dismissed as “just manga” by gallery owners who refused to represent her.¹³³ Eventually, however, her technique and skill have become acclaimed as “the most accomplished”¹³⁴ and three of her works are currently held in the public collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City,¹³⁵ a rare honor for any female artist.¹³⁶

Machida paints thousands of fine lines with a thin brush to compose one large thick outline for her figures, during which she “suffers” from intense emotions;¹³⁷ what she describes as a “field of emotional landmines”.¹³⁸ At other times she seems to enter a sort of meditative state in which she “thinks of nothing”.¹³⁹ Nonetheless, while executing this grueling technique, she has

to bite down upon a mouthpiece to avoid damaging her grinding teeth.¹⁴⁰

Machida's early images were filled with traditional Japanese motifs.¹⁴¹ For example, *Kouzo* is an image of a cute kewpie doll tattooed with good luck symbols - a beckoning cat, a temple guardian dog, and a fox spirit giving a "coquettish stare" from under long eyelashes.¹⁴² Machida says that although these images were quite successful and she was advised not to give them up, she gradually evolved into painting more anonymous, androgynous, simple doll-like figures.¹⁴³ Machida states that she is criticizing superficial gender-based roles with these dolls.¹⁴⁴ Putting a skirt or a tie on the doll signifies it as male or female, but in her pictures these dolls are often engaged in activities which challenge the stereotypes of the gender binary.¹⁴⁵ For example, in *Keni* (Authority), a faceless doll in a wig and dress aggressively molests a passive naked doll. In another image, a bald doll in a skirt reveals a large red erect penis which it holds happily.¹⁴⁶



Machida Kumi (2002), *Shoujo Shonen* (Girls Boys), 89.5x160cm.
Courtesy of Nishimura Gallery

Just like Aida and Yamaguchi Akira, Machida was asked to illustrate for the Horror Doragonica books, this one *The School of Licentiousness* by Sade (2004). Machida met the needs of her clients well in that her images are quite dark and cynical, showing child-like dolls in maid costumes and

spread-legged figures with keyhole-like vaginas.¹⁴⁷ However, when an interviewer mentions that those illustrations gave her a reputation for painting “madness”, Machida bristles and insists she simply illustrated a story.¹⁴⁸

Nonetheless, in images of implied violence, of dolls showing bloody, slit-like wounds, using awkward and high viewpoints which suggest post traumatic stress disorder,¹⁴⁹ Machida alludes to abuse. In addition, her images are close-ups of creepy, large, doll-like figures indicating concentrated, negative emotions, not bird’s eye views of controlled mini-worlds like Yamaguchi Akira’s. One painting, poignantly named *Hitori (Alone)*, shows a male figure and a female child with their clasping hands invisible under bandage-like wrappings, indicating the confused pain of an abused child at loving their parent but not being able to escape abuse. A grinning moon at the top of the image at first seems innocent enough, but when seen in another ogling a Betty Boop-type character it sexualizes both situations.

Machida has also been described as a *bijin* by bloggers,¹⁵⁰ but does not mention any difficulties in being a female artist or a woman in general. She seems to avoid the glamorous life, repeatedly appearing in plain black clothes for interviews.¹⁵¹ Her stated purpose of dissolving gender boundaries indicates that she believes gender roles are too restrictive for both her and others; that is, she is consciously and directly criticizing the [woman] and [man] categories as they exist in contemporary Japan. It is to be noted that she does not comment on what that might mean socially or politically, thereby indicating a lack of focus on [Japan] as a category or how concepts of [Japan] might in fact be influencing the gender-role conditions she rejects.

Yamaguchi Ai: Romantic Escapist, Subtle Social Critic, or Aesthetic Purist?

