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An advertisement on the floor of Akihabara train station, Tokyo 2005

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Mark Leonard Watts

## Abstract

This project explores my relationship with elements of Japanese culture. Central to the project will be the Japanese practice of *cosplay* (dressing in costume), *otaku* (geek) subculture and their influences in the worlds of Japanese *manga* comic books and animated films. It will focus on the importance of *kawaii* (cute) in Japanese culture. The artworks will explore notions of identity and the ‘space between’. I shall do this through the gathering of Japanese objects which will be fused with my own image. I shall use photography, print and digital manipulation finishing in a sculptural installation referencing pop culture and commercial display. This project will constitute 80% practical work to be presented in a final exhibition piece accompanied by 20% written exegesis.

# Introduction



My partner Satoko and me at her family's shrine, Ibaraki 2005

In this research I have chosen to investigate my relationship with Japanese culture. Born English and growing up for the most part in England and Wales, after a two year stay in Japan I have found that I have formed a close bond with the country and the culture. This bond is most pronounced through my new family ties as I marry into a Japanese family and will presumably have English/Japanese children.

I found while living in Japan that I naturally embraced many parts of the culture and lifestyle. I ate and still eat almost exclusively Japanese food. I became a fan of Japanese animation, was even accused of being an *otaku* geek after I started collecting *shokugan* figurines<sup>1</sup>. I enjoyed Japanese fashions and *manga* comic books yet was frustrated by my inability to fit either the clothes of the latest fashion trends or as the character in the stories I read.

I began to find certain Japanese manners preferable, such as not talking loudly and not using a cell phone on the train or in a bus. These attitudes presented themselves while in Japan in the

<sup>1</sup> The *otaku*, *manga* and *shokugan* will be discussed in chapter 2, 'Anime, Manga and the Otaku'.





Posed with my partner's family, Ibaraki 2005

form of embarrassment when in the vicinity of other Westerners. I felt uncomfortable being associated with them as they behaved in a way that was contrary to the commonly accepted etiquette. There was irony in that Japanese would never see me as any different from the Westerners of whom I had become embarrassed. By the colour of my skin hair and eyes and the shape of my body I would always be foreign in Japan. I could not become Japanese but felt that I was estranged from my native culture. For this reason my research had become concerned with understanding the 'space between' the culture I was born into and the Japanese culture I was marrying into.

In order to explore my relationship to aspects of Japanese culture I decided to focus on areas of the culture to which I either related to strongly or had significant interest in. As the research progressed I began to focus my examination on practices and cultural phenomena surrounding Japanese *manga*, *anime*, and *kawaii*. I was interested to understand how these areas could help me to investigate the 'space between'.



Me dressed in my in-laws *samurai* armour, Ibaraki 2005

# 1. Experiments in Cosplay and Self Portraiture

I will detail here my investigation into *cosplay* and how I used *cosplay* in my research. This experimentation raised questions regarding whether I was just using *cosplay* as a tool or whether I was a *cosplayer*. It also raised issues of authenticity and its importance in my work.

*Cosplay* is a very popular pastime in Japan and has started to spread throughout the world. *Cosplay* is largely centred on themes of *anime*, *manga* or video games but can be inspired by any genre<sup>1</sup>. It is practiced by people between late teens and late twenties who are for the most part female. Suggested reasons for this are that *cosplay* often requires the manufacture of your own costume, sewing not being a talent common amongst Japanese men. (Lawson, 2008: 85).

Visiting Ibaraki prefecture in Japan I dressed up in my in-laws' *samurai* Armour. I was playing at being Japanese. These

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<sup>1</sup> One noticeable group outside the *manga* stereotype is the *Rockabillys* inspired by fantasy ideals of 1950's America. They are peculiar among *cosplayers* as they are mostly men and much older, often being in their forties or fifties.






*Rockabillys dancing in Yoyogi park, Tokyo 2005*




(above and bottom right) *Cosplayers* pose on the bridge to Yoyogi park, Tokyo 2005



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*Ohanyasan*, Tomoko Sawada, 2004




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*Untitled Film Still #3*, Cindy Sherman, 1977

*samurai* armour images might be compared, or even mistaken, with popular *cosplay* as the character I portray has elements of the heroic or the fantastical.

Tomoko Sawada is a photographic self portrait artist and her images are concerned with the differences between the inner person and outer person. (Yamaguchi, 2007: 124). Many of her works deal with identity and one of special interest in my research was her body of work entitled *Costume* where she takes the role of many common place figures such as a police officer or receptionist. The images appear to be of a similar style to Cindy Sherman. In Sherman's early black and white *Untitled Film Stills* (1978) she enacted fantasies where the protagonists were dramatic yet common place. Though they were meant to evoke the idea that the photograph was a moment in time in a Hollywood movie, the character that the movie was meant to portray was still someone to whom the audience should relate. While Sawada portrays specific roles and Sherman's characters are less identified they share the same filmic quality. Both artists' work have performative elements and though Sawada is mainly concerned with how people are perceived based on outer appearances (Yamaguchi, 2007: 124), both



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*Kangofu*, Tomoko Sawada. 2004



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*Self-Portrait (Actress)/ After Faye Dunaway*, Yasumasa Morimora, 1996

artists' images appear to contain acts of fantasy. In the *Kangofu*<sup>1</sup> image you do not see the artist emptying bed pans or filling in forms. The image is of an ideal nurse holding the hand of her patient with a look of caring and concern on her face. In her image *Ohanayasan*<sup>2</sup> she looks serene surrounded by flowers in a man-made Eden.

As my research progressed I found that though I shared similar techniques to Sherman in her *Untitled Film Stills* and Sawada in *Costume*, their work was also significant in how it differed from my own. I found that the dramatic roles of Sherman differed from *cosplay* in their costume and context. Sherman's characters were often dressed in what could be termed as everyday clothes for the period she was photographing. The clothes worn by cosplayers are chosen to depict specific characters. Sawada could be seen as closer to *cosplay* in that the clothes worn by her characters were identifiable uniforms portraying the job of the character.

