Chiho Aoshima and The Kaikai Kiki Collective's Soft Rebellion

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Japan's economic bubble popped in the early 1990s, shattering its international image as a technological and cultural powerhouse. Following decades of colonialism and Westernization, this collapse triggered yet another national identity crisis in Japan while it was still reconciling traditional values with global influences. Amid this cultural disorientation, a postmodern artistic consciousness surged in popularity. This exhibition examines how Chiho Aoshima and the Kaikai Kiki Collective redefined resistance through Superflat aesthetics, using seductive, commercialized imagery to reflect their struggle and search for identity amid Japan's cultural and economic upheaval.

Founded by Takashi Murakami in the early 2000s, Kaikai Kiki functions both as an artistic production studio as well as a platform for nurturing emerging Japanese artists. One notable example is Chiho Aoshima, who was pursuing an economics degree when Murakami recognized her talent and personally invited her to join the collective.[1] The term "kaikaikiki" (roughly translating to "strange and mysterious") encapsulates the collective's ethos, with members showcasing diverse styles that defy easy categorization while challenging artistic conventions. Kaikai Kiki's creative freedom was modeled after Andy Warhol's Factory, stemming from Murakami's mission to blur the boundary between fine art and commercial goods.[2]

Aoshima lies at the heart of this exhibition. Her dreamlike digital compositions exemplify "soft rebellion," a form of resistance that prefers seduction over confrontation. Opening with an "Introduction" that establishes Kaikai Kiki's formation and Murakami's artistic philosophy, the exhibition examines "The Aesthetics of Contradiction," comparing Aoshima's deliberate juxtaposition of opposing visual elements with those of Yoshitomo Nara and Murakami. Section

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[1] Yusuf Huysal and Ili Saarinen, "Interview: Chiho Aoshima," Time Out Tokyo, August 7, 2016, https://www.timeout.com/tokyo/art/interview-chiho-aoshima.
[2] Adrian Favell, *Before and after Superflat: A Short History of Japanese Contemporary Art 1990-2011.* (Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher Limited, 2012), 55.

two, "Urban Alienation and Identity," explores Aoshima's view of urbanity and her artistic escape, with Aya Takano and Mr. presenting alternative responses to urban life. The concluding "*Otaku* Culture and Resistance" investigates how Aoshima's pop art approach enhances her "soft resistance", while MADSAKI's spray paint style and ob's anime-inspired techniques provide a more direct assertion of self.

Introduction:

The two sculptural pieces "Kaikai" (2020) and "Kiki" (2020) capture the collective's foundational, paradoxical nature. Kaikai, an innocent white rabbit-like figure with a wide-mouthed smile, embodies *kawaii* (cuteness), which stands at the center of anime culture and commercial appeal. With soft, sparkling blue eyes, Kaikai presents as calm and poised. Indeed, in Murakami's miniseries pilot "Planting the Seeds," Kaikai is shown as outgoing yet responsible.[3] In contrast, Kiki, painted in light pink, conveys mischief through its asymmetrical eyes, a third spiral-patterned eye on its forehead, and fanged teeth that form a slightly manic smile. The episode portrays Kiki as extremely impulsive with exaggerated emotions that counterbalance Kaikai's responsible nature. Standing side-by-side in the installation, the pair illustrates their binary relationship. Kaikai is constantly worried for Kiki, whose wild actions bring the pair on outlandish adventures. Together, they achieve a balance of purity and chaos, a dynamic echoed in many of the collective's works.

Underlying the cute appearance of Kaikai and Kiki is Murakami's strategic appropriation of commercial character design. Like mascots that permeate the Japanese business and government sectors, such as Kumamon of Kumamoto, "Kaikai" and "Kiki" package complex ideas in accessible, marketable forms.[4] Yet, unlike the personable, cuddly Kumamon, their subtle eeriness creates an

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[3] Takamizawa, Hana, Shizuka, Mahito Tsujimura, Tatsuya Osabe, Kaikaikiki Animation Studio, Kaikai Kiki Co, and Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles, Calif). 2007. *Kaikai & Kiki. [Episode 1, Planting the Seeds]*. Directed by Takashi Murakami. [Japan]: Kaikai Kiki.

