Murakami’s Superflat: Constructing a Female Space in a Two-Dimensional Plane

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The toughest adversities women face in art right now are not being seen.

- Bianca Casady, *Play With Me: Dolls, Women, Art*
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Approaching the formation of visual practices and imagery from a non-Eurocentric frame while incorporating a specific national context allows for the understanding of alternate and parallel forms of these practices and the various intersections of political, technological and social influences that informed them. Visuality, or visual practices, are dialogic, historically constituted practices of looking, and affect both the creation of imagery and the reception of that imagery. The limitation in looking at these modes and practices of visuality as representative forms of expression, interpretation and interaction is that the tools generally were not as readily available to women and often became vehicles of objectification of the female form. As an example of the reclaiming of a visual practice, I am researching how current Japanese women artists have used contemporary art movements, previously occupied almost exclusively by men, to find an outlet not only for self-expression but agency and empowerment.

The “Superflat” art movement initiated by Takashi Murakami, the most recognized male Japanese Contemporary artist, is the Contemporary Japanese art movement and style most familiar to the global audience. It is a postmodern art movement and continuation of the style of anime or manga, loosely understood as Japanese comics and animation, brought into high art. Superflat has also become a platform for women’s creative voice through emerging female artists. With women not having the same access to control of the imagery in modern and postmodern Japan, how did they co-opt various art forms such as Superflat to create an autonomous space within visual practices for social mediation?
In 2001 Murakami’s self-curated Superflat exhibition embarked on a tour in the United States supplemented with a bound catalog and manifesto penned by himself. The name “Superflat” was coined as the name for the exhibition and also elaborated from his catalog as a philosophy and movement. Art historians define Superflat as an art in which “all creative works on a flat surface are ‘hyper two dimensional’ or ‘superflat’” (Yamaguchi 8). It employs techniques of both high art and anime, while utilizing the aforementioned flat planes of color. It was also used to explain the blurring of lines between high and low art in Japanese art and culture. It ultimately became Murakami’s platform for interpreting the complexity of post-World War II Japanese art and society, a multifaceted space where Murakami tried to trace the impact of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Murakami’s original thoughts on the concept of Superflat were outlined in a 1999 article published in the magazine *Kokoku hihyo*, in which he posited that since the defeat of Japan in World War II, there had been an infantilizing of the country (Yamaguchi 8). This created a *tabula rasa* for creative development and expression. Murakami often describes the country as if in a castrated state, which created a potential space for inversion of traditional gender paradigms although not necessarily materialized. The prescription to this state being the development of highly sexualized, masculine-dominate, images of young girls, often associated with the Superflat art movement, seems almost too obvious. In spite of the many social statements that Murakami has expounded, he has also tried to oversimplify his motivation for the imagery in his work. In interviews regarding Superflat he has pronounced that the inspiration for his work is as simple as celebration of his own teen years as a self-described *otaku*. *Otaku* is a term often reduced to the definition of a subculture developed in the 1970s in
Japan comprised of primarily young male, obsessive fans of *anime* and *manga* but will be explored more in depth throughout this investigation.

Overall, this project will shed light on contemporary issues of sociopolitical sexism as well as dissipate the academic discrepancy of the voices of Japanese female artists compared to male in the art historical space and grant a platform for an alternate artistic voice. The perspective of female artists is negated when simply subsumed into a genre developed from a male author for a male audience. This study will also address the potential cultural implications when these essentialized images become a globally consumed product as the female body has often been the subject in Japanese art, both traditional and contemporary. It will allow for further discourse on how individuals can transcend propagated ideals of beauty and gender role valuation, and if and how imagery in art is internalized and translated into gender identity formation and expression in popular culture and social roles. The discourse around how to navigate through the social constraints and construct an indigenous, authentic form of expression for girls and women is imperative. Is there empowerment in assimilation into the various genres of art and ultimate control of them? Is it possible to avoid exploitation and objectification and negate dominant cultural perspectives? Is it active resistance or just sublimation? Looking at a specific art movement such as Superflat as well as an alternate female voice in Contemporary Art in the current social landscape of Japan can demonstrate how an artistic vehicle can allow for navigation and mediation of the complexities of a changing culture for girls and women and the ability to surmount the national Manichaean, or the simple duality of “good vs evil,” representations.
The intervention I wish to make is to look at the divergence of the stylistic approaches of the contemporary art form of Superflat by female artists to articulate a different form of visuality, although still subsumed in art history as “Superflat.” I am seeking to discover the unique ways that women were able to adapt techniques of Superflat to situate an empowered status as creator and spectator in post-modern Japan and also look at a historical precedence of this in other Japanese visual media. I argue that a potentially misogynistic art movement such as “Superflat” can become a space of autonomous social mediation and empowerment for Japanese women artists in contemporary Japan.

After looking at Visuality as a system, it is necessary to historicize the binary construction of gender in modern Japan in order to lay a groundwork for investigating gender visual representation in media. Then looking at the social changes that were affects to Modern Japan and how they changed the articulation of women’s roles as well as the new sites of observation of the female form will create an understanding of how the binary polarities of male and female became entrenched in the Japanese visual field. To observe a precedence of visual cues and technical style of historical art practices, my research looks at representations of women from *ukiyo-e*, *nihonga* and *shōjo manga*. I will include a discussion of the historical advent of animation to mark the new visual practice associated with postmodernity that was also articulated in Superflat. To introduce the discussion of Takashi Murakami, I will employ an analysis of *otaku* culture from Hiroki Azuma and how this subculture drove visual practices in the late twentieth century. Then it is necessary to look at Takashi Murakami, his influences and specific work by him. Most importantly, as I mentioned, I investigate how female artists have co-opted the stylistic approaches of Superflat to articulate a different form of visuality,
although still subsumed in art history as “Superflat,” seeking to discover the unique ways that contemporary Japanese women artists have situated an empowered status as creator and spectator in post-modern Japan. I believe it is also necessary to look at the work of an alternate female Japanese Contemporary artist to expand the lens of inclusion as to how women continue to use the female form for self-expression and use a visual medium to interject between their socially constructed roles and modify the representation in the creation of new forms of visuality.

In 2008, Murakami was named one of *Time* magazine's "100 Most Influential People" and yet he remains a paradox. In many scholarly essays about Murakami, he is demonized for his overtly masculine perception of the future identity of Japan and yet his ongoing contribution really is in the development and support of upcoming artists, particularly female. It becomes a critical discussion of this mass-produced imagery and its cross cultural impact. Superflat brings with it imagery of women that is gross subjectification and yet creates a disruptive space for female artists in finding a voice in Japanese Contemporary Art. My intent is to expand on current feminist scholarship which angles consistently that the imagery associated with Japanese *manga, anime* and Superflat art translates into an infantilized, hypersexual identity for modern women in Japan and argue that this is a too-limited academic placement of these forms of representation. Not only do these images not necessarily translate into the visual self of women, but the true flaw of the oeuvre of academic research and dialogue is not giving adequate space to the female artists that have utilized these platforms for expression.


**Visuality as a System**

Visuality is a system, not a specific product of technology like film but rather how we look at film. Visual practices are historically constituted. The practices of looking and interpretation shift according to context and are reliant on the interplay of technological, economic, political, social and cultural factors. Mieke Bal, recent Professor at the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences of Theory in Literature and current independent theorist and art critic, in her discussion of visual culture explains that analysis of images must be distinguished from “object-defined disciplines” such as art history. Visual or scopic regimes require looking beyond the object and including the framings as well as the very act of looking (9). This is necessary in understanding an image as inherently being impure, particularly in the frame of gender studies. Visual practices and the power structures that form them also determine what is not seen due to the limited power of the creator. The implications of the gendered creation as well as the assumed viewer have greatly limited the articulation of alternate ways of seeing as well as limited autonomous practices of identification in the visual field. Bal advocates for a new area of interdisciplinary study, “… visual cultural studies must critically analyse the junctures and articulations of visual culture and undermine their naturalized persistence” (Bal 21). To Bal, and in this investigation, meaning of imagery is a dialogue between viewer and object as well as amongst viewers and cannot be limited to merely descriptive articulation (24). My approach of integrating dialogue on the construction and interpretation of visual imagery as well as inclusion of critical scholarship on the practices lays a foundation for my overall investigation.
Modernity/Postmodernity and Gender Construction