Sherman creates a context for each of her *Untitled Film Stills* to help identify to the viewer what she is trying to express in

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1 Nurse in Japanese.

2 Florist in Japanese.



Self portrait as Japanese electronics salesman, 2008

the work. Sawada works in a similar way by posing her characters in their place of work, therefore helping the viewer to see clearly who and what they are. The context for *cosplayers* comes from their lack of context in that they are found at conventions or in public (such as Yoyogi park in Tokyo) which bear no relevance to the character they play.

Since 1985 Yasumasa Morimura has been using self portraiture in his photographic artwork. (Yamaguchi, 2007: 88). His works have included depictions of himself as the subject of famous Western artworks, as Hollywood movie actresses and as the protagonists in famous press images of death. His success in each role is aided by costume, pose and set but also by familiarity. Many of his images will likely be recognisable to even the casual viewer. This works in a similar way to a *cosplayer* whose costume, inspired by a fictional character, would never have been seen before in 'real' life by their audience, but would be recognisable from imagery.

Searching for my place within Japanese society, I was unwilling to align myself so directly in traditional *cosplay* as I





Self portrait as Japanese festival go-er, 2008

was placing myself in a fringe group<sup>1</sup> which would prevent me, at an early stage in my research, from exploring a larger picture of Japanese culture. I therefore considered the idea of dressing in mundane Japanese uniforms or costumes which for me would also be a fantasy. I did not want to lose links to *cosplay* however, so initially I decided to avoid large sets to aid my costume. Much as the *cosplayer* would do, I was merely trying on the costume rather than pretending to be in the world of that character. I imagined myself as a *cosplayer* at home, preconvention, testing the costume. I was trying on the character for size.

The first uniform I tried was that of an electronics salesman from one of the large Tokyo chain stores. The basic uniform is often just a suit though they also wear a light jacket. This jacket<sup>2</sup> is derived from a bright cotton jacket worn at traditional festivals, however those worn in stores are usually made of synthetic material and are coloured and designed to match that seasons sales advertising. I also wore a face mask which is usually worn by people having a cold. At this point in the project I was concerned

1        Though cosplayers are well publicised in the West, in Japan they are considered to be on the extreme edges of popular in much the same way as goths might be considered to be in the West.

2        Called a *hapi*.



(above and to the right) self portrait as *bosozoku*, 2008





Self portrait as Japanese woman in *kimono*, 2008

that I looked too Western so covered my face as I had done in the *samurai* image. Later when I photographed myself as a festival goer, wearing a loin cloth and a headband combined with the more traditional *hapi*, I felt it was less necessary to cover my face as the less Western nature of the garments lent what I felt was authenticity to my costume. This may also have been due to my increased comfort in photographing myself as a Japanese.

After using mainly purchased items for my costumes I became interested in the notion of authenticity and how it related to my work. I decided to create a *bosozone*<sup>1</sup> costume which would be wholly constructed. Using various items found both in my own wardrobe and purchased specifically I created the *bosozone* uniform. Suitable Japanese slogans were then spray stenciled on, copied from photographs of real *bosozone* though, with alterations to make them more personally specific<sup>2</sup>. The action of creating the costume was time consuming and the overall effect satisfying but had a homemade appearance<sup>3</sup>. This was either closer to or

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1 Japanese motorcycle gang member

2 The Gangs territory was changed to Saitama, Urawa. An area where I had previously lived.

3 In the case of the *bosozone* costume the mask was a legitimate part of the uniform rather than a conscious effort to cover up the face.



Self portrait as Japanese high school girl, 2008

becoming *cosplay*<sup>1</sup>. I began to feel less Japanese in the costume. I could not relate to the role I was playing as easily as I could that of the festival goer or the salesman. These were roles I was familiar with and had first hand experience of. I had never met a *bosozoku*<sup>2</sup>. This was accompanied by the knowledge that I had fabricated the costume. It began to feel more like a game of dress up than an effort to experience or make a transition to being Japanese.

In further experiments I took female roles. I felt that two of the most prevalent characters in Japanese media as I had experienced it were the high school girl and the young woman in a *kimono*<sup>3</sup>. I measured the success of these by how much I could relate them with the common images seen in the media. I found my own image remained very masculine with the female clothes and pose, superficially sitting on my Western masculine frame. My expectations were not met in these images. While these images may be understood to reference drag queens my main motivation was to

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1 *Cosplay* costumes are constructed for the purpose of *cosplay*, usually by the wearer.

2 I had also never met a *samurai*, though was much more familiar after an encounter with real armour and popular Japanese television dramas.

3 The costumes used for these photographs were borrowed from my partner and were the original articles, therefore avoiding the issues around constructing an artificial costume.

achieve *kawaii*<sup>1</sup>.

*Kawaii* is an important concept in modern Japan and permeates through much of society. Large parts of the consumer economy is driven by what is considered *kawaii* at that time and examples of *kawaii* characters appear everywhere in Japan in branding and advertising<sup>2</sup>.

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1        Meaning cute.

2        Teenage girls spends the equivalent of US\$2.5 billion per year on what they consider to be *kawaii* (Drake, 2001: 1).

## 2. Anime, Manga and the Otaku


Two areas of Japanese culture where *kawaii* is significant are the worlds of *anime* and *manga*. *Manga* refers to the illustrated comic strip books and magazines that are very popular in Japan<sup>1</sup>. There are comics specifically dedicated to different age groups and sexes. There are many different genres of *manga* from romance to sci-fi to fishing. *Anime* is the animated versions of the comic books, and often follows the same characters and story lines. Sometimes a series will start as *anime* and move to *manga* and sometimes the other way round. Occasionally the most popular series become feature films with live actors. Examples such as *Nana* (2000), which was a popular *manga* of two girls who share an apartment, became a successful motion picture as did the more violent *manga* story *Death Note* (2003) about a boy who finds he can kill anyone just by writing their name in a book. *Manga* and *anime* all rely in some way on the depiction of *kawaii*. In *Death Note* despite the violent

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<sup>1</sup> Publishing company Shueisha Manga produces 16 volumes a month, one volume being approximately 220 pages of largely black and white drawn pages (Shueisha.co.jp).

