

DIARY

## HAPPI CAMPERS

September 22, 2008 • Tokyo • Cathryn Drake

### Tokyo



Left: Artist and Geisai founder Takashi Murakami. Right: Curator and Geisai juror Alison Gingeras (second from right). (All photos: Cathryn Drake)

The eleventh edition of Geisai, an art fair started by Takashi Murakami in 2001 to allow artists without galleries to peddle their own wares, commenced last Sunday at Tokyo Big Sight in a joyful explosion of Japanese subcultures. At the opening assembly, a kimono-clad woman with a big Minnie Mouse bow on her head gave a long introduction in Japanese, after which Murakami kicked things off by leading the crowd of artist-exhibitors in cheers, instructing them to pose for a mass portrait, and concluding: “This is the biggest Geisai ever. We must make a revolution!”

Needless to say, with roughly twelve hundred exhibitors—more than double the last edition—there was a mind-boggling array of artwork, including paintings of elfin, big-eyed girls

characteristic of Murakami's Kaikai Kiki stable, digitized apocalyptic sci-fi visions, and fantasy worlds inhabited by infantile nymphs. Others sold ceramics, knitted hats, stuffed animals, and manga and anime paraphernalia. Among the performers were a woman with a giant apple head, a man in a bunny suit, and a green monster.

Before the fair opened to the public, the five members of the jury surveyed the aisles, sporting blue Japanese *happi* jackets featuring Kaikai Kiki smiling-flower logos and lapels with Japanese script reading ARE YOU GOING TO DO ART UNTIL YOU DIE? Alison Gingeras looked around wide-eyed and said, "I am overwhelmed. It is different but not different. I think the performances around the fair are the most interesting aspect."



Left: Artist Adrian Tone. Right: Palais de Tokyo director and Geisai juror Marc-Olivier Wahler.

Most of the artists approached visitors to explain their work, much of which seemed to entail a psychological motivation. Of her small paintings and constructions featuring the color pink, artist Yasuyo said, "I want to express the child's world inside me. And pink is happy!"

Another exuberant exhibitor was Hiichan (many of the artists chose to go simply by their given names), whose largest painting depicted "ninety-six styles of sex position." Surrounded by a throng of TV cameras, Marc-Olivier Wahler said, "It is really refreshing. I like the way they behave. They approach you in a way nobody normally would." Although collector Takeo Obayashi said he found the overall quality lower than the last fair, he did purchase a voluptuous painting of a woman with ram horns being ravished by a wolf in a forest.

Even a few of the famously reclusive *otaku*, geeks obsessed with the anime and manga that inspired Murakami's "Superflat," left their homes to exhibit. A young woman, Seira Uchida, replicated her room by cordoning off the booth with string; she sat with her back to visitors wearing giant earphones and reading magazines. Her statement read, "For me, Geisai is a very fearful event because I have to watch 1,000 passing me to look one person who is interested me." Pale and dressed in black, twenty-four-year-old Yuji Oku sat in a chair staring straight ahead, with no apparent interest in discussing his show, "Weapons," a series of nearly identical ominous black figures on white backgrounds.

More than anything, Geisai was a one-stop look at the heavily coded, often conformist youth culture of Japan. On the upper level was the School Festival Executive Committee, which celebrated the distinct subcultures born from Tokyo's Akihabara district, full of video-game and electronics shops including a typical maid café, where coquettish young girls in French maid outfits serve tea to male *otaku*. "The Japanese sell schoolgirls' used underwear in vending machines," one of my colleagues commented as the giggling waitresses greeted us. "It is an unhealthy obsession."



Left: Artist Seira Uchida. Right: Game players.

In the spirit of a school *geisai*, or "art festival," there were mock classrooms, game booths, and an "Itasha" display of race cars decorated with female anime characters. Playboy bunnies passed out flyers, and "cosplayers" wandered around dressed up as characters from comic books, graphic novels, video games, and fantasy movies. (I caught Murakami's studio assistant Ebato Ai dressed in a "zombie" costume with fake blood dripping from her mouth.)

On a stage were concerts by pop stars such as the pigtailed Maria Yumetsuki, dressed in a shimmering pink cape. “She is my angel,” swooned one sweaty, bespectacled young man.

I was so carried away with the festive spirit that I joined the congalike procession of Nakasone OFF, a group of Internet addicts who arrange to meet offline; it snaked around the booth manned by Kyoto DJ Halfby and past the schoolrooms, where kids in military uniforms saluted us as we passed. It seemed like a great—and wholesome—way to get computer geeks to exercise; the whole spectacle brought to mind a county fair on acid.

Murakami is a paradigm of the commercial success of art-star marketing, but he is also creating a structure to enable young artists to emerge by playing with the very system that allowed him to rise. Unlike Damien Hirst, Murakami’s brand of revolution is not all about him. Juror Jack Bankowsky observed at the press conference, “You can’t help but think of the whole thing as his artistic project. Coming here is a better way of understanding his work.” Fellow juror Wahler agreed: “You can see his fingerprint in every detail.” Gingeras commented that Murakami was very democratic, allowing them to choose artists with whom he disagreed. In fact, Kaikai Kiki artist Aya Takano, whose work is showing currently in the Tokyo gallery, said, “I have never been able to understand Murakami’s work. I don’t like his taste. But I think he is a strategic genius.”

Following form, the awards ceremony was a jubilant extravaganza, complete with long-legged, scantily clad beauties handing out awards to the top three prizewinners: Kyoko Nakamura, Unit.maker, and Keita Sugiura. When juror Carol Yinghua Lu presented an award to her own favorite artists, Crazy Hat & Long Ears, the latter of the two, wearing floppy rabbit ears, broke down in tears. When the gold prize was announced, fireworks exploded and metallic streamers rained down from above. One of the winners raised his fists in the air and began a rousing victory chant. Art seemed secondary to the ordered chaos of the fair. How could anything else compete? As the sign on a *pachinko* parlor says, WELCOME TO EXCITING SPACE!

— Cathryn Drake





Left: Musician Maria Yumetsuki. Right: Artist Yuji Oku.

**ALL IMAGES**

All rights reserved. artforum.com is a registered trademark of Artforum International Magazine, New York, NY.