Numerous theorists argue over the time frames and paradigms that fall into the categories of “modernity” and “postmodernity” and often contend that these are Western constructs and do not create a linear time frame in a global sense. To clarify, for this investigation I look at modernity in Japan as a time frame from approximately 1890 to the 1960s and postmodernity as the period since the 1960s and 70s. Hiroki Azuma in Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals further bookmarks postmodernity as “... in terms of Japanese history, the period marked by the era following the Osaka International Expo in 1970” and relates it specifically to a massive transformation in cultural production (Azuma 7-8). Broadly I am considering modernity as a time frame mostly punctuated by capitalism and urbanization and also the solidification of the binary gender construction in the patriarchal structure, and postmodernity as a time frame when questioning the construction of social norms that arose during modernity occurred. Both the consideration of the shifts in cultural production and value systems are important as I dually investigate the formation of gender identity and the cultural products that represented gender identity. “Postmodern” seems often to identify a time in which a stark departure and re-evaluation of the “Western” value system was to have occurred. But when it comes to the gender binary and identification and objectification of the assigned standards and expectations, not much seems to have changed in postmodern representation. Gender definition seemed to have been much more fluid and less assigned prior to modernity, such as the blurred representation in Edo period print art and ukiyo-e as well as the onnagata in kabuki.
The first chapter of the catalogue based on the collection of woodblock prints from the Royal Ontario Museum and exhibition *A Third Gender: Beautiful Youths in Japanese Prints* is titled, “Wakashu as a Third Gender and Gender ambiguity Through the Edo Period.” A unique goal of the exhibition was that it “illuminates the constructed nature of the Edo-period gender system” and “scrutinizes male youths who were neither ‘man’ nor ‘woman’” (Mostow and Ikeda 11). The relevancy of this collection of art is that it ratifies a precedence of gender identity told through visual media and the historical placement of it. The term *wakashu* refers to young, adolescent boys who had yet to go through a coming of age ceremony that would signify their transition into adulthood. *Wakashu* was a designation in the Edo Period that sparked controversy due to the fact that often the boys were engaged in sexual relations with adult men. In many of the prints, the representation of the youth was not designated as male or female and was portrayed rather androgynously. My intent is not to further eroticize the representation of the *wakashu* but rather to acknowledge the blurring of gender and performative gender roles through the Edo Period until the “radical and rapid Westernization” of the Meiji government in which “heterosexual monogamy was the standard” (Mostow and Ikeda 11).

The introduction of the *onnagata* also punctuated a critical consideration in gender formation. For almost the complete Edo and Meiji Periods, beginning in 1629, women were banned from performing in public theaters being initially replaced by *wakashu* but then *onnagata* (Kano 5). But even prior to women being omitted from the theatrical stage, the practice of cross-dressing was still prevalent. *Onnagata* were adult, male actors who “performed” the roles of women. The highly stylized performance ironically became the
standard and idealized representation of femininity. The Theater Reform Society formed in 1886 quickly set to replacing onnagata with female actors to demonstrate acceptability as an “advanced nation” (Kano 6). The advent, heyday and slow dissolving of the onnagata though allowed for a place of constructed gendered performance and blurred sexual practices until the influx of values that entered Japan in the late nineteenth century when the form of the woman became integral to the perception of modern Japan and gender assignment fell exclusively on the body.

Historical time frames become unclear as conceptual indicators of gender representation. I am looking at the concepts of modernity and postmodernity more from a way to historicize various influences, reveal the discontinuity of gender categories, and acknowledge the visual practices that surfaced during those time frames. To be clear, throughout this project I will be using the highly essentialized and somewhat limiting binary terms of gender when necessary. It is useful as a functional definition to highlight the marginalization and objectification of self-identified and societally identified “women” or “female.” Although it does not honor the nuanced spectrum of self-identification in relation to gender as is relevant to current gender studies, it is a necessary approach to discuss a defining time of gender construction. Uncovering some of the historicity of gender construction allows for the possibility of dislodging the perceived inherency of the binary construction of gender and the associated performative acts. As the form of the “woman” became a new visible commodity in modern Japan, the negotiation of what gender meant became a driving societal construct.
CHAPTER 2
NEW SITES OF OBSERVATION AND ROLES OF WOMEN IN MODERN JAPAN

The surge of women being present in the modern visual field in Japan, out of the household and more into public spaces, became representative of the shift to modernity but did not necessarily allow them to be agents within it. These new visible spaces and roles for women created essentialist definitions of a woman, socially assumed norms of gender, and mediated the ways that women were able to autonomously express themselves. The historical and technological shifts in the late 1800s to early 1900s caused more spaces for the commodification of the image of women which in turn called for a new negotiation of representation of the female figure, but limited access to control of the representation in the forms of visuality by women. The increase of women in social spaces did not advance their autonomous voices nor their acceleration into social equity but rather forced a heightened policing of their bodies and allowed for repressive institutions like the government to dictate how women were represented visually. The advent of new educational opportunities for women, urban centers, the railway and cinema constructed new roles for women. The conflux of the social, political and technological influences of modernity in Japan created the proliferation of the visual representation of the schoolgirl, the modern girl, the café waitress and actresses.

Japan expanded educational opportunities during the Meiji era by opening schools for girls with the implementation of the “Higher School Order” in 1899 (Wakeling 131). The development of education was seen as a key to modernization. An equal rights clause in the
1947 Constitution and the revised Civil Code of 1948 granted women equal rights in politics and family life and continued to expand educational opportunities. This ongoing redefinition of the position of women was seen as a direct result of the permeation of Western influences, particularly the United States, and the interplay between Western hegemonic forces and the expression of national character was particularly challenging to women as their opportunities and roles in society changed abruptly. The image of the Meiji schoolgirl quickly became a symbol of progress and modernization for the nation and simultaneously began a slow simmer of anxiety around the potential threat this image imposed on the patriarchal social structure and the traditional construct of family. The image of the schoolgirl quickly transposed into an image laced with fetishized sexuality as it was subsumed into a newly formed social structure.

One of the technological sites, and new space of observation, most associated with Japanese modernity was that of the railway. In Alisa Freedman’s discussion of Katai Tayama’s short story “The Girl Fetish” (1907), she explains that “Trains were places to watch and for being watched, and altered the way people viewed the landscape and each other. Female passengers often became objects of the gaze” (Freedman 23). Freedman discusses how this new visual space could be “traumatising” for both the object and the voyeur and that on the train, the objects of the man’s gaze are generally the women, not the passing scenery: “Female students became both idealized as model modern women and eroticized as sexual objects” (Freedman 29-30). James Fujii in “Intimate Alienation: Japanese Urban Rail and the Commodification of Urban Subjects” uses the term “compass of scrutiny” in talking about how this visual practice contributed to the redefinition of gender (106). In reference to Tayama’s short story he introduces the compound verb mi-shitteiru- or to know (thoroughly) by sight.
The space of the train in conjunction with the influx of women into the new urban space drove a visual practice and gender redefinition that virtually defined the everyday modern life and shaped modes of expression and cultural production such as literature, print art, and advertising. Tayama’s protagonist from “The Girl Watcher” exclaims, “Beautiful girls in crowded trains- there was nothing he enjoyed quite so much...” (Tayama 177). Borrowing a concept from Thomas LaMarre the image of the female form became “psychologically fetishized and technologically ‘spectralized’” (LaMarre 251).

The emergence of female actors, and subsequent deconstruction of the onnagata, or male actors who portrayed women in a highly stylized, idealized feminine way, in the early 1900s in Japan also catapulted women onto the visual field and this contributed to the ongoing assignment of womanhood being directly about the body. Ayako Kano, in her book Acting Like a Woman in Modern Japan: Theater, Gender, and Nationalism, employs Judith Butler's influential gender theory that gender is not “being but doing”-gender is performed, both on stage and in life and that it is socially constructed. She begins her book with:

Acting like a woman does not come naturally. It has to be taught, learned, rehearsed, and repeated. It does not arise from a moment of inspiration, but from many years of persistent inculcation. In an acting woman, the cultural and social desires of an age are concentrated, molding her every gesture, every glance. (3)

As Kano continues to point out, the increased opportunity that the position of an actress allowed, simultaneously granted women a voice on the public stage but also led to greater objectification and heightened voyeurism of the female body (Kano 9). This historical shift
represented how many scopic regimes had to then negotiate not only how they organized the visual field but how they formed structures of power and framed the depiction and use of the female body. The inscription of gender onto the physical body became assigned, socially constructed and negotiated through the visual forms and proliferation of imagery in what was assembled as a “woman.” The introduction of female actresses and the ensuing debate according to Kano, “confirmed the definition of womanhood as an essence naturally grounded in a woman’s body, a definition that would also justify the reduction of woman to nothing but her body” (24).