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*NANA*, Sobisha, Tokyo, 2000



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*Misa Misa*, from *Death Note*, Shueisha Manga, Japan, 2003



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*Rei Ayanami* on the cover of Rolling Stone Magazine, Japan, Sep 2007

theme one the central characters is a Japanese Idol called *Misa Misa* whose most defining characteristic is *kawaii*. Her character is written to appeal to the Japanese *otaku* for whom *kawaii* is one of the most important characteristics.

*Otaku* translated into English means geek<sup>1</sup>. The otaku, like Western geeks, are often obsessed to varying degrees with a subject often, though not always, related to *manga*, *anime*, and video games. An *otaku's* interest is directed by the subject rather than the medium. An *otaku* interested in the Series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* may collect and read the *Manga* and watch the associated Anime, play video games based on the franchise and collect figurines of the characters.

A character whose name is synonymous with *kawaii* and who is an *otaku* object of affection/lust/desire is *Rei Ayanami* from

1 The term otaku in Japanese carries negative connotations and otaku are often blamed for or described as a symptom of the current state of Japan. This is rarely clearly defined but could be related to the difference between the post war generation in Japan who created the powerful Japanese economy of the 1980's and their children today who are seen as benefitting from the hard work of their parents and (in the case of the otaku) being obsessed with fantasy and fiction and contributing nothing to the country their parents worked so hard to create. This is further reinforced by the traditional role of the male as primary earner in the Japanese family and the otaku stereotypically being a young man living detached from normal society. (Pena, 2006: 16).





Custom painted models of *Rei Ayanami* and others for sale, Tokyo 2007



A man prepares his figures for sale, Tokyo 2007

the Anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. This character has outgrown the series she was initially created for and can now be found in many different guises. Her fame is perhaps greater than many living Japanese youth culture idols. Dolls are one of the most popular forms in which to find *Rei* when walking around stores. They range from straight depictions taken from the *anime*, to romantic fantasies where she is dressed in a Western style wedding dress complete with veil and bouquet, or even where she is depicted as a pornographic and fetishistic fantasy. *Manga* and *anime* do not restrict themselves to purely *kawaii* and there are many examples of extreme violence and hard-core pornography depicted in both professionally produced magazines and books and in self published amateur productions.

Many *manga* characters have been created as figurines and one of the most popular formats for these figurines is the *shokugan* or snack toy. These toys are sold in convenience stores and supermarkets across Japan and usually come accompanied by a small confectionery. The original idea was for the toys to bolster the sales of the snack however the snack, when still present, is there more for formality rather than as the motivation for purchase. The



A poster in a train station toilet, Saitama, 2005

figurines come packaged in a box and separated into parts, usually needing some simple construction. More expensive larger figurines exist but these are often considered to be more exclusively the realm of the *otaku*.

*Otaku* collectors display and sell their figurines in stores, in perspex cabinets which they rent from the shop owner. The customer will walk around these cabinets and choose their figurine which will then be retrieved by the store clerk who will eventually pass on the payment. It is in these boxes where you will find the most sexually explicit and fetishistic examples of the *manga* aesthetic on public display. These dolls are often very limited edition and custom painted by the owner.

The influence of *manga* is found throughout modern Japanese culture. Local police forces have cute little characters drawn in a *manga* style as their mascot and in the railway station you will see *manga* characters asking you to properly dispose of rubbish, keep the bathroom clean, and not to disturb other people.

Akihabara is a district of Tokyo which has become associated with electronics<sup>1</sup>, *manga*, *anime* and therefore *otaku*.

1 One exit for Akihabara JR station is labeled "Electric Town"





Akihabara, Tokyo, 2005



Shokugan vending machines,  
Tokyo, 2008



Akihabara, Tokyo, 2008

Often referred to as the Mecca of the *otaku* (Pena, 2006: 1), Akihabara centres around a main street lined with shops from large chain electronics stores like LAOX, which cater for the average consumer, with everything from massage chairs to computer peripherals and small stores catering to the more specialised taste of the *otaku*. The further away from the main strip you go the more humble the shops tend to be and the more specialised their products<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Retail is not the only type of business that has flourished in Akihabara. There are many cafes in the area most famous of which are the Maid Cafes. These cafes were originally designed to cater specifically to the *otaku* market. When entering the cafe the customer will be greeted by a pretty Japanese girl dressed in a fantasy maid costume. She will call you sir or master and use exceptionally formal/respectful language when addressing you and will direct you to your table. All members of staff in Maid Cafes are usually dressed as maids, often following a particular design. The costume is usually not designed to be sexy. If the skirt is short then it will usually be accompanied by petticoats and bloomers. Rather than sexy the purpose appears to be to create an atmosphere of *kawaii*. Photography is usually not permitted in Maid Cafes, though in the more established cafes it is possible to buy photographs of your favorite maid in much the same way you would of your favorite idol. The patrons of these cafes are not only men and it would be perfectly acceptable to take your girlfriend there for lunch. Maids have become so popular that there is also Maid branded toiletries available to purchase and the Akihabara branch of Donke Haute Department store has a floor dedicated to Maid costumes and merchandise and has its only very popular maid cafe.