Yamaguchi Ai (no relation to Yamaguchi Akira) (b.1977) has received much less media coverage so that her background, philosophy, and details about her art are less well known. Nonetheless, she has achieved success for her manga-like images which have a quality of line described as “exquisite” within Japan’s aesthetic tradition.¹⁵² Her art depicts young Edo Period servants in a courtesan’s house called Toge-no-ochaya (The Teahouse of the Mountain Pass).¹⁵³ While this series shows the *shoujo* sexualized for commercial interests and is based on historical reality,¹⁵⁴ the artist does not “reflect on the misfortune” of these girls or on “the debauchery of their surroundings”,¹⁵⁵ but rather chooses to depict them amongst peaceful scenes of natural beauty with the huge, wide, innocent eyes of any typical manga heroine. Yet that they are completely passive both in the reality of the system and in Yamaguchi’s depiction of them is in direct contrast to the *shoujo* manga heroine who often defeats her oppressors with superpowers.¹⁵⁶ The figures

are either viewed from above or from eye-level using a balanced palette, creating at times a sense of observation of a fantasy world, and at others intimacy within that world. The parallel fantasy world of the *otaku* creator is emphasized in that Yamaguchi apparently has individual names and rooms for each of the nine characters with small details altered according to their identities.¹⁵⁷

The series is described as “Japanese eroticism”¹⁵⁸ emphasizing that the world of these “*yūjo*” was reality in the past.¹⁵⁹ The use of the term *yūjo*, literally the Chinese characters for “play” and “girl,” indicates the dominance of the male gaze; while patrons may have “played” with the girls, the girls themselves were performing child labor. Like Aida, Yamaguchi explains that she is attempting to redesign the *bijin* of *nihonga* with these images.¹⁶⁰ However, to what degree Yamaguchi is supporting, idealizing, or criticizing this world is a bit difficult to discern since her explanations about her art are ambiguous and contradictory.¹⁶¹ Yamaguchi’s art is simply celebrated for being beautiful; her designs have been used to decorate products in expensive confectionery shops, as well as a line of Shu Uemura cosmetics, the artist thereby taking advantage of her success to advance materially.¹⁶²



Yamaguchi Ai (2007), *makura yori ato yori*, acrylic on cotton, blanket and panel, 41x103x6cm.
© ai yamaguchi • ninyu works.

In personal correspondence, Yamaguchi writes that her parents greatly influenced her identity as a female because they treated her as if she were a boy, dressing her up and cutting her hair in boyish fashion.¹⁶³ Like Aida's contrary impulse towards his feminist mother, Yamaguchi said she simply reacted against this tendency without much conscious thought by becoming very "girlish" and being attracted to cute things, which she acknowledges is at play in her artwork.¹⁶⁴ Her intention is for her artworks to give viewers a "pure" and strong impression of "beauty" which is "not poisonous" so that viewers can "sink into" the world depicted.¹⁶⁵ When asked about the ideal female or male in modern society, Yamaguchi states that she is concerned with social issues related to gender, but has not considered what to do about them or how they might be improved.¹⁶⁶ It seems that Yamaguchi Ai is similar to Yamaguchi Akira in that they are both escapists, and rather gender-binary focused escapists at that. Yamaguchi Ai offers no analysis of the essentialist categories of [woman], [man], or [Japan] other than attempting to visually depict them as being transcended by [aesthetics].

Neo-nihonga as a Personal and Political Quest and Its Contradictory Relationship to Essentialist Aesthetic Theory

Art is said to be the expression of the personal and political subconscious of a society: a "beautiful fruit but a frightening instrument" because it both represents current historical and cultural values as well as influencing them for future generations.¹⁶⁷ All of these artists are engaged in the themes of modern Japan; the cute, the grotesque, the erotic, and the violent,¹⁶⁸ to varying extents. Most of them (both male and female) also seem to embody characteristics of the *Bushido* warrior by being polite and humble in interviews,¹⁶⁹ but then are often the complete opposite in their confrontational and shocking artworks.

The concept of [Japan] relates directly to gender in this art, although it must be noted that only Matsui and Machida have verbally expressed gender-based intent. The male artists are representatives of the stereotypical postmodern Japanese man, who came of age during the promise of economic boom with its fast track to domestic and international success, but which turned to empty materialism and disillusionment at its collapse.¹⁷⁰ In their promotion of essentialist concepts of [Japan] and [man], the males seem to be doing so for their own advantage; that is, to maintain or take back power both personally and politically. These three particular artists universally condemn the weak businessman-type of [man], but seem to have different attitudes towards females. Tenmyouya allows them power heretofore unseen but in service of his neo-nationalist vision. Aida reacts to personal insults by females, perceiving them to be more powerful than they actually are in challenging the traditional [woman] category.

