



Artistic Remix: Contemporary Takes on Timeless Prints

MATTHEW WELCH

FOLLOWING THE “OPENING” OF JAPAN to the Western world in the 1850s, European and American artists rushed to collect Japanese prints and to adapt certain stylistic elements—flat areas of strong color, off-center compositions, dramatic cropping, unusual perspectives—to their own work. Some artists pictured street scenes and local landscapes after ukiyo-e *meisho zue* (pictures of famous places). In 1902, the French artist Henri Rivière, for example, created a series of lithographs titled *Les Trente-six Vues de la Tour Eiffel*, an obvious reference to the famous views of Mount Fuji by Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849). Some, like Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec, also found portrait themes in quotidian or controversial elements of society, such as shopgirls, prostitutes and actors. The list of Western artists who drew inspiration from Japanese prints reads like a veritable Who’s Who of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century avant-garde. So pervasive was the aesthetic impact of Japanese prints that the French caricaturist Henri-Gustave Jossot produced a lithograph in 1894 picturing an artist, his easel and canvas being tossed out of a boat by an enormous wave—a playful riff of Hokusai’s *Under the Wave Off Kanagawa*.

Japan’s influence on the international art world following World War II was vastly different—both in form and content. Gestural calligraphy and Asian metaphysics were wellsprings for abstract expressionists.¹ Ukiyo-e continued to be admired and amassed by collectors during the latter half of the twentieth century, but it held little interest for artists themselves. Notable exceptions include Masami Teraoka and Roger Shimomura, who both utilize ukiyo-e imagery and stylistic conventions to suggest issues of identity and Western stereotypes of the Japanese.

The work of ten contemporary artists included in “Edo Pop: The Graphic Impact of Japanese Prints,” an exhibition held at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts from October 30, 2011 through January 8, 2012, suggests that ukiyo-e imagery is again inspiring artists—in the West and in Japan. Each of the artists in the exhibition (which also included two hundred eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Japanese woodcuts) finds resonance among twenty-first-century culture and aspects of Edo-period (1615–1865) society, as featured in images of the “floating world”: hedonism, decadence, urbanism, sensuality, consumerism and escapism (fig. 1).

< FIG. 1. Emily Allchurch. *Tokyo Story 1: Lotus Garden (after Hiroshige)*. United Kingdom. 2011. Transparency on lightbox. 120.7 x 85.7 x 5 cm. Minneapolis Institute of Arts (The Christina N. and Swan J. Turnblad Memorial Fund) 2012.3.1

Allchurch cleverly echoed the square shape of Hiroshige’s series title cartouche by substituting an image of a doorway curtain (*noren*) decorated with bamboo.



FIG. 2. Nara Yoshitomo. *Goldfish*, from the series *in the floating world*. Japan. Heisei period, 1999. Acrylic and color pencil on printed matter. 42.2 x 33 cm. Collection of Eileen Harris Norton. Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles. Photo: Joshua White

BITING SOCIAL COMMENTARY

Nara Yoshitomo (b. 1959) is well known for his drawings, paintings and sculptures showing cartoonlike children with glowering expressions and menacing weapons. These images speak to the alienation and societal disenfranchisement prevalent among Japanese adults. Many, like Nara, grew up as latchkey children whose zeitgeist was defined by cartoons, comic books, television and punk rock music. Nara has also cited ukiyo-e prints as having exerted an influence on his work. In his 1999 series *in the floating world*, he adulterates famous woodblock images in offset prints. Some are benignly humorous; others make a more biting social comment with their juvenile facades.

In reworking a woodcut by Chōkōsai Eishō (act. 1780–1800), Nara replaces the head of the courtesan Shiratsuyu with that of a malevolent little girl (fig. 2). By substituting the courtesan's hairpins with nails dripping blood, Nara suggests both the sometimes painful nature of fashion and the unexpectedly maniacal disposition of children.

FANTASTIC SETTINGS

Aerial views by Yamaguchi Akira (b. 1969) are reminiscent of early genre painting in Japan that features glimpses of life through parted clouds, a device most spectacularly realized in screens known as *Scenes in and Around the Capital* (*rakuchū rakugai-zu*), but also used by ukiyo-e artists. Yamaguchi's vast panoramas show traditional buildings with their gracefully pitched tiled roofs amid skyscrapers, nuclear reactors, oil refineries, superhighways and manmade shorelines. While these visions may be seen as commentary on the encroachment of the modern world on traditional Japan, Yamaguchi disavows any political motivation. "If I wished to make a political statement, I would stand in the street with a placard."² Yamaguchi revels in the complexity of his fantastic views—at times providing cutaways into the interiors of buildings (a stylistic reference to "blown-away roofs," or *fukinuki yatai*, of classic handscroll painting), a strategy that allows him to provide even more detail. The inhabitants—courtiers, samurai, modern "salary men"—go about their business in an orderly manner, seemingly unbothered by the populous, labyrinthine world around them.