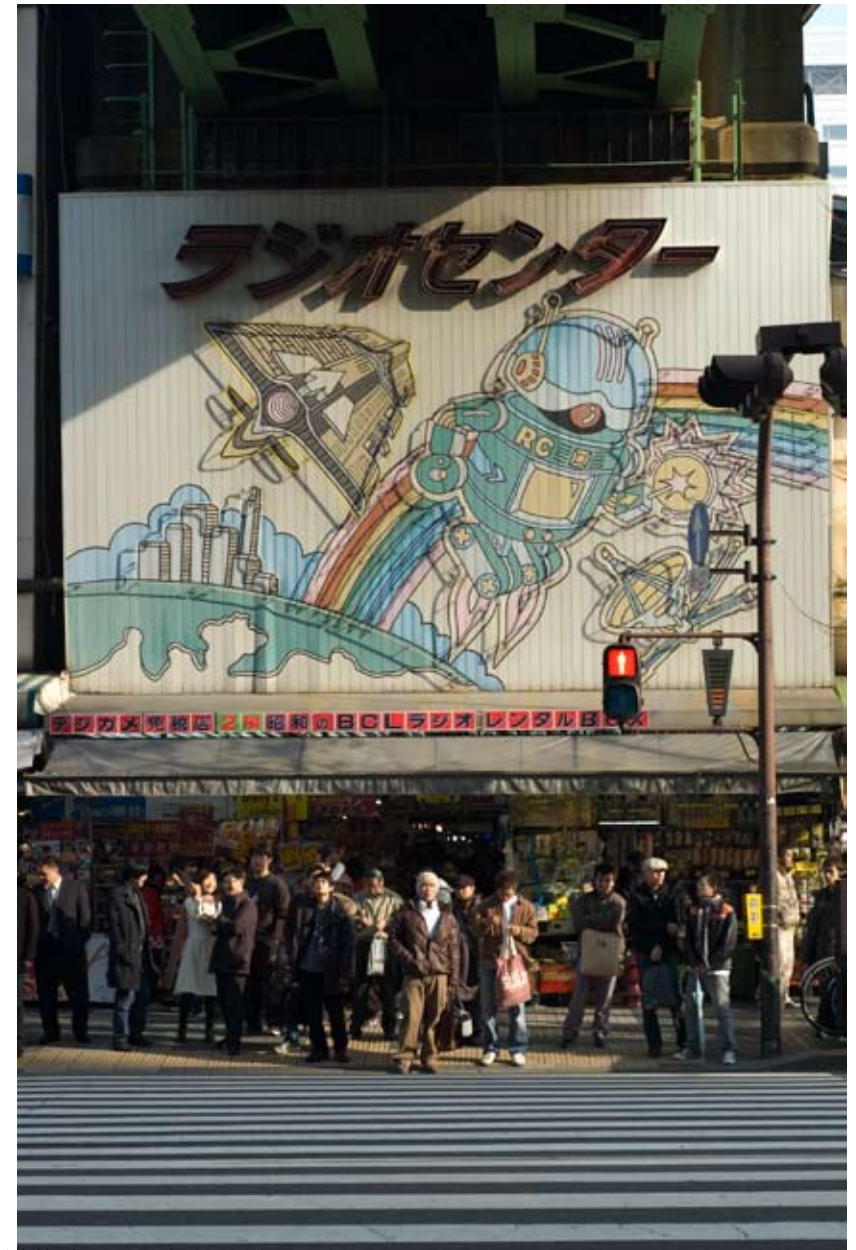




Akihabara, Tokyo, 2008



A girl giving out fliers for a maid cafe, Akihabara, Tokyo, 2005



Akihabara, Tokyo, 2007

### 3. Kawaii in Contemporary Japanese Art

#### Ai Yamaguchi

The work of Ai Yamaguchi was one of the principle examples of *kawaii* that I had in mind in Japanese art when I considered its application in my work. The work which most interested me was her *manga* style illustrations of young female servants in an *Edo* period courtesans house called *Toge-no-ochaya*. Despite their occupation the characters in the illustrations are not shown in an erotic way. The figures, leaning toward androgyny through their simplicity in detail and lack of feminine shape, are shown in common domestic or leisure situations.

Yamaguchi's methods for creating *kawaii* in her work involve lack of detail and shows a lack of imperfection. In this way her works appeal to a certain youthful aesthetic in Japanese culture. The *kimono* and the courtesans accessories that the children are surrounded by are highly detailed in their patterns. The childrens skin is sanitised in its simplicity despite them kneeling on the ground or walking in a garden. Their *tabi* socks are white and

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*Kai soshite watashi wa*, Ai Yamaguchi, 2003

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*Dokkoi*, Ai Yamaguchi, 2004

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*Tebana:haru*, Ai Yamaguchi, 2005

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*Hyaku no hana,yuki wa furitsutsu*, Ai Yamaguchi, 2004

their hair neatly arranged. The perfection is a fantasy that the artist creates and is further a fantasy because of the unseen but apparent situation in which these girls live.


These works highlight the lack of fantasy in my *cosplay* images even though I may have been trying a fantasy in my costume. The costume, the surroundings and my own body did not allow me to escape the confines of my everyday existence. My own body could not be cute in the same way as a *manga* character could be. Also a lack of masculine characters was apparent. Though the characters were shown in a sanitised attempt at a representation of purity they were still intended as female. I wondered whether given the same illustrations, but where the audience was instead led to believe the sex of the character was male through costume and pose, would they have appeared as *kawaii*?

## Aya Takano

Aya Takano's work is influenced by *manga* having grown up reading her fathers collection. (Vartanian, 2005: 88). Despite this her work does not have the perfect crisp lines common with *manga* illustrations<sup>1</sup> but instead has a rougher painterly

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<sup>1</sup> As is the case in the work of Ai Yamaguchi.



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from *Subterranean*, Aya Takano, 2004

appearance. The figures themselves do exhibit *kawaii* though not through their perfection in form. The shapes are perhaps a little too exaggerated, the lines a little too sketchy, and the coloured washes too uneven. Instead the *kawaii* is reinforced through a character as part of a narrative. The actions of the characters, the dialogue/monologue, and the way they interact with the world which they inhabit displays *kawaii* much more than just a formal portrait.