[4] Neil Steinberg, "Meet Japan's Kumamon, the Bear Who Earns Billions," BBC News, February 24, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20160719-meet-japans-kumamon-the-bear-who-earns-billions.

otherworldliness that resists easy consumption. The intentional distortion reflects Murakami's approach to branding, which Weisenfeld describes as a "perceived fusion of high and low" that displays "the eccentricity…of its greatest artists" and embraces "unabashed commercialism."[5] Today, Kaikai and Kiki kokeshi dolls are sold as signed collector items through Murakami's business partner, Galerie Perrotin.[6] Thus, they function not merely as artworks but also as mascots that represent the collective and highly commercialized products.

"Viral: Lamentable Addiction" (2019) reflects the more contemplative aspects of Murakami's work and his interpretation of his popularity after two decades in the global spotlight. The overwhelmingly packed canvas features his signature flower motif: smiling, cartoon-like rainbow blooms that blanket every inch of the work. Within, Murakami includes a caricatured self-portrait with raised eyebrows and droopy eyes behind large circular glasses. His slight smirk suggests thoughtful weariness. In prismatic-colored thought bubbles, he writes, "Now, the [justification of painting] is whether a painting satisfies as visual information on the internet." This self-reflective commentary reveals Murakami's ambivalence toward his accomplishments in the digital age, where art is increasingly consumed as ephemeral online content rather than a physical experience. While this observation echoes his initial critique of Japanese and Western art as "money games" in his 2000 "Superflat" manifesto, it now emerges from his personal reckoning with art's purpose after achieving remarkable success within this system.[7]

The word "addiction" in the title expresses Murakami's exasperation at how the world perceives his art, even as he harnesses his "burgeoning empire of pop designer goods," selling pieces

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[5] Gennifer S. Weisenfeld, Reinscribing Tradition in a Transnational Art World (Heidelberg: Universitätsbibliothek der Universität Heidelberg, 2010), 84.
[6] Galerie Perrotin, "Takashi Murakami - Kaikai & Kiki Kokeshi Dolls, 2020," Perrotin New York, 2020, https://storeny.perrotin.com/products/takashi-murakami-kaikai-kiki-dolls-2020.
[7] Takashi Murakami et al., Superflat (Tokyo: Madra Publishing, 2000), 12.

for millions.[8] He recognizes the Western gaze upon Japan, and "plays along with it for all it worth;"[9] rightfully so, as he works to support over 600 employees and to promote over a dozen featured members.[10] As recently as 2024, in an interview with Takashi Nagira, Murakami expressed his frustration with the collective's finances, admitting that the immense pressure keeps him anxious even on breaks.[11] From his conflicting position as both critic and participant, a bitter and censorious Murakami emerged beneath his playful persona, one that directs scorn at both Western consumers for their fetishization of orientalism (which he adeptly took advantage of) and the Japanese art establishment for its institutional shortcomings.[12]

These representative works establish the complex interplay between critique and commercial participation that defines Kaikai Kiki's approach. This strategic positioning allows artists like Aoshima to develop distinct styles that operate within systems of power while subtly subverting them. As we will see in the following section, this paradoxical stance manifests most clearly in the collective's deliberate use of aesthetic contradictions.

The Aesthetics of Contradiction:

The three artists in this section, Aoshima, Nara, and Murakami, incorporate enticing aesthetic elements only to subvert them through juxtaposition. Rather than resolving these tensions, Kaikai Kiki artists seek to make them visible, creating a dynamic space for critical engagement that avoids both nihilistic despair and blind acceptance.

Aoshima's "Cat's Counseling Chamber" (2009) exemplifies Kaikai Kiki's aesthetic of contradiction. The composition centers on a tiered stone structure resembling a miniature temple and a Japanese gravestone. Its geometric shape rendered in cool blue-gray tones evokes both

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[8] Gennifer S. Weisenfeld, Reinscribing Tradition in a Transnational Art World, 82
[9] Adrian Favell, *Before and after Superflat: A Short History of Japanese Contemporary Art 1990-2011*, 51
[10] Takashi Murakami, Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd., 2025, https://www.kaikaikiki.com/en/.
[11] Takeshi Nagira, "【密着】世界的アーティストの超リアルな 1 日ルーティン【村上隆】," YouTube, 2024
[12] Adrian Favell, *Before and after Superflat: A Short History of Japanese Contemporary Art 1990-2011*, 50

serenity and melancholy. A calico cat perches attentively on the stone steps, its orange, black, and white colors traditionally associated with luck and prosperity in Japan. The cat's formal yet weary posture is especially notable, as if a psychological counselor is patiently waiting for the client to speak their mind.