Yamaguchi is fairly oblivious to females as sexual beings but not as service workers and/or mothers in support of traditional [Japan].

These three particular female artists are to be noted for their nearly complete lack of interest in [Japan] as a political entity. In contrast to the males, none of them, according to my research, have made any comments about political frustration in interviews, or depicted political scenes in their artworks. Matsui and Machida have stated that they find the actual process of making art to be cathartic for powerful emotions, choosing *nihonga* simply because some aspect of its technique, medium, and/or imagery helps them achieve personal expression. The female artists focus on the emotional lives of women or children, particularly the trauma therein, usually at the hands of men in unequal and abusive social systems. Matsui seeks to reverse the gender-based system of repression that causes her pain via images that depict that pain; Yamaguchi Ai to slip into beautiful fantasy away from it, and Machida to replace it with a gender-free alternative. For Matsui, [men] are the source of her art: they cause her suffering but she never paints them, her world is controlled by them and she cannot seem to escape. It is the same with Yamaguchi Ai's courtesans: men are nonexistent in the art, but dominant in the system which in reality would have trapped the girls she paints. If non-white, non-Western male artists were doubly-colonized, these artists and the females they paint could be said to be triply-colonized. The artists seem somewhat naïve in that they utilize portions of [Japan] to express themselves and transcend their emotional suffering without addressing the cause of that suffering. Nonetheless, that these artists have chosen to do so via Japanese art can be seen as an unconscious claiming of power in a domestic genre traditionally focused on passive *bijin*, and an international market dominated by Western aesthetics and techniques, indicating decreasing sexism;¹⁷¹ that is, increasing visibility and power of women in both the domestic and international art worlds.¹⁷²

The gender equality of Tenmyouya, the reverse sexism of Matsui, and the traditional sexism of Aida and both Yamaguchi's, being limited to two genders, are simply different versions of the gender binary. Therefore, Machida's imagery is unique since both [man] and [woman] are concepts from which to free oneself. Her line can symbolically be seen as the definition of the individual; an outline she paints thousands of times to separate him/her from the empty space of the world in which he/she operates, yet this attempt at hyper-definition of identity is, ironically, androgynous. In fact, it is pre-sexual: children/dolls seek to express an identity before society assigns one according to their gender. Given the breakdown of essentialist gender categories and the developing technologies which allow transgendered people to exist physically, Machida's version of the world with new, expanded, and/or more inclusive categories of gender seems to be becoming a reality.

The three male artists challenge concepts of [Japan] and [aesthetics], in part by expressing a fascination with Japan's military past in the forms of *nihonga*-style warriors who avenge the defeat of World War II and cultural colonization by the Americans. The male artists only give brief explanations about their works and philosophies in other languages. They intend their art for Japanese only in a kind of self-defeating *nihonjinronism*: artworks highly critical of the contemporary political situation are nearly guaranteed not to be understood internationally due to a lack of explanation. Matsui and Yamaguchi Ai have made no such comments about 'foreigners' lack of understanding, which might imply that they consider their audience to be Japanese only, but may also reflect a 'universal' emotional purpose to their work. While Machida has also not made any international references, the lack of obvious cultural imagery in her current work may allow it to be most easily received overseas. Nonetheless, whoever the artists' intended audience may be, their revitalization of *nihonga* reveals Japan's evolving circumstances internationally: a new form of Japanese visual culture has been developed and exported; modern versions of [Japan] and [aesthetics] unconsciously symbolizing Japan's process in dealing with cultural colonization while maintaining its own cultural identity, even if this identity is only superficially understood by non-Japanese who are not familiar with Japanese culture in depth.

Why are these works still so popular overseas despite foreign viewers' 'ignorance' of Japanese aesthetics? This postmodern contradiction challenges feminist art historical theory. That this art can still be appreciated on some level by another culture foreign to the original implies the existence of an unbiased, universal, essentialist concept of aesthetics. This version of aesthetics may be free of some former prejudices, but not all. Art and art historical inquiry both represent contemporary historical and cultural values and influence them for future generations, thereby implying a continual and universal need to review inquiry along anti-essentialist lines. Anti-essentialist inquiry, then, is the new essentialism to be applied to as yet unknown biases in both contemporary international aesthetics and in art historical inquiry itself.

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