In my own work I attempt to create a feeling of *kawaii* through characterisation without the need for a narrative. I felt that a long linear narrative, in the same way as Takano's, could work but would limit the number of characters I could investigate. Instead the figure in my image could interact with an unseen person or world giving the suggestion of playing a role in an ongoing story. This would be a departure from the more formally posed photographs I had previously taken but would not necessarily require the large sets which had previously been discounted.

## Takashi Murakami

Takashi Murakami is of major significance to contemporary

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*Miss Ko<sup>2</sup>*, Takashi Murakami, 1997

Japanese art. Artist, curator and manager of Kaikai Kiki, he has launched and manages the careers of many young artists including Chiho Aoshima, Mr, and Aya Takano. His artistic works range from school bags made from the hides of endangered species to large scale flat paintings. The works that most interested me however were his large sculptures such as *Miss Ko<sup>2</sup>*, *Hiropon* and *My Lonesome Cowboy*. Murakami's sculptures take the aesthetic of the snack toy and apply it to life sized figures. Since these snack toys are often based on *manga* and *anime*, Murakami's versions also have the same appearance with the exaggerated features and the *kawaii* appeal. His *Miss Ko<sup>2</sup>* is a tall slender 'leggy' blonde with an impossibly thin waist, huge gravity defying breasts and large round eyes painted in a way that has become a signature of Murakami's work. She is a life sized three-dimensional *otaku* fantasy. *Hiropon* and *My Lonesome Cowboy* share many of the same characteristics, such as the large round Murakami eyes and the exaggerated features. However in these the fantasy is exaggerated further. *Hiropon*'s breasts are balloon-like and her fist sized nipples squirt milk which forms the rope with which she skips. *My Lonesome Cowboy*'s ejaculation forms his lasso



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*Hiropon*, Takashi Murakami, 1997



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*My Lonesome Cowboy*, Takashi Murakami, 1998

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*2nd Mission Project Ko<sup>2</sup> (Human Type)*, Takashi Murakami, 1998

that circles above his head like a trophy. These works mark a departure from *kawaii*, though it is apparent in their origin. Instead they are manifestations of *otaku* sexual fetish. Another doll work *2nd Mission Project Ko<sup>2</sup>* combines two *otaku* fantasies as a naked girl transforms through a series of three human sized sculptures into a aeroplane. The idea of transformation in these sculptures is combined with *kawaii* which is not as sexually charged by the figure being naked<sup>1</sup>.

Murakami does not move far from the *shokugan* concept with his work and eventually brought the concept full circle and released a series of sculptures as *shokugan* figures. (Schimmel, 2008: 134). As with other snack toys you could walk into a convenience store and buy a miniature *Hiropon* or *Miss ko<sup>2</sup>*. The commercial references in his work and the importance of scale were significant characteristics of these pieces. There would of course be a difference in the viewers perception of the work when encountering either version of the sculptures. You could see the *shokugan* as representations of the larger and vastly more expensive works until you remember that the large sculptures were based

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<sup>1</sup> This is particularly true when they are compared to *Hiropon* and *My Lonesome Cowboy*.



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*2nd Mission Project Ko*<sup>2</sup>, Takashi Murakami, 1999-2000

upon *shokugan* originally. Putting aside the time-line of their creation, it is difficult to decide which is a representation of which? Perhaps the large scale works were a sketch on the path to making a *shokugan* artwork. This raised my awareness of the commercial aspect to *kawaii*, even when considered in conjunction with Japanese art.

## Ryoko Suzuki

This artist's work was not of interest to me initially so much for the concepts she explored, but more for the methods she employed. Her work entitled *Sweat 3* from the *Anikora* series has the artist's face set on the body of a female *anime* or *manga* doll. The dolls she has chosen for this series show an exaggerated female form with large breasts, thin waist and smooth skin. The pose is revealing or alluring which largely takes the doll away from what I felt was the *kawaii* I wished to introduce into my work. The inclusion of the artist's head leaves us with the impression of seeing the artist nude, possibly as an object of lust, an erotic image. This is however interrupted by the differences between the head and the body. The skin on her face is not plastic and perfectly



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*Sweat 3*, from the series *Anikora*, Ryoko Suzuki, 2002

smooth. On closer inspection you can see the dimples in the skin and the wrinkles around the eyes. The work is an ironic statement in response to the male fantasy of perfection in Japanese popular *anime* and *manga* and particularly in dolls whose form bordered on the erotic or pornographic. The title of the work refers to the practice of collaging faces of famous women whom men might want to imagine naked onto photos of naked women, confirming the fantasy connection.

I found the method interesting because, if I chose a figure that I felt displayed *kawaii*, I could simply graft my own face onto it. This would easily side-step issues I had with trying to make my own body appear *kawaii*. I felt the point of difference that existed between Suzuki's work and my own was that I wanted to become part of the figure rather than demonstrating my difference to it. It was as if I had chosen to enjoy the perfection of the figurine by making it my avatar while Suzuki was exposing the same perfection as inadequacy. It wasn't until later in the research that I realised that Suzuki's and my conceptual issues and objectives were not as dissimilar as originally thought.

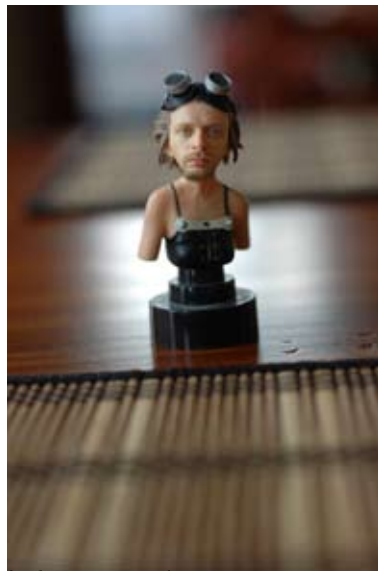


My first attempt to place my face on a *shokugan* snack toy

## 4. The Self Portrait and the Shokugan

I next experimented with placing my face on a body of an *anime* style *shokugan* snack toy. I was pleased with how successfully the merging of my face and the doll proved. I did not feel that *kawaii* was achieved in this image but I felt there was a potential.