This tranquility is sharply disrupted by the severed head resting at the monument's base, its flowing hair seemingly replacing her arms and legs. The head's large, watery eyes exude sadness and even shame, while its round face and *ochobo* (aesthetically small mouth) draw on kawaii manga, veiling the eerie atmosphere beneath an innocent appearance. Aoshima excels at creating this sense of desolation, drawing from personal experience. In an unpublished interview, she confesses her attraction to cemeteries. "I have found myself in graveyards talking very normally all of a sudden to people I do not know," she said, inviting viewers to connect with her unconventional perspective. [13]

The plants emerging from the stone structure's edges add another layer of tension. The grass and high-standing stems are dynamic yet fragile, supporting delicate white flowers that symbolize transience and renewal in Japanese cultural tradition. In its entirety, the counseling chamber, ostensibly a place of healing, brims with contradistinction: a peaceful sanctuary with cracks of uncanny discomfort, a serene atmosphere punctuated by signs of life, and a superficially cute aesthetic harboring emotional distress.

While Aoshima remains subtle in her juxtaposition, Nara's "Nobody's Fool" (1998) takes an explicitly subversive approach. The composition directly references ukiyo-e master Kitagawa Utamaro's iconic *bijinga* prints while systematically undermining their refined elegance. Specifically, Nara paints over Utamaro's "Geisha of the West District" with intentionally crude draftsmanship that evokes children's drawings, an aesthetic typically excluded from high cultural discourse. By

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[13] Galerie Perrotin, "Chiho Aoshima - Artist," Perrotin Art Museum, 2006, https://www.perrotin.com/artists/Chiho_Aoshima/14.

retaining the pale, *ukiyo-e* style paper with Japanese calligraphy, he creates a visual contradiction between reverence and rebellion.[14] A girl figure with an oversized head replaces the Geisha, dominating the composition despite having minimal facial features. Her narrow green eyes and small red mouth, while simple, convey staunch defiance. Paradoxically, Nara's reduction of facial expression to essential elements achieves a more complex emotional landscape than Utamaro's refined Geisha.

The bright red text "NOBODY'S FOOL" emblazoned across the scroll presents the piece's most explicit contradiction. The English phrase, rendered in punk-inspired handwriting, disrupts the Japanese visual tradition with Western vernacular and contemporary attitude. Its possessive form suggests a statement of identity. She belongs to no one and refuses to be deceived. The "NO NUKES" message on the girl's headband reinforces this defiance, substituting coded references historically employed by *ukiyo-e* printmakers (like *yokai* that represented Tokugawa shogunate officials) with direct political activism. The floating word "you're" above the scroll forces the audience's involvement by directly addressing them. Through these elements, Nara addresses deeper concerns about Japan's heavy economic and political reliance on the US since WWII, a relationship that Nara and his contemporaries viewed as exploitative.

By merging childlike representation with weighty political consciousness, Nara creates an accessibility that made this work the centerpiece of Nara's most famous exhibition. By filtering complex political sentiment through seemingly innocent imagery, allows viewers who might normally avoid political art to engage with difficult questions about national identity and autonomy.

Moving deeper into the realm of dissonance, Aoshima's "Apricot 2" (2004) presents perhaps the most visually arresting contradiction in this section. The work centers on a flowering Sakura tree

[14] Kitagawa Utamaro, "Geisha of the West District," The Art Institute of Chicago, accessed April 23, 2025, https://www.artic.edu/artworks/36184/geisha-of-the-west-district.

drawn with meticulous attention to detail. The usual symbol of hope and beauty is transformed into a site of bondage, with a pale, naked female figure drawn in manga-style proportions bound to its apex branches. Despite her confinement, she appears both vulnerable and strangely serene. The immediate visual impact creates a profound discomfort arising from the coexistence of natural beauty and human subjugation.