Miriam Silverberg’s work on the ideological construct of the Modern Girl and the subculture of the café waitress in Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times, demonstrated how gender politics often drove the conversation of social structure. Through the lens of these new modern roles for women, similar to that of the schoolgirl, she explores the construction of gender and commodified eroticism of the female figure as they represented the conflicting fantasies and desires that were projected onto them. They were simultaneously a visual spectacle and a challenge to the societal norms. The position of the café waitress offered up the opportunity for a new subjectivity for women. Silverberg’s lengthy discussion on these two female constructs demonstrates her point that gender politics is intrinsically linked to the ideology of the emperor system during the modern years and is necessary when speaking of this kind of cultural shift. These key roles, schoolgirls, the modern girls and café waitresses came to represent various “relationships of domination” within the new modern society.
In acknowledging these key influences of modernity, new visual spaces and roles for women, mass commodification of the female image and the inscription of gender on the physical body it is necessary to think about how the female artist or fan was engaging with the discourse and aesthetics. As I said, women did not have the same access to control of the predominant imagery. The new scopic regimes that presented themselves in modern Japan through this conflux of technological, social, economic and nationalistic influences came to be understood as new opportunities of developing individual subjectivity. The precedence of how women expanded the male-centric regimes to allow for a place of identity can be found in historical visual representations and will be briefly investigated. Control of the images of a gendered form allows for a unique way of presentation and viewing as gender and sexuality is constructed through the visual image.
CHAPTER 3
HISTORIC VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN JAPAN

It is valuable to demonstrate the historical representation of women through a cross-sectional lens of traditional art by both male and female artists as well as in popular art. These primary sources assist in developing a timeline of not only how the representations changed through the history of Japan, but also about what influences correlated with those shifts and to disrupt and further complicate a presupposed linear pattern of gender norming. An image from ukiyo-e by Kitagawa Utamaro of bijanga, or studies of beautiful women, is representative of the historical female beauty aesthetic of the late eighteenth century (Fig. 1). Yuki Ogura’s work demonstrates how this historical art representation of bijanga was deployed in an alternate way by a female hand over a century later in the 1930s. The contrast of the imagery provides a specific precedence of visual cues for many of the contemporary female Japanese artists and demonstrates how Ogura, a premier Japanese modern artist, articulated the female form differently in the male dominated tradition of nihonga, traditional Japanese painting. Shōjo manga which is “comics” aimed at a young female audience demonstrates another precedence of re-articulation of a dominantly male created visual practice media form by women for women. Shōjo manga boomed in the 1930s but had developed from the medium of girls’ magazines of the early 1900s. The medium of shōjo manga also demonstrates a historical basis for many of the stylistic approaches present in the work of many female contemporary Japanese artists.
Bijanga in Ukiyo-e

Early depictions of women were found in the woodblock prints of ukiyo-e, ‘pictures of the floating world,’ which flourished primarily from the seventeenth through the nineteenth century. The Edo Period (1603-1868) in Japan preceded the Meiji Era and was marked by seclusion from influences outside of the Japanese territory (Nelson Davis 9–10). During this time frame, the Yoshiwara district was established as the licensed pleasure district. Tokyo Yoshiwara was the most famous, refined and cultured of the city's licensed quarters. During this time and space, the art form of ukiyo-e, translated as “pictures of the floating world,” was established. Kitagawa Utamaro achieved international acclaim and recognition as one of the greatest artists of the woodblock prints. Utamaro’s initial work was also comprised of nature studies and illustrations of insects, although his primary focus became images of the women of the pleasure district. It makes sense to research the imagery of Utamaro because it is representative of the great beauties of the Edo period, and his work became the standard for bijanga for his generation.

In 1789–93, the Kensei Reforms were instated and designed to return society to a more ethical order (Nelson Davis 64). This challenged the overt imagery of Utamaro’s current work, which was a clear representation of the Yujo, or female sex workers of the Yoshiwara district. He began to be commissioned to illustrate full-color, single-sheet images of bijanga. “In the 1790s, the name of Utamaro became synonymous with the work that was the mainstay of his career: the bijanga, ‘pictures of beautiful people.’ By Utamaro’s time, bijin seems to have been primarily employed to describe attractive women, and the compound, bijanga, to describe
pictures of them” (Nelson Davis 62). Beyond the literal translation of the word *bijanga*, the representations of the women in the images were often a covert recasting of the women who worked in the pleasure district as a catalogue of sorts. After the Kensei Reforms, Utamaro’s work continued to contradict the fluidity of gender found with the *wakashu*.

In 1792, Utamaro published *Ten Physiognomic Studies of Women*, which was later titled, *Ten Classes of Physiognomies of Women*. Physiognomic study was derived from Chinese sources, and the reading of one’s face “meant interpreting the pattern of heaven in the earthly object of the manifested body” (Nelson Davis 85). In reading the specific dimensions and markers on a person’s face, a physiognomic could read a person’s health, spiritual manifestations and fate for the afterlife. After the Kensei Reforms, Utamaro used this veil to disguise the true nature of his representations. Julie Nelson Davis argues that “these prints employed visual devices that proposed that Utamaro was making observations of individual features; as is shown in this chapter, however, these images were not ‘portraits’ but culturally coded designations of social types” (21). It was a classification and categorization of women for the male audience. “In looking at these and other *ukiyo-e* images, it is vital to realize that Utamaro’s images are not about a reality ‘out there’ that had been seen, but are a collaborative view of that world that was described, interpreted and packaged through and for a commercial venture” (Nelson Davis 24). Utamaro’s work has become representative of the ideal beauty aesthetic of women of the Edo period, which, in actuality, was often a catalogue of women for sale for the pleasure of men and almost exclusively created for men by men. During this strongly patriarchal period when women were not given legal equality, the images spoke to a clearly idealized depiction.
In dissecting the specific facial features caught in his images, it is challenging to decipher a discernible difference in the features themselves, even when the images include specific, named individuals from society as in *Three Beauties of the Kwansei Period* (ca. 1791) *(Fig. 1).* Julie Nelson Davis describes this in *Utamaro and the Spectacles of Beauty:*

Differences between the types are made through the secondary features of costume, hairstyle and gestures, while the general contours of the face (the focal point of physiognomic inquiry) and the body (also studied in physiognomic analysis) are altered only slightly to indicate expression. But none of these figures shows the kind of distinct differences in eyes, noses, brows, mouths, necks, arms, hands and so on that would be expected if eight women from the city of Edo were brought together. The artist seems to have used a basic template for the female face and figure... (80)

This homogenization of the female face seems curious, particularly when the images were purported to be a study of physiognomy. It is only in the differences of the face that the study of physiognomy maintains relevance. The uniformity of the facial features in *bijanga* is a trait that seems to have continued through historical representations of women and into contemporary advertising.

One trait regarded as desired in Japanese beauty and captured throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in these art forms was the frame of a demure woman with eyes lowered and a serene, dignified gaze. Throughout Utamaro’s work, the women have narrow eyes and a lowered gaze that casts their view into a remote direction. It was customary to lower lids over the eyes in order to express a contemplative, reflective and rather modest
appearance, and the size and shape of the eyes was not necessarily as important in evaluating beauty (Kyo 16). “As is clear from the statement that eyes that are too large are unsightly, in the Edo Period (1600–1867) large eyes were deemed rather unattractive” (Kyo 18). The brows were emphasized in Utamaro’s work, and the high arches that slanted extremely upward were part of the template seen throughout the representations. Generally in Utamaro’s work, the teeth are not shown; to show the teeth was seen as a rather unmannered representation. A woman of higher value did not show her teeth, and thus the showing of teeth in artwork became an easily recognizable understanding of the status of the woman. If she were considered a beauty, then regardless of her profession, her teeth were not generally shown.


Along with the distinction in the appearance of the eye area and closed mouths, there is a generality to the shape of the face and nose. “A long, narrow face and a tall nose were
standards of beauty in the Edo period as they are in modern times” (Kyo 6). The typical female image portrayed in ukiyo-e style was this type, with small, lowered eyes and lack of distinction in the face. 