Yamaguchi's *Horse Stable* is in oil and watercolor on ten canvasses, measuring a total of about 160 x 300 cm (5 x 10 feet) (fig. 3). Yamaguchi holds both BA and MA degrees from the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, with an emphasis on oil painting. The assembly references pictures of stables that became a popular theme for folding screens during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Likely commissioned by warrior patrons, stables suggest the power and prestige of owning prized horses. A variation of the theme also pictures the warriors, their groomsmen and their high-placed acquaintances among the clergy and aristocracy, all casually lounging on the stable's veranda, engaged in board games and conversation. Yamaguchi's rendition playfully updates the



FIG. 3. Yamaguchi Akira. *Umayu-zu* (Horse stable). Japan. Heisei period, 2004. Oil and watercolor on canvas. 161 x 303 cm, comprising ten panels. Museum of Modern Art, Otsu City, Shiga Prefecture

theme. A rack of tires outside suggests that this is no ordinary stable: the horses are animal-machine hybrids. The figures, too, have been culled from different time periods, some wearing traditional garb, some sporting polo shirts and short pants. The comfortable integration of the modern, even futuristic (a servant bearing a cup of tea is actually an automaton) and the historical seems more humorous than apocalyptic, akin to present-day Japan, where the force of tradition is omnipresent in the midst of cutting-edge innovation.

GRAFFITI AND SHUNGA

Gajin Fujita (b. 1972) combines imagery derived from ukiyo-e with graffiti styles and tagging, or marking one's graffiti with an identifying name, mark or alias (fig. 4). His parents immigrated to the United States after World War II and settled in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of East Los Angeles, where they raised three sons. Once a melting pot of Jewish, Mexican, Japanese, Yugoslav and Russian immigrants, by the 1970s and 1980s, when Fujita was growing up, Boyle Heights was predominately Hispanic. Like stereotypical Asian parents, the Fujitas believed they could ensure their children's future success through good education. They also hoped that by sending their boys across town to Fairfax High School in West Hollywood, with its Magnet Center for Visual Arts, they might prevent them from becoming involved with the gangs prevalent in Boyle Heights.³



FIG. 4. Gajin Fujita. *Crew*. United States, 2002. Spray paint, acrylic and gold leaf on wood. 152.4 x 243.8 cm, comprising six panels. Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas

Fujita attributes his early interest in art to his father, a landscape painter: “The colors he used were vivid and amazing and . . . that naturally transferred to my work.”⁴ But in his neighborhood and on the long bus ride to school, Fujita regularly encountered graffiti. In high school, he became a member of a tagging crew KGB (Kings of Graffiti Bombing) and later, K2S (Kill to Succeed). “My brothers and I grew up in this hip-hop era. With the birth of hip-hop music, graffiti is the visual, and break dancing is the performance aspect.”⁵ At East Los Angeles College, Fujita enrolled in classes on drawing, painting and art history, coincident with an abatement of his tagging and bombing activities on the streets of Los Angeles. Ultimately, he decided he wanted to attend art school and pursue a career as an artist. Fujita received his BFA degree from the Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles, in 1997, and his MFA degree from the University of Nevada in Las Vegas in 2000. He began to combine the street idiom of graffiti with Japanese print imagery in 1998: “Initially, because I was wanting to shock people, I used *shunga*, which are erotic prints. I thought the combination—the layering—of the lowbrow culture of graffiti with the traditional, but taboo, idea of *shunga*. . . would have people doing flips.”⁶

Over time, Fujita has evolved a hybrid working style. Using tall wood slabs, he produces expansive multipanel compositions. With aerosol paint cans, he free-hands background tags, while making extensive use of stencils to render the main motifs. His use of gold leaf, too, is a conflation of two traditions, recalling both the metallic sheathing of trains he encountered in New York City, as well as traditional Japanese gold leaf, which he saw on the Golden Pavilion in Kyoto. The panel device is simply a means of

creating a larger composition that can be dissembled and stored easily. His studio is his rather humble family home.

Crew is a tribute to Fujita’s graffiti gang, picturing its members as kabuki actors against the contemporary backdrop of a heavily tagged wall. Fujita playfully integrates other motifs that hint at his present-day interests. The black hat traditionally worn by Japanese aristocrats, seen here on the fellow in the center of the composition, bears the kangaroo insignia of the British clothier Kangol (famous for its jaunty 1940s beret) that manufactures fashions popular among hip-hop groups like the Beastie Boys. Rather than a family crest, the same figure also sports the Oakland Raider’s logo, but Fujita mischievously changed the eye-patch from one eye to the other and altered “Raiders” to “Ronins.” In historical Japan, *rōnin* were masterless warriors whose lords had died, suffered defeat or fallen from political favor. As a result, *rōnin* were disenfranchised from the military hierarchy, yet unable to integrate into society because of their status and training. Fujita likens today’s subcultures, such as graffiti crews, to the disaffected warriors of Japan’s Edo period.