Aoshima's masterful use of contrasting color palettes enhances this tension. The cherry blossoms bloom in saturated pinks and red against a mountainous background of cool purples and blues. A glowing white moon and scattered stars, along with three birds in flight, create a dreamlike suspension, a scene simultaneously enchanted and ominous. This ambiguity is furthered by the blue-gray rock formation that recalls traditional *sansui* (landscape) paintings while including stylized anime backgrounds. The cloud formation mimics those traditionally depicted around Mount Fuji but is rendered with sharp, digital contours.

Extending Aoshima's carefully crafted background, the restrained female figure becomes a potent symbol of contradictory expectations imposed on women in contemporary society. She must maintain traditional feminine virtues while navigating hypermodern consumer culture, all while subjected to a perverted "male gaze" that has historic resonance in Japan (the most available example being *bijinga* prints). She is shrouded with seductive beauty, one that unsettles more than allures. In contrast to Nara's overt criticism, Aoshima draws the audience in with aesthetic pleasure before revealing the work's disturbing implications. As Aoshima states straightforwardly, she wishes to create "dark, disturbing worlds," but "in the end, even those should be cute."[15]

The last work in this section, Murakami's "And Then Black" (2005) distills the aesthetics of contradiction into its most emblematic form through his iconic DOB character. It appears against a

[15] "Chiho Aoshima," Chiho Aoshima Biography – Chiho Aoshima on artnet, accessed April 23, 2025, https://www.artnet.com/artists/chiho-aoshima/biography.

black and gray checkerboard backdrop reminiscent of PNG images, revealing Murakami's technological understanding of an "empty" background. However, this space is far from empty to the human eye; the sharp edges and stark color transitions ominously threaten a sense of confinement.

The visual economy that Murakami employs focuses attention on DOB's inherent multi-faceted nature. Its round-eared silhouette evokes Mickey Mouse, a reference to Murakami's Western cultural influences, while its name derives from the Japanese slang expression *dobojite* (why?).[16] This linguistic-visual clash reflects Murakami's internal battle, one that simultaneously appropriates and questions western influence. DOB's asymmetrical features further embody contradiction: its left ear displays a solid blue "D" while the right presents a magenta "B." This eye-catching imbalance is complemented by its psychedelic eyes with concentric circles of clashing colors that disrupt the graphic simplicity found elsewhere in the composition. Most unsettling is DOB's fixed grin, a wide, toothy smile rendered with mechanical precision that hovers between friendliness and menace, suggesting emptiness behind its apparent cheer.

Through this seemingly simple cartoon character, Murakami demonstrates technical precision worthy of commercial design while sowing seeds of discomfort. Thus, DOB functions as both product and critique, embodying the contradictions of an artist deeply embedded in the consumer culture he scrutinizes. This self-awareness elevates Murakami's work beyond appropriation or satire. Unlike artists who position themselves either inside or outside of mainstream culture, Murakami inhabits both spaces simultaneously.

Urban Alienation and Identity:

[16] Museum of Modern Art, "Takashi Murakami," Museum of Modern Art, accessed April 24, 2025, https://www.moma.org/collection/.

The works in this section examine how Aoshima, Takano, and Mr. navigate Japan's hyper-urban landscape and explore identity within. These artists, particularly Aoshima, create dreamscapes that function both as critique and escape from the alienating effects of contemporary urban life.

Aoshima's "Building" (1999) presents the most striking portrayal of urban confinement in this section. The narrow vertical space between two skyscrapers creates a claustrophobic corridor that extends beyond the frame. The lifeless geometry of the dark building overwhelms the girl resting at the bottom. Her body language communicates both resignation and yearning as she gazes upward, not toward the conspicuous exit closer to the audience, but toward the unseen sky above. The girl's pale, elongated form fills the already cramped space, suggesting her assimilation into the urban environment.