Ironically, the style of these images of bijanga began to be used in consumer advertising targeted toward women in the 1890s. Bijanga became aspirational images of wealth, culture and privilege, evoking a sense of allure and even driving fashion trends. The prospect of foreseen commercial value repurposed a classical genre of art to suit the needs of modern publishing (Shamoon 60). This historical popular art form sets a precedence of style and visual cues that will be continued, manipulated or outright drawn in opposition throughout visual practices that followed. It also set a precedence for how imagery in art drives aspirational tropes of the female form through a consumer-driven medium.

Yuki Ogura

Around 1900, in response to the societal transformations of the Meiji period in Japan, but more strongly in response to the influx of Western influence, nihonga developed. Nihonga is distinguished primarily by the materials used. The painters used mineral based, natural pigments and traditional papers or silk as their canvas which gave the works more of a matte, watercolor finish. The use of sumi ink, ink made from soot, was important and when and how to use outlines was a distinguishing part of the tradition. Secondarily, the images or themes of the paintings tended to be nature, symbolic patriotic images such as Mount Fuji, or bijanga. “This emphasis on the idealized Japanese female reminds us that nihonga, as with so many
areas of Japanese culture, was very much a man’s world. It is surprising, therefore, that even though Ogura was the first woman to be accepted into the *Nihon Bijutsu-in*, in 1932, most of her works share this fixation with the female form” (Liddell).

Yuki Ogura (1895-2000) was a *nihonga* painter known for her *bijanga*. In an online retrospective of Ogura’s work and in honor of an exhibition at the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo (2002), Peter Naumann perfectly encapsulates the relevance of Ogura in modern art. He writes, “Yuki Ogura is among a small group of Japanese artists that helped maintain the *Nihonga* tradition of painting through the modernization of Japan... As a woman artist, she also marks a departure from tradition. She represented as well as depicted a new era for Japanese women, which is still slowly unfolding.” While maintaining the strong traditions of *nihonga* painting in both technique and materials, she paved a disruptive path for women artists by diverging from the traditional compositions, subject matter and narratives. As continues to be common for female Japanese artists, she rarely represented male figures in her paintings and rather focused on the inclusion of the female form.

A representative, and essential, piece from Ogura from 1938 is *Bathing Women* (Fig. 2). The primary distinction of the work is the realism of the painting of the tiles. As Naumann points out, “The tile joint lines wave and curve through the optical effects of the waters refractive lens.” Ogura’s inclusion of the simple, naked figure of the women was a stark departure from traditional representation of females as was seen in Utamaro’s *bijanga*. This element created a visual cue and narrative that is critical and consistent with many of the female Contemporary artists that will be explored. C.B. Liddell in the *Japan Times* describes the
female figures in two additional pieces of Ogura’s as showing “women in relaxed, naturalistic poses, giving them a refreshing, earthy quality that contrasts markedly with the doll-like depictions of earlier nihonga” (Liddell). Also of note is the stillness of the figures. This is consistent with the general quietness of nihonga painting. There is a liquidity of their shapes, which are painted with simple, light, breathy lines but are languid in movement. Ogura reserves the depth of paint and detail for their hair. Ogura allowed for a new space for women to be represented in high art differently and negotiate their unique dialogue with the visual depictions.

![Bathing Women](image)

Shōjo Manga

As the national transition into modernity (1900) crossed paths with this historical placement of ukiyo-e and nihonga and girls were granted freedom of education, the new community that began developing found an outlet of expression in girls’ magazines which were the precursor to shōjo manga. Manga was initially a male centric art form for a male audience but shifted dramatically in the 1950s and ‘60s with shōjo manga becoming a reassertion of the female voice. “In the closed, girl-only space of the shōjo culture, girls negate and make complex the dominant gender stereotypes that exist in contemporary Japanese society through creations of gender that transgress hegemony” (Wakeling 130). The images of the girls in this medium had to speak directly to its primary audience of girls. This allowed for a point of identification and a safe place for the manifestation of emotion and desire.

Deborah Shamoon in her book Passionate Friendship traces the influences and origins of shōjo manga, comics specifically marketed to girls, throughout Japanese history. She connects the development of girls’ culture in pre–World War II magazines that were established with the impetus of educational availability for girls in the Meiji period (1868-1912) and links it to post-war teenage girls’ comics which proliferated in the 1930s, popular culture and the impact on the genre of shōjo manga. The imagery and narratives popular in shōjo manga had their roots in these early magazines, with origins in the Meiji period. These, along with the later iterations of shōjo manga, became a counter-social art form to reassert the feminine image for girls by girls in a patriarchal society in early twentieth-century Japan. Around the beginning of the 1970s the primary authors and artists of shōjo manga were women. Girls’ magazines and early
*shōjo manga* played a critical role in the development of girls’ culture, which allowed for the construction of the social structure and identity for girls. The sequestered world for girls provided an opportunity to generate a private community and discourse to navigate their identities within the otherwise male-dominated social structure.

In Shamoon’s chapter, “Narrative and Visual Aesthetics of Prewar Girls’ Magazines,” she looks at the illustrations and visual style that developed in the magazines. She notes that “the features of their illustrations, specifically, the lyrical, wistful tone, the tendency toward sameness and matched pairs of girls, and the exaggeration of the eye all became standard motifs in girls’ magazines and were picked up later by postwar *shōjo manga*” (Shamoon 70). This general overview highlights two critical notes on the images of girls. First, the exaggeration and expression in the eyes became a noted feature of the *shōjo* and a dynamic expression of interiority and emotion and a direct contrast to the idealized, demure figures in *ukiyo-e* (Fig. 3).

Second, the inclination toward sameness or homogeneity in the appearance of the girls was a consistent visual aspect. According to Shamoon, the intention behind homogeneity in the girls’ magazines was to create an inclusive community as opposed to upholding a hierarchy of preference in physical distinctions of girls. This continues to be a relevant and distinguishing component in the analysis of how female artists represent the female form in contemporary Japanese art. There was also a blurring of lines of gender representations by inclusion of androgynous figures.
The 1950s and ‘60s saw a prevalence of strong women characters in the narratives of shōjo manga, which was also a time when nearly all of the authors were women. The girls in the stories were allowed to move back and forth amongst the constructs of innocence, sexuality, passivity, destruction and power. Girls were finding a new, personal voice in the sequestered world of shōjo manga. In many publications, there was also a removal of male characters and allowance of female-female romantic relationships and a blurring of the gender binary. Girls’ magazines and shōjo manga exemplified the tenacity in expression of girl culture throughout history in spite of the patriarchal umbrella of oppression and cross-cultural influences in the face of modernity. Shōjo manga illustrated popular imagery of women for commercial and artistic expression that created a cloistered, private space for feminine culture,
speaking directly to women not just through the words written but the images of the girls themselves as they became a point of identification in the roles and relationships portrayed.

Emily Jane Wakeling, in an article with the University of Queensland, discusses the image of the shōjo and how it allows for negation of stereotypical, hegemonic categories of girls in Japanese contemporary culture and cites Chiho Aoshima, a contemporary artist associated with Superflat, who will be investigated in detail as representing the shōjo in a medium that lends itself to this. The term shōjo refers to a girl/woman who emits femininity and youth and yet complicates the stereotypical, docile, subservient girl defined by the patriarchal construct. Often the shōjo was dressed as a schoolgirl which is an image that is picked up frequently in manga, anime and Japanese contemporary art in the Superflat genre. As discussed, the image of the schoolgirl has become highly representative of both national pride and also fear of transition. The image was ultimately reclaimed by female artists as an emblem of empowerment. Wakeling contends that there remains an authenticity to the image of the shōjo despite its being subsumed into a hyper-sexualized image in male generated and consumed content: “While Japan’s popular culture has often mythologised the figure of the shōjo as an embodiment of contemporary Japanese culture’s many vices and sexual anxieties, shōjo culture operates in a different space that is dictated only by Japanese girls’ subjectivities and creative agency” (Wakeling 140). Two examples of art demonstrate subtle differences that establish how the shōjo can be portrayed, Nana Haruta, Stardust Wink, 2014, and Mr., SEVEN COLORS IN THE SPECTRUM, TEN COLORS IN THE MIND, 2011 (Figs. 4 and 5). The cover of Stardust Wink, one of the most popular stories in contemporary shōjo manga and written and illustrated by a woman, shows a typical shōjo in a schoolgirl uniform. The work by Mr., a Kaikai Kiki artist
associated with Superflat, shows a portrayal of the shōjo that is incredibly similar in style. Both images use the style associated with Superflat; flat, bold planes of color creating two dimensional graphic pictures using imagery from youth culture, with a young girl with oversized, expressive eyes. But, the piece by Mr. demonstrates a couple of subtle, and yet blatant, differences that change the undercurrent of sexualization of the girls. The subtle lift of the skirt as well as the supine positioning of two of the girls sexualizes them in a way that has become a common motif in Japanese popular culture.