FINDING COMMONALITIES

New York City-based Iona Rozeal Brown (b. 1966) is an artist and a disc jockey who sees parallels between the amped-up sexuality and materialism of hip-hop culture and the hedonistic pursuits of the rising class of urban commoners in Edo Japan.⁷ Brown, who holds an MFA degree from the Yale University School of Art, was aware of Japanese art and culture from a young age. She took a particular interest in the late 1990s, when she learned of the popular phenomenon of *ganguro* (literally, “face-blackening”). Japanese youth, seeking to emulate their black hip-hop idols, began to darken their skin, crimp their hair and weave it into cornrows and sport urban street wear.

Trips to Japan in 2001 and 2005 were, in part, attempts by Brown to come to terms with this cultural appropriation. “I was really just trying to understand these Japanese kids,” she recalls. “I didn’t like it when they got dressed up in blackface . . . but my thing is about finding that common thread. What I look for are commonalities.”⁸ The series *A3* (Afro-Asiatic Allegory) is based on Brown’s experiences in Japan and of Japanese art: . . .

Late Edo woodblock prints are depicting a time when people had money. They were partying. They were hanging around with geisha. Merchants had money; some of the merchants had more money than samurai. People were going to kabuki. And I saw that as the commonality with the fabulosity of the rap world. People buying diamonds, cars, going to strip shows, throwing money at strippers. I mean it’s the same thing. It’s the same thing on a different continent at a different time. But that’s what I think my calling is—to find commonalities, because when you, as a human being, find common ground with another human being, that makes life so much better, automatically. . . I’m just that naïve to think that makes a difference.⁹



FIG. 5. Katsukawa Shun'ei. *The Actor Ichikawa Komazō III*. Japan. Edo period, c. 1791. Color woodcut, *hosoban*. 32 x 14.5 cm. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC: The Anne van Biema Collection, S2004.3.58

FIG. 6. Iona Rozeal Brown. *one for the money, two faux the show (still pimpin')* (after Katsukawa Shun'ei's *The Actor Ichikawa Komazō III*). United States. 2006. Acrylic and gold leaf on panel. 152.4 x 121.9 cm. University of Virginia Art Museum, Charlottesville



In 2004, Brown was awarded a grant from the Japan–US Friendship Commission (Creative Artist Program) that enabled her to live in Japan for six months. During that time, she studied kabuki. Later, some of her compositions came to reflect her awareness of actor prints. Her *one for the money, two faux the show (still pimpin')* is based on a portrait by Katsukawa Shun'ei (c. 1762–1819) of the actor Ichikawa Komazō III in a distinctive, twisting pose (fig. 5). Rather than wielding a sword, Brown's hip-hop fan holds a bag emblazoned with a dollar sign (fig. 6). He wears baggy trousers and a loose, open shirt. His face is darkened with *ganguro* makeup, and he sports a white do-rag.

MASTERING MASKS

The Noh-mask artist Yamaguchi Hiroki (b. 1970) is known by his art sobriquet, Bidou (fig. 7). Ironically, he first became intrigued with Japanese Noh masks when visiting American museums in 1991. A recent graduate of the Kuwasawa Design School in Tokyo, he did something very unusual for a Japanese artist after he returned home—he began to carve his own Noh mask without any formal instruction. Eventually, he showed his mask of Okina (a venerable old man) to Ogawa Gendō, a master mask carver affiliated with the Noh-mask carving school of the “Living National Treasure” Nagasawa Ujiharu. Ogawa was surprised at the precocious young talent and accepted him as an apprentice. After about five years—a comparatively short time—Ogawa conferred the art name Bidou on his protégé in recognition of his mastery of the medium.

By 1998, Yamaguchi's masks were acknowledged as acceptable for use by actors associated with the Hōshō school of Noh acting by Hōshō Fusateru, head of the school. In 2002, the grand master himself ordered two masks—Shaka and Chubeshimi. Yamaguchi's career as a traditional Noh-mask artist seemed set, yet he harbored misgivings. The emphasis that Noh placed on precisely replicating past examples of masks, considered impossible to better, was frustrating for the young artist, who began to view his work as mechanical. In 2004, he set out in a new, heretical direction. He began to fashion three-dimensional “masks” inspired by icons of Western art—Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* and Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. These masks ask us to question our assumptions about “appearance” and “reality.” They also speak to the notion of iconic immortality through artistic appropriation.