What makes this work particularly compelling is Aoshima's inclusion of organic elements that disrupt the sterile urbanity. Tendrils of plants emerge from the walls, alley floor, and even the manhole, creating a metaphor for nature reclaiming the artificial. These elements echo traditional Japanese landscape paintings, particularly Utagawa Hiroshige's Tokaido series, where human figures are dwarfed by magnificent landmarks such as Fuji or Lake Ashi. Here, the relationship is inverted. The natural world exists in disrupted fragments within the suffocating environment. This visual tension embodies the traditional Japanese reverence for nature and the reality of contemporary urban Japan where greenery exists primarily as carefully contained decorative pieces.

Aoshima starts this section off with a subtle perspective toward urban Japan. The girl depicted appears trapped, but she is not in distress. She might have even chosen this restriction for herself. Regardless, there is no active resistance depicted. The girl seems to have resigned to reality and done her best to adapt, an attitude normalized in the environment of high urban density and extreme social isolation. The digital rendering technique only serves to enhance this sense of

emotional detachment. The smooth surfaces and artificial precision create an uncanny atmosphere that mirrors the constructed nature of urban environments.

Mr.'s "CORN DOGS ARE BEST WHEN HOT" (2021) offers a logical progression from Aoshima's isolated-figure-in-confinement by examining how commercial spaces function as surrogate communities in contemporary Japan. The meticulously illustrated 7-Eleven convenience store serves as both a setting and social commentary. The *konbini* culture this work peers into has a specific focus on how the stores have evolved beyond mere retail spaces to become essential social infrastructure. In post-Bubble Japan, these stores provide a range of products, from hotdogs in the title to cigarettes and alcohol advertised through transparent windows. Beyond goods, services such as package delivery, public phones, and ATMs effectively replace traditional neighborhood institutions, establishing itself as the catch-all location for civilian life.

Compared to the isolation of "Building," Mr.'s piece is populated with children engaged in casual interaction. Classmates share a moment after school for conversation and a quick bite. One angle of interpretation focuses on the commercial context that conceivably undermines the positive social moment. These characters gather not in a traditional community space but in a corporate chain store that mass produces sustenance. Yet, Mr.'s depiction of visibly cheerful characters suggests a different reading. These teenagers have chosen to adapt rather than resist. They have reclaimed meaning with these consumer environments and celebrate the ease of processed food, a sign of diminishing expectations of contemporary social life.

Mr.'s visual language reinforces this theme of identity negotiation within commercialized urban spaces. His hyper-flat style removes depth, mirroring how *konbini* culture flattens social experience into standardized transactions. The vivid, almost garish color palette dominated by the store's corporate branding shows how commercial aesthetics have infiltrated intimate social

interactions. Yet Mr.'s rendering of the children with exaggerated, anime-inspired features creates an interesting tension: their expressive humanity persists despite the homogenizing commercial context.

While Mr. takes a positive approach to urbanity, Takano's "Hoshiko the City Child" (2006) focuses on the sensory overload of contemporary Japanese life. The composition centers on an adolescent girl surrounded by chaotic detritus and consumer items. What is particularly somber about this piece is the seemingly symbiotic relationship Hoshiko has with her cluttered surroundings. The unidentifiable objects stuffed in her clothing and arms seem to have been forced upon her rather than chosen, while the partial buildings fading into the dark background suggest the sheer scale of the bustling urbanity. Hoshiko is inseparable from objects and consumption, which stems from the tragic reality of some.

The blue tones dominating the piece impart a dreamlike quality that contradicts the harsh reality of consumer culture, creating a visual oxymoron. Hoshiko's oversized, blank eyes and expressionless face with an open mouth are especially unsettling, even creepy. She lacks any emotional connection with the audience or surrounding elements, appearing detached despite being physically overwhelmed by objects. This emotional flatness, combined with the dreamlike atmosphere, presents Hoshiko as a character who has achieved the extreme psychological detachment necessary for surviving in hyper-stimulating environments.

Unlike previous generations that experienced Japan's economic miracle, Hoshiko represents youth that grew in its aftermath, where the material replaced the spiritual, promoting an accelerated maturation due to economic precarity. Fittingly she dons knee-high socks, a school uniform, and a notable necktie that is traditionally a highly sexualized attire. She herself could be seen as a commodity: a character within a purchasable piece of artwork, a coveted *kawaii* girl typical in anime creations, and an ambassador for commercial goods.