Fig. 4. Nana Haruta, Stardust Wink, 2007. www.komikid.com/manga/stardust-wink.
The stylistic cues and visual narratives from *shōjo manga* include homogenization in the depiction of girls, androgynous, non-sexualized portrayals, removal of an alternate gender and instead consisting mainly of women; the ubiquitous expressive, large eyes continue in the imagery of women by the women artists of the Superflat movement. There was also an allowance of trying on the various, stereotypical Manichean representations of girls proliferated in contemporary society. While the explosion of a creative voice through *shōjo manga* in the twentieth century was an imperative way of negotiating and mediating the complexities of a changing culture for girls and women, the imagery often became a casualty of exploitation and objectification. This continues to be a common practice in the art associated with Superflat and underlines why it is important to look at alternate representations of girls and women by the female artists of the genre, such as Aoshima, as they offer a different vision.
CHAPTER 4

SUPERFLAT

To truly lay the groundwork for the investigation of Takashi Murakami’s influence and the impact of the new visual form encapsulated in his Superflat work, I will discuss the advent of animation and the theoretical relevance of this. This will allow for a deeper understanding of the form of visuality and how the female artists subsumed in the genre diverge from the technical aspects of it. This partnered with a deeper exploration of otaku culture will give a depth to the critical lens when looking at Murakami’s work and impact in Contemporary Art and allow the discussion for how female artists have diverged from the stylistic approaches of the Superflat to articulate a different form of visuality.

Animation and the 2D Image

The rise of animation offers a segue into a visual practice with a postmodern perspective, and yet honors historical artistic forms. Thomas LaMarre in The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation discusses the visual technology of animation and how it creates a dynamism of interaction between the viewers and the animations (xiii). One way that it represents depth in limited animation is as a “distributive field.” He draws from the superflat work and theory of contemporary artist Takashi Murakami to demonstrate how the role of the flat surface creates a unique viewing experience. LaMarre explains the lack of depth in superflat
as creating a unique form of visual movement: “When the background does not look farther away than the foreground, your eyes cannot detach, isolate, and hierarchically order the elements in the image. Instead, your eyes follow the lines that zigzag across the surface. Such images are structured to encourage lateral movement of eyes. Eyes begin scuttling, meandering, scanning, as if restlessly oscillating around a center that remains nonlocalizable. This is superflat movement” (La Marre 111). The lack of a focal point, with no foreground and no background, flattens the relationship of images and forces the viewer to deal with the composition as a totality. But the imagery is not static, rather the movement is drawn through the flow of lines and overall composition with figures gaining certain prominence as a result of bold, black outlining. This flattening and dehierarchizing of the visual field allows for the viewer to unravel the narrative of their own partiality which causes viewers to become active observers and co-equal producers of the text. As LaMarre explains, “Amid flattened, dehierarchized, and relativized flows of images, we are summoned to make a personal selection, to personalize our relative movement, to find our focal concerns” (LaMarre 108). The visual practice and experience of animation is consistent with what is understood as the foundation of Takashi Murakami’s Superflat genre of contemporary art. This is important to understand as Superflat has become an umbrella term which doesn’t allow for adequate discussion on the technical differences in artwork as it’s included under that label.

The platform that Superflat, and Japanese animation, has created for the consumption of the imagery globally has created a unique historically constituted visual practice. The concern is how the imagery and interpretation of the images construct gender in the visual field particularly if there is ongoing absorption into mass culture when the male centric practice is
considered as the dominant form. How does a woman “act” in a flattened, two-dimensional, plasticized model? How do women read the interstices in superflat if the primary imagery does not resonate with them? How are women represented differently, as well as represent themselves, when they are not just a symptom of masculine desire? In looking at previous visual practices, with Yuki Ogura and in shōjo manga, that constructed the visual lens of modernity, I offered a historical frame to observe how women have transformed the practices of predominantly male-centric regimes to allow for a unique articulation of identity and experience. After a brief overview of male authorship through the lens of otaku culture and Murakami’s Superflat, I will seek to discover the unique ways that women artists were able to adapt techniques of Superflat to situate an empowered status as creator and spectator in postmodern Japan.

**Otaku Culture**

Hiroki Azuma’s theoretical articulation of the postmodern subculture, *otaku*, informed visual analyses of imagery in *manga*, animation, video games and Superflat. Azuma explores the psychological structure of postmodernity through a brief history of products generated through the *otaku* lens. He explores the circular influence of *otaku* as producers as well as consumers of cultural products. The word “*otaku*” is generally translated as "geek" or "nerd,” but this is an oversimplification of a term more steeped in societal construct. In a 2005 *New York Times* article, Arthur Lubow explains the adaptation of the word: “Literally, the word means ‘your household’. It is a way to refer to another person in conversation without implying either
superior or lesser social status. Employed by postwar Japanese housewives, the usage was adopted by the fans -- all right, call them geeks -- who became obsessed with the minutiae of a particular bit of popular culture” (Lubow). The understanding was that those, primarily youth boys, who engaged in this subculture spent the bulk of their time “consuming” the imagery in the basement of their family house. Azuma expands this understanding with emphasizing that *otaku* are active participants in the actual circular production of the characters, narratives and merchandise. His main assertion is that the postmodern human being has become a “database animal,” which is exemplified by the *otaku* and that their culture is a “tool for them to come to terms with the world and comprehend it from their respective positions” (6).

In Azuma’s theoretical analysis, the extreme shift in technological production of the 1960s and ‘70s in Japan created a rupture that truly could no longer allow for a continuous line between Edo culture and *otaku*, as Murakami tries to through Superflat. This becomes an interesting way to view Murakami, his influence, his work, and the differences between his relevancy and that of the female artists associated with him because Murakami continually connects Superflat with *otaku* culture. Azuma notes that “Murakami’s ventures have been criticized even by the *otaku* who have collaborated in his works” (63). He proposes that Murakami is unable to intuitively grasp the *moe*-elements that make *otaku*-like designs and characteristics work (64). *Moe* is an imperative piece of the *anime* and *manga* that is critical to the cultural designs and allows for the internal database of relevancy. The term refers to specific elements of a character that elicit strong emotional feelings such as cat ears, hair springing up, specific curves of a figurine, and even maid uniforms. These characteristics transcend the simple, fetishized features or dress. Much of Murakami’s work has been
denounced for missing the mark and simply becoming fetishized and hyper-sexualized representations whereas some of the women associated with Superflat have adapted the elements with more authenticity. This again is important to distinguish while continuing to disentangle the importance of the art of the female artists, rather than simply allowing it to continue to be under Murakami’s umbrella. Additionally, some of the contemporary female artists investigated also more effectively employ the techniques and stylistic approaches of Edo style art. To continue to establish the platform that forms the basis of comparison, it is important to expand on Murakami.

**Takashi Murakami**

Takashi Murakami was born in Tokyo, Japan, post- World War II (1962). As a youth, Murakami merged into the *otaku* culture as a first generation consumer. He embarked on a more traditional art education path, ultimately obtaining a PhD in *nihonga*, but chose the *otaku* influence to be the major driving force in his art as he believed that it was an honest, indigenous, Japanese representation and not an appropriation of Western culture as other contemporary art was in Japan. “Relishing apocalyptic violence, saccharine cuteness (“kawaii”), resurgent nationalism, and variously perverse sex, *otaku* spawned artistic tendencies: Neo-Pop, Sado-Cute, Superflat. Murakami became a leader, or major collaborator, in nearly every development” (Schjeldahl 1).