Most recently, Yamaguchi has been inspired by the prints of Tōshūsai Sharaku (act. 1794–95). As with his masks of Western masterpieces, he fastidiously reproduces every detail, including damage to the prints caused by mold and soil. Part of the mystery and gravitas (conveyed by the Japanese term *yugen*) of historical Noh masks derives from their age. Even traditional masks depicting young women possess a numinous quality, owing in part to the masks' timeworn appearance. Yamaguchi based one mask on a print by Sharaku of the actor Bandō Zenji performing in the kabuki play *The Thousand Cherry Trees of Yoshitsune* (*Yoshitsune*



FIG. 7. Bidou at work in his studio. May 2012. Photo: Yoshida Ayomi

senbon-zakura) at the Kawarasaki Theater in 1794 (figs. 8, 9). The play is based on the story of the warrior brothers Yoshitsune and Yoritomo of the Minamoto clan in the twelfth century. After a successful military campaign against the rival Taira clan, Yoritomo turned against his brother. Yoshitsune evaded Yoritomo's army for several years, seeking refuge among allies, and always on guard for those who might betray him. This mask represents Oni no Sadobō, an evil monk who sought Yoshitsune's downfall. In kabuki, Oni no Sadobō is a stock character referred to as a “catfish monk” (*namazu-bozu*), having a shaved head and long sidelocks that resemble catfish whiskers. As with traditional Noh masks with implanted hair, Yamaguchi used horsehair for Sadobō's sidelocks.

BOLD LINEWORK

The British artist Julian Opie (b. 1958) draws inspiration from the world around him, assertively picturing urban individuals in a pared-down, linear style that derives, in part, from his admiration of Japanese woodblock prints. Opie graduated from Goldsmiths College (University of London) in 1982. He first received widespread recognition in 2000 for his album cover for the British rock band Blur, illustrating the group's four members, the original paintings for which are now in the National Portrait Gallery, London. Opie works from photographs and, through a reductive process, renders his subjects in bold but sensitive linework, and areas of bright, unmodulated color—characteristics also found in Japanese prints. The scale and precision of his images, realized as silkscreen and vinyl output, as well as in electronic formats, have a distinctly contemporary feel. *Olivier, Racing Driver* shows the famous French racer Olivier Panis, winner of the 1996 Monaco Grand Prix (fig. 10).

Opie is a serious collector of Japanese prints and has curated (with Timothy Clark) exhibitions on Hiroshige (“The Moon Reflected,” Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK, 2007) and Utamaro (“Kitagawa Utamaro,” Ikon