Aoshima's "TAKAMAGAHARA" (2015) offers the culminating perspective in this section's progression, moving from adaptation and alienation to potential transcendence. This panoramic digital composition depicts a floating metropolis suspended above Tokyo Bay, its title referencing the "abode of heavenly gods." The ethereal city glows with inner light, its organic architecture blending seamlessly with clouds and vegetation, creating a visual utopia that contrasts with the earthly Tokyo visible as a distant silhouette below. The buildings are anthropomorphized, swaying gently in the wind throughout the original video. This emphasis on organic development rather than materialistic construction proposes that urban alienation stems not from the city itself but from the disconnection from traditional values and spiritual frameworks. By naming her floating city after the divine realm of Shinto mythology, Aoshima suggests that technological advancement and cultural preservation need not be opposing forces.

The installation's expansive horizontal format invites leisurely visual exploration, contrasting sharply with the restrictive vertical composition of "Building." This spatial liberation parallels a reimagining of urban existence. The dramatic color palette, featuring purples, blues, and greens creates a futuristic aesthetic while referencing traditional Japanese representations of spiritual realms. In the video installation, Aoshima structures the narrative as a cycle where skyscrapers are destroyed by natural disasters only to be reborn.[17] This regenerative view reflects Aoshima's expansive imagination and her hope for a future that combines technology and nature, one an inevitable progression and one a primordial force, as a resolution for urbanity.

Otaku Culture and Resistance:

This final section examines how Aoshima, ob, and MADSAKI appropriate elements from anime, manga, and other forms of *otaku* culture to express cultural resistance. Though often

[17] Chiho Aoshima, "Chiho Aoshima: Rebirth of the World," YouTube, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5427YXnyKXY.

dismissed as escapism, the range within *otaku* subculture is displayed through powerful expressions of identity and resistance, ranging from passive withdrawal to active reclamation of agency.

Aoshima's "We'll Always Be Together" (2009) serves as the ideal entry point into understanding the softer manifestations of resistance within *otaku*-influenced art. The center figure is a solitary skeleton figure curled up and leaning against a tree trunk, seemingly seeking comfort from the tree. Rather than evoking the conventional attitudes towards mortality, Aoshima emphasizes the word "forever" while rendering the skeleton with childlike proportions that suggest comfort and belonging. The tree is anthropomorphized with a warm smile and comforting embrace despite the death of the other figure. It acts as both a sanctuary and a symbol of continuity, enduring the elements but also accepting the skeleton's impermanence. The romanticized view portrayed here comes from Aoshima's love of nature. She said in the Hong Kong Tatler, "as I grew up, talking to people became a painful experience [but] nature healed me."[18]

This quiet retreat to nature represents a rare rejection of Japan's technological obsession and hyper-connected yet emotionally isolated society. While Japan has long been celebrated for its technological innovations, both Aoshima's work and personal experience suggest that these advancements have come at a spiritual cost. She deliberately turns to natural imagery, opting to avoid technologically medicated "connection." The skeleton, like Aoshima, is unable to find comfort among the living and turns instead to the enduring presence of nature. Though visually warm and cute, her work offers a silent yet powerful commentary on Japan's social fragmentation.

Resistance here is invisible, a fitting example of "soft" rebellion. Rather than directly opposing social norms, Aoshima sidesteps Japan's valorization of productivity and social performance. For her, the lack of socialization represents not failure but genuine self-preservation.

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[18] Oliver Giles, "Heaven and Earth," Hong Kong Tatler, October 1, 2020, https://www.perrotin.com/artists/Chiho_Aoshima/14/press-review/heaven-and-earth-2020-10-01/7803.

Her refusal to participate in the system liberates her from its rules and confines; her lack of aggression and opposition suggests transcendence. Her resistance does not come from a place of reaction, but from connection found outside of conventional social structures entirely.

Ob's "Sandbox" (2022) presents a more private and intimate form of resistance through the creation of miniature worlds. A young girl with large, round eyes and soft features sits hunched over a sandbox, embodying the shojo manga style. Like Aoshima's work, ob employs very soft imagery. The slight blurring of the pencil lines almost presents the piece as one from a child's hand instead of a world-renowned artist. However, compared to Aoshima's relaxed, passive skeleton, the girl is leaning forwards with her hands actively engaged in arrangement. Despite her young age, she represents agency in this create-your-own-realm game featuring pixelated, blocky trees and houses reminiscent of digital gaming environments such as Minecraft.