My next attempt was with a full figure *shokugan*, again of a girl. This time I trimmed back my facial hair for the photograph of my face. I found the full figure to be much better at creating a feeling of *kawaii* and the less facial hair worked to diminish the masculinity of my face. I did not want to remove the facial hair totally as I felt it was a means of keeping my identity in the work. Without my beard I was concerned I would slowly disappear from the image as I tried to blend myself with the figure. The figure's pose suggested performance and I could see no reason to deviate from that so I allowed performance to become part of the creation of each self portrait. I would pose, like the doll to decide exactly what expression I would carry. I decided not to directly



further attempts to place my face onto *shokugan* snack toys

copy the expression on the doll but instead see what felt most natural when I assumed the pose. I felt that I had achieved *kawaii* in some respect.

My use of the female figure in the works was mainly concerned with my pursuit of *kawaii* but was also subject to how I would represent myself. Andrew Kokesh in his essay on *shonen* (boys) *manga* (Kokesh, 2006: 2) describes two representations of male characters, one being the hyper-masculine character who is successful and powerful and is often associated with sports, described as “the superman type” (Kokesh, 2006: 2), while the other is initially weak, referred to as the underdog. A typical example of the superman type is *Goku* of *Dragon Ball* (1984) and *Dragon Ball Z* (1989) who is born with supernatural strength which he uses to solve problems. The underdog character is in many ways strangely not dissimilar. They often start out as weak and bullied but find their strength or physical prowess in a specific sport or undertaking. An example of this would be *Makunouchi Ippo* from the *Hajime no Ippo* (1989) boxing *manga* about a boy who is bullied but learns boxing and finally becomes successful. These characters rarely rely on their intelligence or cunning but



*Shokugan* photographed in artificial light with my face added

rather use physical strength to solve problems. There are a group of male characters that do not have the physical strength of the typical *shonen manga* characters. These characters, instead of using intellect or mental fortitude to get them through seem to rely on luck. *Nobita* from the popular manga and anime series *Doraemon* (1969) is a failure in every aspect of his life and does not have the physical strength of other *manga* male heros. His 'luck' comes in the form of a robot cat from the future who is sent there to help set him (though often unsuccessfully) on the path to success. Another character who relies on luck is *Keitaro* from the series *Love Hina* (1998) who fails at nearly every task set to him and only ever succeeds in finally getting the girl of his dreams because of a series of improbable events.

These roles models did little to inspire me when I became interested in *manga* and *anime*. I had never held an interest in sports growing up, and I had always valued intellectual over physical achievement. I found it particularly hard to relate to characters whose main attribute was either physical strength or utter incompetence. I quickly found distinct differences when examining female characters.



My first attempts at cut out pieces

Since the early 1980's there has been a trend where the strong hero character in many Japanese anime and manga have been females. In Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausica Valley of the Wind* (1982) both the heroine and antagonist are strong female characters. Japanese playwright Ogita speaks of the sexuality of Miyazaki's characters saying "Superficially, the heroines in Miyazaki Hayao's anime are female, but more important than their gender is their purity and asexuality". (Robertson, Suzuki, 2003: 73) A significant number Hayao Miyazaki's characters have followed this model and have become fairly well known in the west. Other examples are *Kiki* from *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), and *Chihiro* from *Spirited Away* (2001). All of these characters use their intelligence, their cunning and their experience to solve their problems and progress. It was these movies that initially sparked my interest in Japanese *anime* and *manga* and became the ones I would more easily relate to.

When I decided to represent *kawaii* in my work it was also these characters that came to mind. Using the female hero I was able to both relate easier to the female characters from anime and the *kawaii* idol of the *otaku* for whom the figures were created.





A refined cut out piece

In Japanese culture, and particularly in *otaku* culture as exported to the west, *kawaii* is often mistaken for erotic imagery and a erotic fantasy ideal of Japanese women. In her essay *Beyond The Geisha Stereotype* (2008) Junko Saeki states that “Images of young girls depicted in *manga* for boys, usually exaggerate female sexuality, and thus can be easily misunderstood as pornography” (Segers, 2008: 187). In the paper entitled *Pornography, Rape and Sex Crimes in Japan* (1999), Milton Diamond and Ayako Uchiyama describe pornography as “sexually explicit material (SEM) primarily developed or produced to arouse sexual interest or provide erotic pleasure.” (Diamond, Uchiyama, 1999: 3) If this is recognised as the definition of pornography then the *manga* or *anime* in question would have to have been created as erotic rather than being interpreted as pornography. This did not discount the possibility that my work could be seen as erotic. To be erotic something must be “relating to or tending to arouse sexual desire or excitement”. This meant that the interpretation of my work as erotic was in the realm of the audience and though I could take steps to avoid such questions there would be no way I could totally remove the possibility of such an interpretation.



(this page) Cut outs during test installation

*Moe* is an expression popular among the *otaku* to express a feeling they get when viewing certain imagery. *Moe* is a verb describing the sprouting of a plant and refers to the budding of love or the *kawaii* of innocence. The feeling of *moe* often inspires the *otaku* to fantasies of protecting that innocence rather than in anyway defiling or destroying it. In his book *Cruising The Anime City* (2004) Tomohiro Machiyama states that “virginity is essential to *moe*, once actual sex is portrayed the fantasy is destroyed” (Machiyama, 2004: 50). *Moe* imagery and figurines are often interpreted in the west as erotic images but the lack of sexual interest and the desire to protect innocence is not concurrent with the erotic. The popularity of *moe* is also represented in art, and the works of Ai Yamaguchi would likely be interpreted as *moe*.