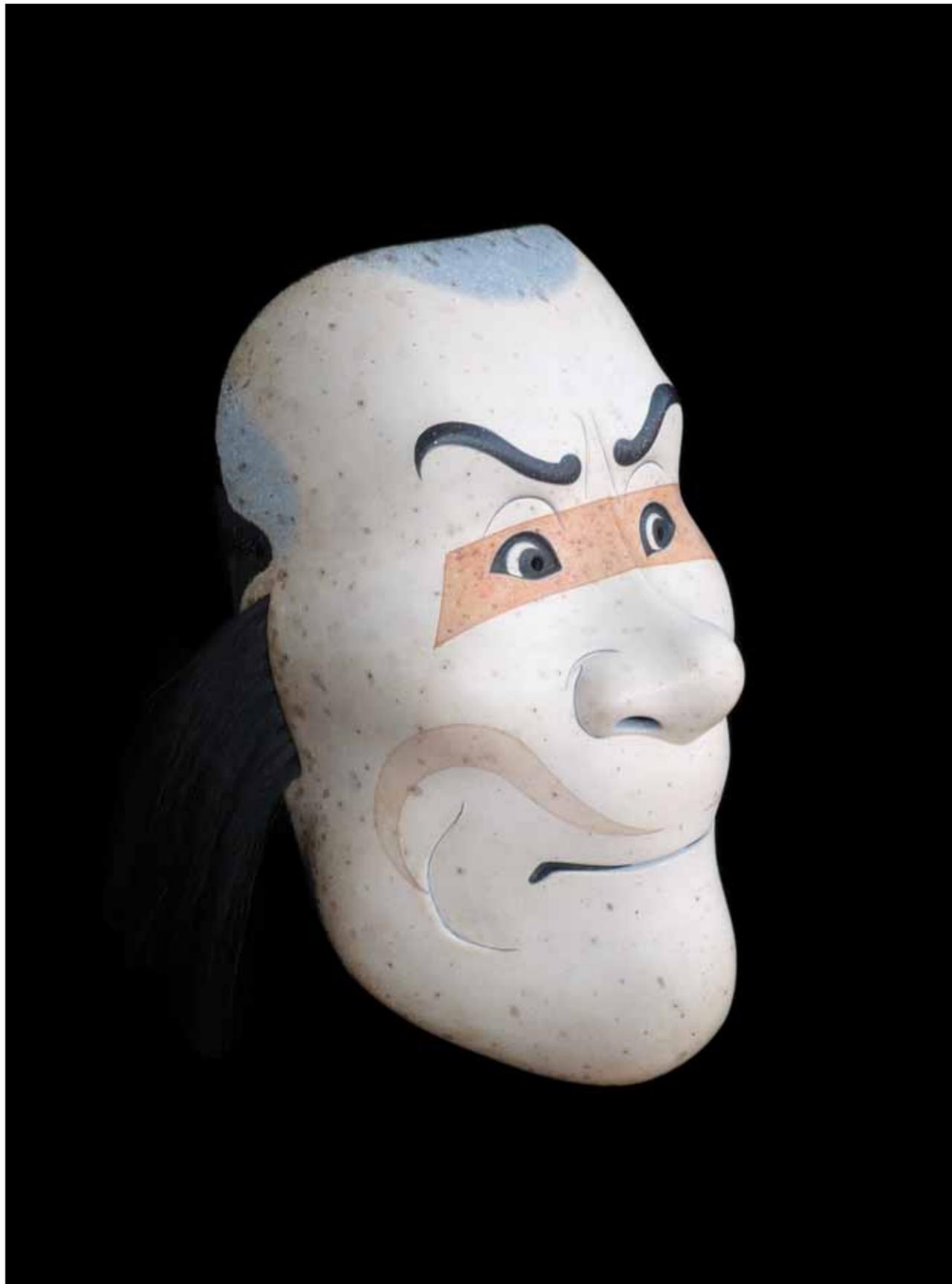


FIG. 9. Tōshūsai Sharaku. The Actors Sawamura Yodogorō II as Kawatsura Hōgen and Bandō Zenji as Oni no Sadobō in the kabuki play *The Thousand Cherry Trees of Yoshitsune* (*Yoshitsune senbon-zakura*) at the Kawarazaki Theater. Japan. Edo period, 1794, fifth month. Color woodcut with mica ground, *ōban*. 38.3 x 25.2 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, William Sturgis Bigelow Collection (11.14676). Photo © 2013 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



< FIG. 8. Yamaguchi Bidou. *Oni no Sadobō*. Japan. Heisei period, 2011. Wood, pigment, lacquer, *gofun* (a white pigment made from powdered oyster shell) and horsehair. 45.7 x 19 x 8.9 cm. Minneapolis Institute of Arts (Gift of funds from Robert J. Ulrich) 2012.2

Gallery, 2010). An exhibition of his work at the Museum of Applied Arts (MAK—Museum für Angewandte Kunst) in Vienna in 2008 included his sketches after Utamaro. In the catalogue for the exhibition, Clark remarks that Opie's subjects look directly at the viewer, whereas Utamaro's beauties, rendered in three-quarter profile, do not:

They're from a generation who have grown up encouraged to project an individual persona. Yet there is an undeniable tension present between this projection of individual confidence and the quite narrow range of stylistic devices with which they are presented. . . . It's impressive just how much information the simple Opie schema can convey and how efficiently we have learned to read his signs.¹⁰

FIG. 10. Julian Opie. *Olivier, Racing Driver*. United Kingdom. 2002. Vinyl on wooden stretcher. 193.7 x 156.2 cm. Collection of Steve Smelt, Los Angeles. ©Julian Opie. Photo courtesy Barbara Krakow



SURREAL ANIMATION

“Edo Pop” also included a video installation, *hanabi-ra* (Flower petals), by the Japanese artist Tabata Ayako (b. 1975), who goes by the art pseudonym Tabaimo (fig. 11). In 1999, at the age of twenty-four, she was awarded the Kirin Contemporary Award Grand Prize for her graduation video *Japanese Kitchen* for Kyoto University of Art and Design. Unlike the slick, computer-generated, fantastical imagery associated with manga and the Superflat movement, Tabaimo’s images are hand drawn and tend to reflect the mundane aspects of Japanese life. Her soft-color palette and graphic textures, derived in part from traditional woodblock prints, give her imagery a comfortably nostalgic feel. This initial familiarity soon dissipates, however, as surreal and nightmarish vignettes begin to appear, implying that the normalcy is only a facade.

