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Winter Garden: The Exploration of the Micropop Imagination in Contemporary Japanese Art

Midori Matsui's Micropop is a macro flop

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BY DAVID BALZER August 25, 2010 21:08

EDITORIAL RATING:

Winter Garden: The Exploration of the Micropop Imagination in Contemporary Japanese Art
To Nov 6. Mon, Thu 11:30am-7pm; Tue, Wed, Fri 11:30am-4:30pm. The Japan Foundation, 131 Bloor W, 2nd fl, 416-966-1600. www.jftor.org

Can a show full of mediocre art be important, imperative even, because of its purported anthropological value? The gallery at the Japan Foundation — always a source of intriguing projects — is currently presenting "Winter Garden," a collection of work by young, contemporary Japanese artists, that curator Midori Matsui claims represents a movement she has christened "Micropop."

Understanding what exactly this is, despite her thorough essay in a beautiful exhibition monograph, is a challenge.

There seems no way to give coherent justification of the work — which, on its own, often seems idiotically primitive in technique and absurdly obvious in concept — without the aid of theory positioning it as the emanation of one or more post-industrial conditions. (Deleuze and Guattari, Robert Smithson and Michel de Certeau are all quoted by Matsui in the monograph.) But does knowing that, say, one of Tam Ochiai's abominable, pencil-crayon-and-acrylic scribbles is emblematic of his generation's tendency to use "sedimentation as a model for the activities of the human unconscious and a model for the analogical relations between the unconscious and natural processes" really help us like it better?

Here, then, is, at least apparently, a group of artists who want little to do with beauty because they have been raised on the amateurish, the expendable, the banal. This is, obviously, not a style or attitude that is new to us or, in turn, exclusive to Japan, and Matsui acknowledges this, referring to the homogenizing effects of globalization in the monograph. It follows that there is little reason to see the show. In addition to the shockingly ugly and sloppy — Hiroshi Sugito's or Masaya Chiba's laughably primitive paintings, for instance, which could only be rescued with the problematic designation "minimalist-Buddhist" — there is underwhelming video art to which Western viewers are very much used. Sure, the approach may owe a degree of debt to Japan, but one can now see generic pieces like Koki Tanaka's (which showed at YYZ last winter) or Taro Izumi's with regularity at any given gallery or museum.

This is not the whole picture: Matsui gives us glimpses of work that is more passionate and firm-wristed, such as Mahomi Kunikata's elaborate horror-show acrylics (pictured) and Aya Takano's pretty drawings of super-heroines. It is no coincidence that, like Takashi Murakami, both of these artists are influenced by manga. Indeed, their attempt to respond to mass culture by matching its allure and outwitting its wittiness may be more '90s (and '60s) than now, but it is a breath of fresh air in a show that seems set on portraying the artist as a victim of circumstance.

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