Murakami is no doubt the most recognized, if not most highly paid, Japanese contemporary artist globally and he has inked his place in art history books. This
acknowledgment dictates a closer look at not only the influences in his work, but also the fact that a limited Japanese contemporary history is being told through a visual medium to a global audience. Murakami’s international success and recognition has allowed for a platform of visibility of not only his work, but his curated exhibitions and artists that he has mentored and built through his business. Murakami launched an independent production facility named Hiropon Factory in 1996, which was later incorporated as Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. in 2001. As Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. it serves as a production facility of art, merchandise and books with locations in Japan, New York and Los Angeles. Murakami runs the company as a business to promote not only his own art and merchandise but also that of other artists, art exhibitions and fairs (Kalb 235). The artists who are represented through Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. are mentored by Murakami, promoted and also subsumed into a style that is representational of Murakami’s Superflat. It is easy to demonize Murakami for his overtly masculine projection of the female form and yet his ongoing contribution to contemporary art is also in the development and support of upcoming artists, particularly female ones like Chiho Aoshima. Superflat brings with it imagery of women that is both gross objectification in the male gaze and yet creation of a stage for global consumption of contemporary art by Japanese female artists. This provides the opportunity to discuss how women artists within the Superflat movement address the imagery of women and diversify the techniques of Superflat and co-opt the platform to allow for a different visual practice.
CHAPTER 5

DIVERGENCE OF STYLISTIC TECHNIQUES OF SUPERFLAT BY WOMEN ARTISTS

The limited reading of the female artist’s work associated with Superflat in both art criticism and academia negates prominent stylistic difference in their work compared to Murakami as well as in the presentation of females as it is subsumed in a genre that, according to Murakami, is to supersede the technical and allow a vision of a historical period. How might we rethink Superflat as a visual/aesthetic practice that allows for the reintegration of women’s voices and gaze? This study will examine the work of three female artists associated with Superflat, Chiho Aoshima, Aya Takano and Mahomi Kunikata to demonstrate key differences in visual imagery and stylistic cues that create dissimilar visual experiences and open the conversation about how women artists have intervened in this visual art form.

Chiho Aoshima

Most reviews of Chiho Aoshima’s work begin with an acknowledgment of Murakami and his influence in her career. In Art In America Jori Finkel says, “It is almost impossible to imagine Chiho Aoshima’s work without Takashi Murakami” and goes on to refer to her as a “true disciple” of Murakami (Finkel). Murakami clearly directed her artistic ascent by not only hiring her but also promoting her as an artist and including her in his international exhibitions, including; Tokyo Girls Bravo, Superflat and Little Boy : The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Pop Culture.
Aoshima acknowledges the role he has had as her mentor. In an interview for *Departures*, an American quarterly lifestyle magazine published by Time Inc., she says, "Takashi really understands me and my work. He will often make suggestions on how I should do things: 'Why don't you emphasize this part or downplay or eliminate that part of a piece?' And if he sees me slacking off, he comes and pushes me to work faster—kicks me in the ass a little bit." When asked if she ever offers him ideas or criticisms, she said, "I almost never—I don't" (Wallis).

There are few direct interviews with Aoshima, and when this is the language that is picked up, it unfortunately continues to defer attention from her back to Murakami as the maestro.

From a technical perspective, there are many identifiable overlaps in Murakami’s and Aoshima’s process and technique. Aoshima, like Murakami, was predominantly using Adobe Illustrator to create her large scale art pieces. Both have also begun integrating digital and animation with motion capture and game engine technology (Huysal and Saarinen). But when asked to define her work within the larger picture of Superflat, Aoshima responds with ambiguity and lack of clarity of her place in the movement. In an interview for *Timeout Tokyo* when asked whether she agreed with her work belonging to the Superflat movement, she responded with, “At first I wasn’t sure what the term implied but after looking into it further, I've come to realise that some of its characteristics, like the re-appropriation of *ukiyo-e*’s linear aesthetics, are present in my work and I've come to accept my part in the Superflat movement. I didn’t study art so I’m not very proficient in thinking of things in 3D and how they look in the real world. By drawing on traditional Japanese art, I express art on a flat perspective” (Huysal and Saarinen). Intentional or not, this response is loaded with subtext. Her lack of commitment to the general discourse of the Superflat manifesto as well as her refusal to
participate in the mass-multimedia distribution/commercial presence of Murakami
demonstrate a clear line of departure for Aoshima that goes beyond just the technical aspects.
She also in the statement clearly aligns with the stylistic approaches of *ukiyo-e*.

To demonstrate some of the additional departures in narrative and image articulation, it
is necessary to analyze and compare specific representative pieces of work by both. Aoshima’s
work demonstrates the linear, flat two-dimensional, graphic style that Murakami presented
with Superflat. Murakami and Aoshima both also integrate similar thematic narratives of
catastrophe and paradise, and bizarre, otherworldly realms inhabited by monsters, innocents
and recurrent characters. The saturated colors, melting images, balanced composition and
flowing lines of both of their work are seen in two examples that Peter Kalb uses in *Art Since
1980: Charting the Contemporary*, Aoshima’s *Magma Spirit Explodes: Tsunami is Dreadful*, 2004
and Murakami’s *Tan Tan Bo Puking- a.k.a. Gero Tan*, 2002 (*Figs. 6 and 7*). Kalb presents these
two pieces as exemplifying how certain artists have used the aesthetics of pop and youth
culture to navigate identity formation in the period of contemporary globalization (Kalb 235).

Kalb acknowledges that there is a narrative difference in that Aoshima’s content primarily revolves around female protagonists who lead the story. He stops short of doing a gendered reading of the pieces, though, and only acknowledges that her characters demonstrate a “consistent ambivalence toward whatever surrounds them” (238). This is a common approach to Aoshima’s work; the critique acknowledges the stylistic similarity to Murakami, the female characters oft described as “doe-eyed nymphs,” and the kawaii, which is often simply translated as “cute,” elements on a backdrop of destruction. The word kawaii is used pervasively in Japanese culture, particularly by girls and women. Non-Japanese often translate it as “cute” and it is assigned almost ubiquitously in describing elements of Chiho Aoshima’s work, and many of the other artists of the Superflat genre and additional Japanese contemporary female artists. The word in a more general sense within the culture refers to something that elicits a strong, often positive reaction. It is not a pop culture label, but rather an emotional response to something and could refer to something small, trendy, precious, adorable or chic. When written in romaji, it often refers to a kawaii culture that is associated with youth and Pop, and this is often again an assignment by non-Japanese. Western scholars have used the word to contain what is perceived as a cultural “descriptor” that doesn’t translate back to the Japanese culture with the same narrow, reductionist definition. Western critics and art historians have appropriated this byword to generally categorize Aoshima’s work through the pervasive usage but in so doing miss the nuanced cultural connotations. Various, again predominantly Western, scholars have also used the descriptor to raise concern over the infantilizing of the female image in Japanese culture. It is critical to have a conversation around the concept, (mis)understanding of the word, the narrow lens that it allows in scholarship as
well as the misappropriation of the word as a generality when ascribed to an art aesthetic.

Aoshima herself has tried to correct the misunderstanding of the word *kawaii* in the interview previously noted by Carlo McCormick: “For Japanese the word does not only mean *anime* or girly, but includes a variety of nuances. When an exquisite balance is achieved, I feel *kawaii* in my heart. I try not to forget that moment, and have it live in my work. But there is a lot about it I can’t explain very well. *Kawaii* is not logical, but it is very important.”

Kalb reads ambivalence in the reaction of Aoshima’s characters but it can be read quite differently by looking at the facial features more closely. Many of the characters’ features are too small to see but in those that are visible, their eyes demonstrate an emptiness that can be translated otherwise. The upward gaze and downturned mouths read as sadness or wistfulness for an alternate fate. Although their bodies are contributing to the violence around them, their faces emote a different feeling from anger and intent to destroy. The wide eyed or “doe-eyed” expression is similar to that of Murakami’s in *Hiropon* or *Miss K2*, but as his are partnered with a coquettish smile or pursed lips, the characters clearly emit a different emotion (*Figs. 8 and 9*). There is no perceived ambivalence in either. These are subtle differences in the figures, whereas in general it is much easier to articulate the overt differences.

