

THE DOOR INTO SUMMER: THE AGE OF MICROPOP

CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY, ART TOWER MITO
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Art critic Matsui Midori has coined the term 'micropop' to describe a trend in Japanese contemporary art that she identifies as having emerged over the past ten years, inspired, she says, by the theory of 'minor literature' advanced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Michel de Certeau's thinking on the practice of routine existence. The show Matsui has curated under that title features work by 15 artists, chiefly those belonging to the 'small-scale avant-garde' group born in the decade spanning the late 1960s and early 70s, who combine fragments of everyday experience to create their own aesthetics and way of life, spurning reliance on any system of ethics or dominant ideology.

An exhibition by an art critic is bound to recall *Ground Zero Japan*, curated by Noi Sawaragi in 2000, and also staged at Art Tower Mito. That challenging project took the history of Japanese contemporary art – which, postwar, had been marked by a sense of inferiority towards the West – right 'back to zero', making the dividing line between art and animation, as well as other manifestations of Japanese subculture, the starting point for a new orientation in Japanese art. For *Micropop* Matsui has attempted to capture artistic expression in Japan since this turn. Unlike the history- and trend-conscious *Ground Zero* generation, *Micropop* celebrates the individual, and values small pleasures. As one might imagine, these works are notable for their naivety and their preoccupation with the humbler, more intimate aspects of life.

The first half of the exhibition consists of a vast array of drawings and photographs capturing the beauty in small things: the poetic photos of Shimabuku standing on a summer beach in a red Santa Claus suit and carrying a blue rubbish bag; Kaoru Arima's series of tiny drawings on newspaper; and Ryoko Aoki's arrangements of cut-outs and drawings in space, organised as one might lay out a garden. In the second half the show moves on to works by a younger generation of artists, such as Taro Izumi's video *Lime at the Bottom of the Lake* (2006), in which people captured on a security camera are swatted like mosquitoes by a giant hand. According to Matsui, drawing and video, in their easy informality and availability, fit well with the micropop genre's celebrations of the trifling and trivial. Matsui likens artists to groups such as migrants and children, as losers in an era of globalisation, viewing their tendency to amuse themselves with TV and their immediate surroundings as a strategy for surviving amid the chaos. One wrong step, however, and this state becomes indistinguishable from the phenomenon of the one-and-a-half million hermit-like *hikikomori*, Japan's post-adolescent stay-at-home recluses. Are we to be left with nothing but the innumerable private universes of people turned in on themselves?

In contrast, Tam Ochiai, whose contribution consists of a row of more than 170 drawings casually pinned to the wall, neatly sidesteps Matsui's voluble interpretation. While the other artists try to precisely organise 'their own universe', Ochiai's row of light, quick-handed drawings hangs unevenly against a line-level, suggesting an outward-looking interest with the imperfect and the provisional. Which perhaps – paradoxically – makes him a true micropop artist, cleaving to nothing and no one. *Chiaki Sakaguchi*



Ryoko Aoki, *Flower Range*, 2001.
Courtesy Kodama Gallery, Tokyo and Osaka

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LA and the artworld are lucky that Hawkinson's back in the saddle, ears alert for the call of the Sensory Homunculus Scout

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