Japanese culture does not treat *manga* and *anime* as exclusively the realm of *kawaii* or *moe* and the erotic and pornographic possibilities of the medium are also explored. The upper image on page 18 of this text shows dolls which have clearly been created with sexual fantasies in mind. Takashi Murakami's *Hiropon* and *My Lonesome Cowboy* are erotically charged works and could arguably be referred to as pornographic.


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*Submissive, Mannequin series*, Siren Deluxe, 2008

Returning to the works of Ryoko Suzuki, similar conceptual issues now seemed to arise with my own practice. Her works are partly concerned with the objectification of the female form through the pornographic representations and erotic interpretations of some *manga* imagery. While at first I felt that this was aside from investigation I found that our paths of exploration, while still different, more similarities than I had initially considered.

A Western artist whose work explores the erotic is New Zealand photographer Siren Deluxe. Sirens work focusses on sexuality, gender identity and censorship. In her *Mannequin Series* she focuses on “the artificial, sanitised and mass produced sexuality” (Deluxe, 20) that she feels is endorsed by public art galleries. Her use of the mannequin is a metaphor for the sanitized humanoid form while the fleshy features and body parts she employs in the works expose the uncensored human sexuality. Her techniques are similar to my own but with the objective of celebrating the sexual and erotic while my works strive to portray innocence and *kawaii*. The artificial mannequin she sees as an obstacle to human sexuality, so she imposes humanity upon the figure in the aim of restoring it, thus creating an erotic image. In





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*Minority Interests, Mannequin series, Siren Deluxe, 2008*

my work I use the artificial body to portray innocence, hoping to avoid the erotic interpretation.

I understood that my audience may not receive the figures I used as *kawaii* in the same way a Japanese person might (and as I would). I felt that an audience who interpreted any display of *kawaii* (or *moe*) as erotic would also see my work in the same way. Attempting to change the perception and understanding of *kawaii* in the Western world was not an issue that this project set out to address. Indeed it could be seen that an erotic interpretation of my work by a western audience was a possible endorsement of my success in creating *kawaii*. It was at this stage that I found I was also exploring the space between erotic and *kawaii* through my audiences possible interpretations.

As an example of *kawaii*, and with the addition of my face, the work potentially created a conflict in the viewer who might be drawn to the cute lines, pose, costume of the doll but forced to acknowledge the presence of my face. I felt that the use of a small depth of field when shooting these figurines was significant as it made the viewer aware of the environment in which it was photographed and its size without any explicit detail which would



Cut outs during test installation

serve to distract the viewer.

Further attempts used the same method but used a variety of doll shapes, returning to the bust format of the first doll and to seating positions. It was at this point that I realised that with the doll being a bust, I found the face added a degree of life to the figure which was then dismembered as a bust. I abandoned the bust style dolls at this stage. Another problem was encountered with the seated figures. The pose was not the issue of concern but rather the requirement for a seat. I had started to see the environment in which the figure sat to be some kind of 'between world', between the cute fiction of the doll, and the reality of the domestic space. Bringing an extra object into this space felt as if I was violating the space in some way. It became important to only have the figure occupying this 'space between'.

I began experimenting with scale. When printed smaller the images retained their nature as figurines and the addition of my own face on them become easier to overlook. They began to lose significance and instead felt more mundane. When printed larger the images had a more dramatic impact on the viewer, the presence of my face in the image was immediately obvious and the figure



Cut outs during test installation

maintained its sense of scale through the narrow depth of field.

In an effort to return the figure to its original sculptural form<sup>1</sup>, I mounted an image on plastic sheet and cut it out. I moved this around the studio using a prop to stand it up. A change was observed in the nature of the figure as it moved from image to standing cut out. Though with careful examination the small depth of field was still visible, the sense of scale had started to diminish. The size now began to resemble that of a small child which further enhanced the effect given in the image. Its presence in the 3D space was much reduced compared to the 2D space of the print. This was due to the tonal weight (the large dark background) being removed, it no longer being presented at eye height, and if seen from the side, becoming for the most part invisible. This lack of impact brought with it extra qualities that had not been as present when it was 2D. Rather than dominating the space the figure would slowly be perceived by the viewer who would at first see what they believed to be a idealised figurine of a young girl. It would only reveal my face at the second glance or closer inspection. A second cut out was attempted, this time in a larger scale to try to recapture some of the impact lost when removing it from its background. I also had

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<sup>1</sup> As Takashi Murakami had done with his *shokugan* based works.



Cut out during test installation

this figure staring directly out at the viewer. It became clear upon completion of this piece that the feeling of *kawaii* which was still present in the earlier work was diminished. The size became adult like and the direct gaze engaged the viewer in a way that lacked vulnerability. It had become more uncomfortable than *kawaii*. In addition the inclusion of the seat on which the figure leaned seemed to push the figure back toward a 2D appearance and, as mentioned previously was an obstacle to the figure appearing to sit in a space between the fantasy and reality.

With the size established I switched my attention to the photography of the figurine and my portrait. Once removed from the domestic setting the need for a small depth of field diminished and so I rephotographed in the studio. This time I employed a wide depth of field and shot it against a white background. When the figure was printed cut and stood it further added to the appearance that the figure was moving into the world which we occupy as we could now view it in the same way (a similar depth of field) to other things around us. I felt the addition of the white border returned some impact to the image and prevented it disappearing into the background. It was a layer of separation in the same way



(this page) Cut outs during test installation

as the plinth on which the doll stood. I had considered the idea of having the cut out figure standing on a three dimensional plinth but abandoned the idea as it would remove it from any feeling of interaction and place it decisively as a sculptural object. I preferred the viewer to be able to feel as if the cut out was another person they could interact with.