David Rimanelli, editor and contributor to the *New Yorker* and *Artforum*, describes the “characters” in much of the art of the Superflat genre as “avatars of hypersexualized yet requisitely cutesy fantasy” (Rimanelli 1). Murakami describes the inspiration behind one of his most famous works *Hiropon* (*Fig. 8*), a huge cartoon sculpture of a woman with monstrous, lactating breasts, by saying, “I became an *otaku* when I was in high school and absorbed many
different things from anime like its erotic and fantasy elements... that very process resulted in that work” (qtd. in Lu Stout). “Hiropon” was named after a popular methamphetamine drug from postwar Japan with a messy history. Murakami relies heavily on the highly sexualized avatar as the articulation of the female form in his work, although he primarily depicts women in sculpture. Along with Hiropon, Miss ko2 (Project ko2), a life size sculpture of one of Murakami’s most recognizable characters, demonstrates physical traits representative of most of the girls in Murakami’s work which include large breasts, small waists, long flowing hair, short skirts, petite hands and facial features, long legs and blue-wide eyes, similar to a traditional, western, Caucasian Barbie doll (Fig. 9). They have become almost a satire of the imagery in manga, which has frequently, and ironically, continued to provoke the otaku culture to outwardly articulate distain for Murakami. The commanding height of the sculptures (seven and six feet respectively) is a direct antithesis to the narrative of the figurines collected by the otaku which are often tiny. They are depicted as a waitress, maid, nurse or schoolgirl, which are roles assumed by many of the young girls in a genre of manga and anime called Lolicom and as I have discussed were key roles that became present for women in modern Japan and have been associated with moe-elements, but Murakami’s articulation resonates differently.

www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/saltz/saltz8-26-99.asp#1

Fig 9. Takashi Murakami, *Miss ko2 (Project ko2)*, 1997. english.kaikaikiki.co.jp/artworks/eachwork/project_ko2/
In looking at another work of Aoshima’s, we are readily able to see the alternate depiction of women opposed to Murakami’s. Aoshima’s *Japanese Apricot 3 - A pink dream* (2007) is one of a series of pieces that depict a narrative of a girl, or girls, suspended in a tree and tethered by a rope (Fig. 10). The illustrative, graphic style is consistent with her other work. The picture of a flowering tree set against a pink horizon gives it a poetic and almost wistful look. The background includes a gradation of color which gives it a different depth from Murakami’s and the general assumption of Superflat work. The fact that there are girls tied up in an apricot tree, which is an ornamental, decorative tree with skulls buried underneath, creates a jarring, discrepant narrative. The girls are all nude, but the bodies are more androgynous and waiflike with narrow hips and small breasts in contrast to Murakami’s. Many of the female artists, such as Aoshima and Aya Takano (Fig. 11), in the Superflat genre draw women as nude, much like Ogura, whereas the men that we have seen draw them in specific clothing that has become fetishized in popular culture, like the café waitress outfit or schoolgirl uniform. Aoshima’s line work is much more delicate and the color variants create less abrupt planar differentiation than Murakami’s thus creating fewer visual breaks in the narrative. The outline of the figures is barely visible which almost allows them to merge into the background. These consistent features demonstrate additional key points of differentiation from Murakami’s work.
Fig. 10. Chiho Aoshima, *Japanese Apricot 3 - A pink dream*, 2007. www.artnet.com/artists/chiho-aoshima/japanese-apricot-3-a-pink-dream-20d8pWR9-LOHo3Ou-qr24g2

**Aya Takano**

Rhiannon Platt interviewed Aya Takano for *Complex*, a New York based media platform for youth culture with over 120 million unique users per month, and asked the very pointed question, “Being the predominate woman of the Superflat movement, which often depicts idealized women, how do you believe your work differs from your male counterparts?”

Takano’s answer highlights two key concepts: “I’m not a man, so I can only speak to my own gaze, but I think of the figures that I create as spiritual beings. They are undifferentiated, neither man nor woman, without any particular pursuits, and they are capable of becoming
anything. They need not be thought of as bodies; they are more like symbolic representations of certain existences” (Platt). First, she does not identify as a man, she identifies as a woman. Thus her experience and her articulation can only be that of her own experience and understanding and she does not assume a “gaze” associated with the creation of the work. It is my assertion that having to presuppose an audience in the creation of imagery of women is in itself a masculine paradigm. Second, creating an androgynous form with the capability of “becoming anything” is an assertion articulated by many of the female artists explored (Fig. 11). The whiteboard presented in their figures allows for individual interpretation, articulation of autonomous identification and space for an audience to engage in the limitless possibility of existence, a fluid narrative. There is no forced assumption of identification. Again, this is a representational practice that was used throughout historical imagery of figures by women but Takano overtly states it. This becomes a true subversion of the male generated imagery of the female form.

![Aya Takano, Moon, 2004](www.perrotin.com/artists/Aya_Takano/15/moon/9355)

*Fig. 11. Aya Takano, Moon, 2004. Courtesy Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin.*
Takano cites the 2011 tsunami in Japan as a catalyst for change in her work and an inspiration for the title of the piece *May All Things Dissolve in the Ocean of Bliss* (Fig. 12). She says, it “is inspired by one of the tenets of Indian philosophy, which says that everything we see is part of a collective unconscious, the kind that Jung talked about, and that all things emerge from an endlessly deep ocean of bliss. The title is my prayer that everything will thus melt back into that ocean” (Platt). Much as Murakami acknowledged a collective national disaster/tragic destructive force as driving much of the thematic experience of his art, so does Takano. The overt difference is that Murakami genderized the masculine experience of castration and Takano articulates the more feminine, fluid experience of collective consciousness and attachment to nature. This understanding of course relies on the assumptive binary system of discrepant gendered poles, feminine and masculine.
To look at the technical aspects of Takano’s work allows us to see how she articulates the romantic, fluid quality of her narrative in the specific line work. As is seen in *May All Things Dissolve in the Ocean of Bliss*, much like Aoshima, she integrates more of a water color lyricism. There is no real attempt in Takano’s work to create the painstakingly flat planes of color that Murakami is known for. Her colors are more of a gouache sentiment, similar to Ogura’s traditional *nihonga* style. In both *Moon* and *May All Things Dissolve in the Ocean of Bliss*, the median plane of the canvas is highlighted, with brighter, lighter colors and white, drawing the eye to the central area and to a specific focal point in *May All Things*. This is directly antithetical to LaMarre’s “distributive field” theory of Superflat art and animation. Nor does Takano use the distinct, black outline indicative of *manga* or other work associated with Superflat but rather employs light or barely visible outlines to her figures more reminiscent of Aoshima. As one dissects what Superflat is known for in technical art work, it is hard to understand why Takano is understood as the “predominant” woman of Superflat.

**Mahomi Kunikata**

The fact that Lubow’s interview with Murakami from the *New York Times* begins its description of Kunikata with, “An aspiring artist who especially interests Murakami is Mahomi Kunikata, a chubby, bashful woman who looks younger than her 25 years” is unfortunate (Lubow). It remains a strange anecdote not only to relate her primarily to Murakami’s interest but also to relay a physical description of her in the first sentence of her mention. But not
strange in the sense that some of the most robust written information on Kunikata is most likely imbedded in an article about Murakami.

In an astute review on artdaily.com of one of Kunikata’s exhibitions, “The Devil Within YAOI,” her overall esthetic is described as works that

...employ the same narrative qualities of manga, or Japanese comics, though with a pathos that is entirely her own. She has adapted the conventions of the genre to tell
stories more personal and emotionally demanding than those found in the typical work.

...Kunikata’s work is infused with the tenets and aesthetic of the subculture, referencing an often sexually-explicit manga subgenre known as yaoi. Addressing issues of abandonment, masochism, and depression, each painting contains a character facing a struggle, often surreal in nature, but human in its suffering.

Kunikata describes herself with the label “otaku” and so in differentiation from Aoshima and Takano, she assigns herself more specifically to the same motivation that informs Murakami’s work. But while Murakami strives to tell a narrative of a national identity, Kunikata strives to tell a more personal story through her work and constructs the moe-elements quite differently.

The technical aspects of Kunikata’s work again straddle the techniques of Murakami, Superflat and some of the other female artists discussed. She employs the bold color and saturated variants similar to those of Murakami which creates a more delineated start and stop between the graphics but there is no attempt to create the planes of color to be perceived as “flat” which is one of the basic tenets of Superflat. The brush strokes within the color are clearly visible and exaggerated and this allows the eye to dance within each image point. In Outside (Fig. 13), each circle of saturated color creates a swirling visual experience. This brings a more emotive and energy-filled visual experience. The eyes are painted to reflect back images much like in shōjo-manga. This creates a different sense of interiority and symbiosis.

