Japan’s Collective Unconscious

An illustration by Aya Takano, above, is on view in “Little Boy: The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture” at Japan Society. The Japanese artist Takashi Murakami is the curator of this exhibition, which explores the culture of post-war Japan through its popular visual media — fantastic science fiction, toys, comic books and anime.

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From a Mushroom Cloud, a Burst of Art Reflecting Japan’s Psyche

By ROBERTA SMITH

“Little Boy: The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture” currently wedged into Japan Society is not just another art exhibition. It is a fast-moving visual spectacle with a mission, orchestrated by the Japanese counterculture impresario Takashi Murakami. He of Vuitton bag fame.

“Little Boy” displays works by 18 contemporary Japanese artists amid a veritable cavalcade of greatest hits from postwar Japanese animation and tokusatsu (special effects) monster movies, starting with the mid-60’s “Ultraman” television series. These days the “Ultraman” panoply of rudimentary effects seems like a deliberate forebear of postmodernist camera strategies.

Yet this exhibition is not simply about the relationship between high art and mass media, a distinction that is especially hard to make in Japan and that Mr. Murakami argues does not exist. Instead, his goal is to show how Japan’s popular culture reflects its national psyche, which also sheds some light on the psyche of its chief protector, the United States.

The exhibition’s title poetically incorporates the code name for the atomic bomb the United States dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. Prominently displayed in the first gallery is Article 9, Chapter 3 from the Japanese constitution that went into effect in 1947. It reads, in part, “The Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right,” and “The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.”

This show proves once more that pop culture provides an especially direct view of the repressed unconscious of creative, consumer, and society alike. In Mr. Murakami’s eyes, the connection is especially close in Japan because the collective unconscious has worked overtime to absorb the largely unprecedented trauma of Japan’s role in the war, the atomic-bombing of two of its cities and the prolonged American occupation.

Mr. Murakami holds that these traumas have created a lot of displaced emotions — anxiety, shame and a pervasive sense of impotence — that have found their outlets in popular culture. (Fittingly, the show’s title also invokes the way Japan’s dependence on the United States has kept it from growing up.) Notions of trauma are reflected in two opposing tendencies. One is a fascination with violence and power, visible in the building-crunching monsters and mushroom-cloud explosions frequently used in Japanese animation. The opposite pole is an infatuation with powerlessness that is played out in the obsession with what is called kawaii, cute, as exemplified by Hello Kitty and other irresistable characters.

In “Little Boy” Mr. Murakami sets out the artifacts representing these tendencies, and then shows how they have been twisted together in a darker subculture called skaka (seed or geek is the nearest translation). Okats are unidiomatic minded known for their obsession with nuclear catastrophe, monster films, science-fiction anime and manga, and what might be called an inappropriate fixation on schoolgirls. (From the evidence here, the obsession, at least with anime, seems entirely justified.)

The show also examines how okats’ attitudes and subjects have been adopted by the artists on display and that figure in the interesting international nature of contemporary Japanese art. For a better understanding of the complex cultural ecosystem explored here, I recommend attention to the show’s outstanding bilingual catalog, which has essays by Mr. Murakami, the Japanese art critics Naohiro Fujita and Yoshinori Honda, the American critic Katy Siegel, and Nien-nya Mooney, the director of the Japan Society Gallery, who invited Mr. Murakami to organize “Little Boy.”

Mr. Murakami’s role in recent Japanese art is complex. To cite American models, he has functioned a bit like a combination of Jackson Pollock, the chief innovator, and Clement Greenberg, the chief explicator, of Abstract Expressionism. He was one of the first Japanese Neo Pop artists to break the ice in terms of recycling Japanese popular culture. Then, in Mr. Murakami’s work, writings and the exhibits he organized, Neo Pop mutated into the more historically conscious Superflat style, which embraces the emphasis on surface decorations and patterns indigenous to Japanese visual traditions. With “Little Boy,” the final show Mr. Murakami’s “Superflat Trilogy,” which Japan Society has organized with the Public Art Fund, things become even more chilling because psychology is introduced.

The show is a sociological argument made with visual evidence, but because this evidence comes from one of the world’s most aesthetically sophisticated and refined cultures, it packs a tremendous visual punch. At times one can do nothing more than hang on for the ride. The first gallery is dominated by a task-force head of the robot Grendon. Behind it is an imposing phalanx of Hello Kitty ephemera, including wallpaper. To one side are Ayu Takanari’s drawings and paintings of wide-eyed prepubescents, but sexually knowing, waifs. To the other side, cute goes monstrous in five plush, big-headed puppetlike creatures for yuru-chara, regional mascots that represent nearly every local government in Japan. They conjure cuteness as public policy.

Sometimes the show progresses with almost textbook clarity: these, antithesis, synthesis. Looking from the assortment of dodgy Dorasemon toys to Shigeru Komatsuzaki’s action-packed watercolors of World War II sea battles, which once decorated the packaging for model kits of destroyers and fighter planes (and influenced the first anime artists), is to contrast pure cuteness with equally childish fantasies of violence and war.

Nearby, Mr. Murakami self-consciously portrays these extremes together in “Little Bokan — Black,” a painting of a spectral skull whose eyes are composed of his signature flower faces. Westerners would not be incorrect to link this work to the skull images of Andy Warhol and Gerhard Richter, but it is based almost exactly on the ghastly image from “Time Bokan,” a children’s television animation whose every episode ended with an apocalyptic explosion.

Around a corner one encounters a more unexamined meeting of cuteness and implied violence in the exquisitely crafted and colored nightmareskate plastic figures of schoolgirls with oversized breasts. These objects of male desire are the work of the illustrator and bassist (beautiful girl!) creator Osashima Yuki. They exemplify the okata sexualization of kawaii (cuteness) along Lolita-like lines and are among the hottest collectibles on the okata scene.

In a further twist, the okata bijou has been appropriated by an emerging generation of young female artists including Ms. Takanari, Chiharu Shiota and Chihiro Aoyagi, who return the figures to a state of androgynous flat-faced grinsomeness while also giving them a greater sense of autonomy and emotional complexity. Their colorful paintings look to manga, children’s art and Japanese street art for inspiration.

In Izumi Katou’s evocative paintings and carved and painted wooden sculptures, which are being exhibited in this country for the first time, infancy itself — the epitome of kawaii — acquires a dark, withering tenor. Her naked figures seem suspended in embroyonic helplessness while revolving Expressions, in contrast with yet another display of unabashed cuteness: scores of small, childlike plastic persnification of people and animals from the Kihara Collection of vintage Japanese toys.

“Little Boy” is Mr. Murakami’s show from beginning to end, to such a degree that it might almost be considered an extended essay. The distinction between fine and commercial art does not entirely disappear, but it is frequently rendered pointless by the sheer inventiveness of much of the work.

In the end, Mr. Murakami has attanged psychanalytical on a national scope in exhibition form, while creating a work that is arguably the most daring, thought-provoking show yet seen at Japan Society. Those who visit it stand an excellent chance of having their understanding of Japan, its culture and its history profoundly shaken.

Fallout from national trauma: a fascination with violence and cuteness.

By ROBERTA SMITH