Her *hanabi-ra*, a four-minute, twenty-four-second animation, centers on the naked rear view of a male figure, tattooed with chrysanthemums taken from a print in the “large flower” series by Hokusai. Despite their prevalence in mid-nineteenth-century prints depicting valorous heroes, tattoos have a long association with common laborers and gangsters in Japan. (Today, some public baths in Japan ban admission of tattooed

individuals because of the longstanding association with the criminal underworld.) Tabaimo’s video takes on a voyeuristic tone, not because of the figure’s nakedness, but because it reveals what is typically unseen; tattoos in Japan always stopped discreetly before the neckline and sleeve openings of undershirts. When revealed at public baths, they prompted furtive glances and discreet curiosity. The sense of benign déjà vu in Tabaimo’s film takes a surreal turn when the petals begin to fall from the flowers. Ominous black crows fly by, and the breeze from their wings hastens the process. Ultimately, only the stems remain. The man himself disintegrates, leaving the viewer to consider notions of permanence and immutability, time-honored currents of Japanese art and literature.

COMPLEX COMPOSITE IMAGES

The British artist Emily Allchurch (b. 1974) lives in London. She completed her BA degree at the Kent Institute of Art and Design in 1996, and her MA degree at the Royal College of Art, London, in 1999. Soon after graduate school, she began digitally altering photographs to heighten certain pictorial effects. In 2003, she changed course, creating images that are composites of hundreds of photographs digitally spliced together. For a series of thirteen works, entitled *Settings*, Allchurch used a veritable library of digital images that she had shot in and around London to produce compositions based on old-master paintings and prints. In 2005, the BBC featured her in its series *A Digital Picture of Britain*.¹¹ Her next major series, *Urban Chiaroscuro* (2007), garnered widespread acclaim. Inspired by Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s etchings of imaginary prisons, Allchurch faithfully reproduced the look of the originals by “building” the architectural structures out of countless photographs of brick and stonework. Only on close inspection is the artifice revealed through the inclusion of contemporary surveillance cameras, convex safety mirrors, graffiti, crosswalk lights, discarded beer bottles, advertisements and other detritus of present-day life.

Long an admirer of the 1857 series *One Hundred Views of Famous Places in Edo* by Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858), Allchurch traveled to Tokyo in 2009 and visited the locations pictured by Hiroshige over one hundred and fifty years ago. While most areas bear no resemblance to Hiroshige’s views, Allchurch photographed details of the urban landscapes she encountered. “I really love this idea of rediscovering a place from a contemporary perspective,” she reflected. “How do I take all of the information I have—I took six thousand pictures—and abstract it into just ten images that can reveal my whole journey around the city?”¹²

While following the compositional arrangements, dramatic cropping and color gradations of the Hiroshige woodcuts, Allchurch manipulated digital images on her computer to create backlit transparency views that are at once an overt homage to Hiroshige, but also a statement on contemporary Japanese life, culture and environment (see fig. 1 and frontispiece, p. 24). Of *Lotus Garden*, after Hiroshige’s *Irises at Horikiri*, Allchurch has remarked, “When I was there, it was more of the season for water lilies.

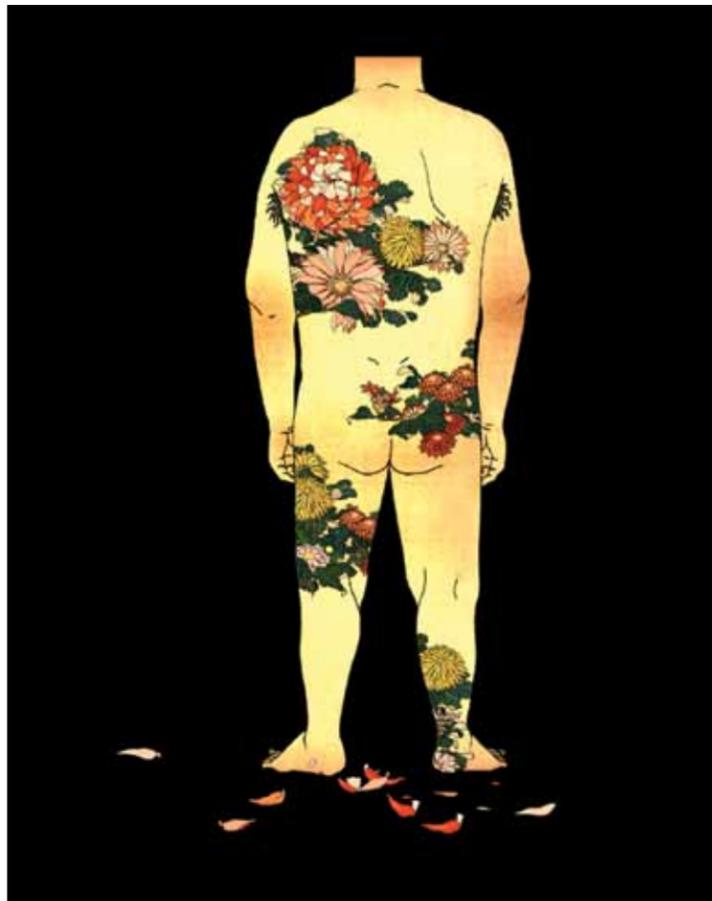


FIG. 11. Tabaimo. *hanabi-ra*. Japan. Heisei period, 2003. Video animation; 4 minutes, 24 seconds. © Tabaimo. Collection of the Birmingham Museum of Art (Museum purchase with funds provided by the Collectors Circle for Contemporary Art). Photo courtesy Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo, and James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai

I felt they would be a way of updating the original, but rather than having people picking flowers commercially, which you don't see in the center of Tokyo anymore, I've replaced it with a woman in the leisurely pursuit of photographing flowers. That is something I came across a lot, of course, . . . so it felt like an honest way to update the original."¹³ Allchurch's skyline also suggests contemporary Japan with its modern high-rise buildings and billboards. "At the bottom there's a catfish which actually is known in Japanese culture to exhibit strange behavior before an earthquake," she continued. "So suddenly, this image seems to have more poignancy now with the events of March of this year," referring to the earthquake of March 11, 2011, and the tsunami that subsequently devastated the northeast coast of Japan.¹⁴

SUPERFLAT ANTHROPOMORPHICS

Aoshima Chiho (b. 1974) graduated with a degree in economics from Hōsei University, Tokyo, in 1995. Largely self-taught as an artist, she was "discovered" by Pop impresario Murakami Takashi when he organized the

exhibition "Tokyo Girls Bravo" in 1999 for the NADiff Gallery in Tokyo. Aoshima produces digitally rendered drawings and animations featuring fantastical worlds populated by anthropomorphic creatures and fairies, as well as terrifying demons and ghosts (usually interpreted as metaphors for the regenerative/destructive aspects of nature). Stylistically, she is connected to the Superflat movement typified by simple and emphatically two-dimensional forms. Her emphasis on line, unmodulated color and dramatic cropping also draws on traditional Japanese art—especially ukiyo-e.

Aoshima is currently a member of Murakami's Kaikai Kiki artist collective. Her meteoric rise on the international art scene has been marked by many high-profile exhibitions and projects. In 2001, she was included in the "Superflat" exhibition that opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and subsequently traveled to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo. In 2004, she was invited to participate in the fifty-fourth "Carnegie International" in Pittsburgh. In conjunction with the exhibition "Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture" at the Japan Society Gallery, New York, in 2005, she was commissioned by the Public Art Fund to install photomurals in the Union Square subway station. Part of her *City Glow* series, they pictured anthropomorphic skyscrapers in a paradisiacal garden. A revised version titled *City Glow, Mountain Whisper* was installed in the Gloucester Station, London, in 2006.



FIG. 12. Aoshima Chiho. Still from *City Glow*. Japan. Heisei period, 2005. 7-minute animated film. Animation in collaboration with Bruce Ferguson. © Chiho Aoshima/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. Minneapolis Institute of Arts (Gift of Funds from the Friends of the Institute and the William Hood Dunwoody Fund) 2011.83

a swarm of fluttering moths. Just before the scene gives over to Bosch, Aoshima offers a Disney-like reprieve, wherein a butterfly pulls back the curtain on a fantasy-affirming rainbow.

Aoshima's narrative owes much to traditional Asian handscroll painting. The animation was designed to be shown on five contiguous high-definition television screens, thus giving it distinctly long and narrow proportions. As in handscroll painting, the visuals proceed from right to left, and are designed as a whole, but are to be enjoyed in intimate segments. To suggest deep space, Aoshima enlarged motifs in the extreme foreground, recalling a similar approach to composition used by Hiroshige in several prints from his *One Hundred Views of Famous Places in Edo* series.

COMPELLING TERRAIN PHOTOS

Panoramic photographer Gus Foster (b. 1940) first became intrigued with Japanese woodblock prints in the 1960s. In May 1991, he embarked on a journey inspired by Hiroshige's famous series *Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō Road* (fig. 13). Carrying a 35-mm Globuscope, one hundred rolls of film, a compass, maps, a sleeping bag and a backpack of supplies, Foster crossed Tokyo's Nihonbashi Bridge (the first station) and began walking just over three hundred miles to Kyoto. Following the Tōkaidō, now a superhighway, he hiked about ten miles a day, photographing a terrain that

City Glow, Aoshima's first animation, was made in collaboration with New Zealand-based animator Bruce Ferguson (fig. 12). Twenty-four hours elapse within the film's seven-minute time frame. Anthropomorphic skyscrapers sway in the background, plants grow and blossom luxuriantly in the foreground. A rainstorm suddenly gives way to an underwater scene of fish, bubbles and weightless aquatic plants. Aoshima transcends the "cult of cute" in Japanese popular culture with strong subcurrents of edginess, here juxtaposing her futurist garden paradise with ominous night. Eerily glowing trees rise in a graveyard occupied by the spirits of baleful beauties. This netherworld is dominated by a terrible, three-eyed goddess from whose mouth escapes