The young girl's careful manipulation of her tiny environment articulates a poignant metaphor for *otaku* resistance. Without the power to control larger socioeconomic forces shaping contemporary Japan, individuals instead create and manage scaled-down worlds where they maintain complete authority. Rather than directly confronting Japan's oppressive work culture, housing crisis, and economic pitfalls, a parallel reality that temporarily distracts from these problems looks attractive. Though somewhat escapist, ob portrays this creation of alternative spaces as productive and emotionally nourishing, evident in the girl's absorbed concentration. Thus, ob's clear voice that claims *otaku* practices as valid responses to social alienation stresses individual integrity as a central form of resistance.

MADSAKI's "The News is a Social Construct (2019) presents a stark perspective on destruction and media perception. The acrylic and aerosol painting captures the moment of a catastrophic explosion, with a mushroom cloud of smoke dominating an otherwise muted sky. Beneath the blue-gray background, indistinct structures crumble into the horizon, recalling both

specific disasters like Fukushima and general apocalyptic imagery. Yet rather than invoking reverence or mourning, the image feels oddly detached, almost absurd.

This emotional dissonance is intensified by MADSAKI's deliberately raw and unpolished spray paint technique. Unlike Aoshima's polished digital surrealism, MADSAKI embraces imperfection as a conceptual tool. The drips, uneven coverage, and raw textures rejects the traditional presentation of solemn subjects as clean or authoritative. The surface itself becomes part of the calculated critique of how news is edited, packaged, and disseminated. The randomly scattered yet expressive marks serve as a metaphor for the public media process riddled with subjectivity, bias, and commercial interests.

By portraying a moment of destruction in a cartoonish, exaggerated style, MADSAKI subverts the emotional expectations normally associated with disaster imagery. The piece's ironic title, *The News is a Social Construct*, further punctuates this critique by directly interrogating the authority of the media. His explosion is thus not just a symbol of devastation, but of distortion—of how trauma can be aestheticized and sold as content in a hyper-mediated society.

Aoshima's "The Souls and Flowers Around Me" (2021) culminates this progression with the most spiritually ambitious vision of resistance. The composition centers around Moimoi, a well-recognized avatar of Aoshima, in meditation. Unlike conventional representations of spiritual practices that emphasize austerity, Moimoi is surrounded by an assortment of skeleton heads and blooming flowers. They float like thought bubbles around her, suggesting an expanded consciousness that transcends material boundaries.

In line with Aoshima's presentation of stillness, she claimed that "human beings are prone to lose sight of what is really important as we have too much to think about."[19] This visualization of

[19] Oliver Giles, "Heaven and Earth," Hong Kong Tatler, October 1, 2020, https://www.perrotin.com/artists/Chiho_Aoshima/14/press-review/heaven-and-earth-2020-10-01/7803.

spiritual communion offers a profound resistance to contemporary Japanese capitalism. Moimoi actively chooses disengagement from production and consumption, instead cultivating awareness of immaterial dimensions that capitalism cannot colonize. The spirits surrounding her, reminiscent of both traditional yokai and contemporary anime characters, represent ancestral wisdom and cultural memory that persists despite modernization's amnesia. By blending traditional spiritual iconography with digital aesthetics, Aoshima suggests that authentic connection to cultural heritage remains possible even within hypermodernity. In fact, Moimoi can be seen as simultaneously solitary and connected in this work. Though physically alone, she communes with entities beyond ordinary perception. This state transcends both the alienating hyper-individualism of neoliberal capitalism and the suffocating collectivism that has historically dominated Japanese society.

As demonstrated with the works in this exhibition, Kaikai Kiki's approach extends beyond the contemporary Japanese art scene. Their strategy of "soft rebellion" offers a model of resistance in an age where traditional forms of protest no longer fit the voices of the new generation. By creating visually captivating works that gradually reveal their critical stance, these artists demonstrate how beauty become subversive within the system. This exhibition hopes that viewers will leave with inspiration on how resistance may manifest as reimagination from within.

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