These examples from the Superflat contemporary art movement are relevant to demonstrate that women artists have and will continue to disrupt male driven tools of visuality as well as create parallel modes of visual practice that mediate expression and yet are often
negated in academic and popular discourse. There is clear overlap as well as overt differentiation in the work of these artists from Murakami and each other and so to subsume all of the artists under the umbrella held by Murakami serves an injustice to the unique voices that come through the art. Power structures continue to dictate who has license to create imagery consumed on a national and international platform as well as who is able to consume imagery, but seeking and discussing alternate voices like Aoshima’s, Takano’s and Kunikata’s articulate a different form of visuality and lived experience.
CHAPTER 6
NEW FORMS OF VISUALITY BY FEMALE CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS

Essays and interviews by contemporary artists and cultural figures allow me to engage in a critical, direct and progressive conversation around the evolution and visual representation of the gendered form and how additional contemporary artists are avoiding some of the familiar tropes of gendered identity and creating new forms of visuality. This provides insight into how artists are creating a three-dimensional lens of understanding the art, with the creator, the content and the viewer and how these cues are being integrated in the dialogue created by female visual artists today. In *Play With Me: Dolls, Women, Art*, Grace Banks says, “Showing your body in public has long been a political tool for feminists and a way in which women have tried to control the male gaze and created the Female Gaze” (111). What I continue to challenge is that needing to assume a “gaze” in the creation of an image is in and of itself a masculine paradigm created within a specific patriarchal power structure. With that, the movement to foster the female gaze in the creation of contemporary art is an attempt to renegotiate this power structure.

In her book, Banks investigates how contemporary female artists have been regaining authorship of the objectification of the female form. The artists that she discusses and interviews in her book use dolls, their own bodies and nudity to try to understand their own sense of self and open up a discourse around sexual identity in art. Banks says, “… using your own story and literally placing yourself at the centre of your work has created some of the most
powerful imagery about sexual identity in art history” (110). In an interview with Narcissister, a contemporary performance artist, the artist explains, “It’s hugely liberating to present my naked body in a non-erotic way and/or in an expressly erotic way, but on my own terms. Nakedness is where we drop the surface elements that we use to pretend we are different from each other” (qtd. in Banks 111). Integration of the female form into the fantasized space of visual art allows for a re-imagining of self where identity is fluid and self-constructed. Narcissister uses a trio of masks in her performative work to portray different characters and explore the different facets of herself. She says that one of the most exciting things about her work is that she is able to communicate without using her voice and this allows a more powerful platform for expressing “her ideas and values” (130).

Leah Schrager surmises in her manifesto that, “Throughout art and film history, the female body and nude has been an ongoing subject in male-authored work... More often than not, the women’s body is capitalized while their voice is muted” (qtd. in Banks 138). Ai Yamaguchi, a female Contemporary Japanese artist not associated with Superflat, offers a widened lens on the articulation of the female form as she reclaims the portrayal of the body, as have the other artists discussed, on her own terms. In an expansion of the current scholarship on the contribution of female Japanese artists, her work grants us the ability to look at an alternate, symbolic representation of identity and culture.

Ai Yamaguchi has exhibited widely through Japan as well as the United States and her paintings predominantly feature the female form. Yumi Yamaguchi in Warriors of Art: A Guide to Contemporary Japanese Artists, explains that the primary characters in her work are “a group
of prepubescent nine- and ten-year-old girls who work as servants in a fictional courtesans’ house called *Toge-no-ochaya*” set in the Edo Period (1603-1868) (Yamaguchi 152). Unfortunately her figures are often subjected to the same requisite, minimalistic descriptor of “cute.” The curator of a recent exhibition at Tokyo’s Spiral Garden, “Utakata Tayutau– The Blinking of an Eye” which includes the work of Australian artist Pip & Pop (Tanya Schultz), Yoshie Ota said she sees the artists’ works as “distinct from one another, yet the combination is intended to be an experience for the senses that brings femininity, naivety and creativity to the fore” (qtd. in Wakeling). In this review on artasiapacific.com, Emily Wakeling who has written extensively on Japanese Contemporary Art and Women’s Studies and the culture of cute, takes the liberty of expanding the curators intent by saying:

> although it apparently wasn’t the curator’s intention to focus on the theme of “cute,” it was difficult to ignore when viewing such works together. Unfortunately, it still remains difficult to pursue a serious discussion of notions such as “cute,” or the Japanese term *kawaii*, in terms of art criticism. Even in Japan, a country where many contemporary artists over the past two decades have been utilizing such an aesthetic in their works, critical analysis is generally weak (Wakeling).

As discussed *kawaii* is a difficult and complex word to translate and also to understand the multiple uses of it in the Japanese language and culture, but Wakeling feel that this exhibit can be summed up with it and the feelings it evokes and concedes that Yamaguchi’s “art is quite playful” which unfortunately can negate the social relevancy of the work.
Yamaguchi’s girls are often naked or semi-clothed and are depicted in various mundane, daily activities-- lounging, grooming each other, bathing or playing sedentary/quiet games. Very little detailed attention is paid to the figures of the girls themselves as they are drawn with very fine, continual outlines. Similar to Ogura’s work, Yamaguchi reserves the intricacy for their hair as well as the patterns in their clothing. Wakeling deems that “the girls are always depicted as passive, and they often settle into the compositions with the docile ease of a flower or forest creature” (Wakeling). I attest that there is very little passivity in the posture of the girls but rather quiet focus, which I feel is a necessary distinction and is reminiscent of the depiction in traditional nihonga. In Hyoutan Kara Gamanbana Ga Deru (Fig 14), there is in fact a rather determinable stern-ness in the set of the girls face. Her eyes appear furrowed; her mouth in a frown and her elbows perched on her knees as her back straightens. The style of Yamaguchi’s paintings harkens back to the ukiyo-e style of painting and Ogura’s nihonga and interestingly, she integrates the usage of flat panes of color much like Murakami.

![Image](image.jpg)

Yamaguchi utilizes the shapes of her canvases and alternate drawing platforms to additionally express a unique narrative and form of visuality. As explained in an online statement by the Joshua Liner Gallery, New York, the shapes she uses as a backdrop for her paintings are all different characters from Japanese words she doesn’t care for, neither their sound or significance:

These words are broken down hiragana characters—the simplest alphabet in Japanese. Considered a feminine way of writing, during the Heian period hiragana was used exclusively by the ladies of the royal court. In hiragana—unlike with typed fonts—when written vertically with a brush, the shape of each letter becomes more organic, similar to western cursive. By physically beautifying the words through her canvases, the artist hopes to gain a different perspective and sensitivity towards these words—words sown
like the seeds of Yamaguchi’s forest. (Ai Yamaguchi ‘Shinchishirin’ @ Joshua Liner Gallery, Nyc.”)

The inclusion becomes a distinctive statement on a uniquely female mode of communication, integration of Western influence and the artistic liberty and transformation that Yamaguchi employs in her work. As a new voice in Japanese Contemporary Art, Ai Yamaguchi uses the female form to garner an alternate observation on historical and contemporary placement of women in society.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Representation and inclusion of female voices in the space of art history and contemporary art critique is imperative. As demonstrated, they themselves have continually, throughout history rejected the objectification of the female form and reclaimed the portrayal of women to create an autonomous space in which to mediate the complex structuring of gender and gender roles in society. It is a continued disservice to the unique visual practices of female artists to subsume their work, and ultimately their voices, under the umbrella of a genre that is applicable to neither their technique nor their narratives. This short investigation into historical forms of visual practice in modern and postmodern Japan do not nearly allow me to investigate the complexity of gender construction, articulation and identification in visual media, but this brief conversation that seeks to trace the lineage of autonomous female voices through different media is a critical starting point. The use of visual media has been a powerful tool to interject between their socially constructed roles and innate sense of self. It is a continued space of reconciling the predominate, misogynistic portrayal of a “female.” Each revolution in technology or new technique of visuality allows for a platform of not only self-governing articulation by the female creator but also interaction of the spectator and viewer.

Ayako Kano reminds us that, “Cultural practices such as theater, literature, journalism, and scholarship produce collective fantasies and imagined communities” (Kano 11). Bearing this in mind continues to demonstrate how women have been represented differently, as well as
represented themselves, when they are not just a symptom of masculine desire. In doing so, they have created communities of dialogue that allow the consumers of the visual imagery to negotiate their “selves” in the process. The experimentation that occurs in the systems of visuality in art allows for women to sift through the imagery to allow for an authentic expression and identity formation as well as create new forms of visuality that reach different audiences. To continue to re-focus the academic lens on these female authors allows for a rebalancing in the assumptive understanding of history.
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