FIG. 13. Gus Foster. *Station 27: Kakegawa*. United States. 1991. 419° panorama, color coupler print. 36.2 x 312.4 cm. Collection of the artist

Hiroshige would not recognize. Nothing prepared Foster for the staggering degree of urban growth and industrialization he encountered. Nevertheless, he remained committed to his goal of creating the most compelling panoramic images possible. Unlike Hiroshige's poetic depictions of the landscape, Foster's images capture the specifics of time and place with machine-made precision and objectivity. And yet, each picture suggests Foster's remarkable skill at finding scenes that, when presented in panoramic form, become more than the sum of their parts.

UKIYO-E INSPIRES DISPARATE VOICES

Individually sardonic, alien, dreamlike, vibrant or evocative, taken as a whole, these contemporary works appropriate subjects, styles and motifs from ukiyo-e. That artists look to the past for inspiration and borrow elements from earlier masterpieces for their own productions is hardly a new phenomenon. The nature of ukiyo-e, with its emphasis on popular culture (albeit of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), ribald and sensational tales and disreputable subject matter, will always find resonance among all but the most puritanical. With their bold compositions, colors and linework, woodcuts relate to contemporary screen printing and advertising—and thus possess a modernity that is universally familiar. While these characteristics help explain why ukiyo-e continues to attract artists, it does little to account for the breadth of their artistic re-visioning. Nara Yoshitomo harkens back to the original counter-culture nature of woodcuts by contributing his own icon-busting doodles. Emily Allchurch and Yamaguchi Akira embed gentle commentaries on the state of Japan's present reality within compositions that are unabashed tributes to earlier styles. Julian Opie pictures young urbanites in a reductive, linear manner that seems chicly contemporary—the same élan that characterized Utamaro's beauties, rendered in spare, sinuous linework. Iona Rozeal Brown and Gajin Fujita also picture the young and fashionable, but as hybrids—taggers as kabuki actors and fashionistas as *bijin*—reflecting the parallels they see between Edo urbanity and the ethos of hip-hop. Tabaimo and Aoshima Chiho take on grander themes: transience and the opposing forces of nature (respectively) through alternate realities that only distantly evoke the floating world. Gus Foster's panoramic photographs taken along the Tōkaidō relate to Hiroshige's famous series only in concept. (Foster actually walked the three hundred miles that separates Tokyo and Kyoto to take his photographs; current scholarship suggests that Hiroshige

probably never made the journey, but created his images from descriptions in guidebooks, earlier woodcuts and his own vivid imagination.) And the visages Yamaguchi Bidou appropriates from actor prints are post-modern simulacra made ironic through his chosen format—masks are associated with the Noh theater, the aristocratic antithesis of lowbrow kabuki (the inspiration for Sharaku's original designs).

The contemporary artists included here speak in disparate voices, owing to their divergent backgrounds, artistic media and philosophic viewpoints. Each draws inspiration from ukiyo-e, but to vastly different effects in his or her own work. In doing so, they bring texture and nuance to themes that are as resonant to our lives as they were to the people of Edo. 🍡

NOTES

1. See Bert Winther-Tamaki, "The Asian Dimensions of Postwar Abstract Art: Calligraphy and Metaphysics," in Alexandra Munroe, ed., *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009), 145–58.
2. Jeff Michael Hammond, "Akira Yamaguchi: New Takes on Tradition," *Skyward*, JAL Group's inflight magazine (2005): 32; as cited in David Elliott, *Bye Bye Kitty!!! Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art* (New York: Japan Society; New Haven, Yale University Press, 2011), 18.
3. Peter Goulds, Foreword to *Gajin Fujita: Made in L. A.* (Venice, CA: L. A. Louver, 2011), 4.
4. Audio guide, "Edo Pop: The Impact of Japanese Woodblock Prints" (Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2011).
5. Audio guide, "Edo Pop."
6. Audio guide, "Edo Pop."
7. In 2010, Brown was the subject of a major exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland, "iona rozeal brown: all falls down."
8. Audio guide, "Edo Pop."
9. Audio guide, "Edo Pop."
10. Timothy Clark, "Empty Places, Conspicuous Faces: Hiroshige, Utamaro, Opie," in Peter Noever, ed., *Julian Opie: 1958–: Recent Works* (Vienna: MAK, 2008), 31–33.
11. In the BBC segment, Allchurch is shown creating a work based on James Abbott McNeill Whistler's *View of the Thames*, in the collection of Tate Britain.
12. Audio guide, "Edo Pop."
13. Audio guide, "Edo Pop."
14. Audio guide, "Edo Pop."