I was equally pleased with the two dimensional prints but felt however, it would be best to concentrate on one method in order to fully realize its potential within the time frame I had allotted. The two dimensional prints retained a very clear focus on the original figurine. The scale was immediately apparent as was its nature of being moulded plastic. They had the appearance of being a collectable item and the domestic space in which they were photographed made them feel at once accessible and precious (further enhanced by the dark wood invoking ideas of wooden display cabinets). The works felt like images of private treasured possessions, probably of an *otaku* collector, embodied with life but hidden away. This represented well the imagined life of a *kawaii shokugan*. Perhaps I cast myself as the owner, the doll a reflection of the world where I live in my imagination. Perhaps I became the





Cut outs during test installation

character, *kawaii* in a world of Japanese imagination. I felt I had moved away from Ryoko Suzuki's critical view of the figurine and instead celebrated the otaku's proud possession.

The 3D cut out standing figure has a feeling of life beyond that found in the 2D prints. This is due in part to its nature as a 3D object occupying space as the viewer occupies space. It is also due to its size and as mentioned its wide depth of field leaving the whole figure in focus. There is a tension with both works created by the inclusion of my face. However with the standing cut outs the viewer is also faced with the decision of how to view it. Whether they allow their imaginations to bestow the figure with some level humanity or animation or whether they treat it as a sculpture. The difficulty in making this decision is part of the interest of the piece. Where the 2D images speak of a small private object the 3D are themselves a large public object. The cut outs are reminiscent of the cut outs of idols and movie characters found in stores and cinemas across the world. This gave them a commercial aspect and one that was very public. They were also something the viewer would on some level recognise. The commercial, desirable or famous nature of the stand ups created an interesting contrast to the reality of my





Cut outs during test installation



Cut outs during final installation

works, which further escalated the tension I previously mentioned. Their presence as perhaps living beings occupying a space crossed with this public commercial image placed the works and therefore my image into a more public arena in Japan though still within the safety of a fantasy. It was for these reasons that I selected the cut out as the way to move my work forward.

Once the format of the final pieces had been decided I needed to establish what sort of volume would be necessary to present my research outcomes. To help establish some level of characterisation I decided to photograph each figure from several angles and then create a set of cut outs which could be viewed independently as if the viewer were experiencing the same character at different times. After experimentation with this idea I settled on three being the number of times the figures could easily be represented without it seeming repetitive. Since the pieces reference commercial images and popular culture I decided that rather than a small number of examples allowing the viewer to examine the whole work in detail easily, I would create a large body which would overwhelm the viewer. I had twelve figures to select from and wished to use each for three separate



Cut outs during final installation

images so decided to initially select ten figures and produce thirty pieces. When installing these pieces in the gallery space I would be free to remove any that I wished. I felt that the way the pieces behaved in the space was of greater importance than showing a specific number. This plan was aided by a trial installation where the number to fill the space appeared to be between twenty four and thirty. As I was producing each cut out as a set of three I would always ensure my selection included a complete set of each displayed.

I placed a sample set of ten cutouts in the exhibition space. The focus of my experiment was how the audience would view them. Two central ideas surfaced. I could force the viewer into one area by arranging them all to face that area and as soon as the viewer stepped away some would fall out of the field of view, or I could allow the viewer to only see the front of a small number of figures at any one time and force the viewer to walk around the space and encounter them on a more individual basis. I wanted the dispersal to appear in some way chaotic or random but to have evidence of deliberation. I decided to achieve this by not having them evenly spaced but to have them both in small groups and

individually, in close quarters and at times widely spaced, each carefully placed to ensure feelings of characterisation and being overwhelmed remained.



(this page) Cut outs during final installation

## Conclusion

I began my research with experiments in adopting Japanese roles and costumes. I was using *cosplay* to see myself as a Japanese person. I became aware that I was actually experimenting in fantasy. I found *kawaii* was of great importance in my understanding of Japanese culture and reproducing this in my works became an important objective. I began to look closely at *anime* and *manga* as ways of achieving *kawaii*.

Despite not wanting to explore too specifically the subculture of *cosplay*, for fear of exploring only a fringe group, I have found myself drawn to the world of the *otaku*. The *otaku*, while being a significant group in Japanese society could equally be referred to as fringe. I feel however that my research has demonstrated my closer identification with this group and its values. In my *cosplay* experiments I was playing a fantasy of being Japanese, as if from the outside looking in. Perhaps in my *shokugan* work I have placed myself inside the world of the *otaku* and am looking out into my *kawaii* fantasy.

Part of creating this fantasy world however, involved





Cut outs during final installation

placing myself in an ‘in between’ space. I was in between cultures, states of fantasy and reality and had created characters that stood between the sexes.

My choice of the female figurines to represent myself became a point of interest in the research and the exhibited works. Positioning myself between the sexes, I was using the female form in two main ways.

I was portraying *kawaii*, using the female body as a tool to do this. This created a risk of the images being interpreted as erotic by a Western audience. I felt that a Japanese audience would largely appreciate the *kawaii* aspects of the work while a western audience might see the erotic potential. I was in effect placing myself between *kawaii* and erotic, allowing the cultural lens through which the images were seen to influence the reading of the work, and so placing myself between the cultures.

Using the female body also raised questions about how I was representing myself. As a white male, why would I be representing myself as a Japanese female? Why, when occupying a position of strength (the historical stereotype of the Western male) would I be representing myself in a position of weakness



Cut outs during final installation

(the stereotype of a female in a society that is male dominated)? I explained this by looking at the fantasy role models that were available to me in *manga*. Not placing value on physical strength or luck (the defining characteristics of many Japanese *manga* heroes) I instead identified with the intellectual strengths of the female characters. So I saw the apparent position of weakness to actually be a position of strength. In doing this I was once more placing myself in another 'space between'. I was between perceptions of strength and weakness. In addition I could again find myself in a space between the perceptions of two cultures. I felt that a Japanese person would more readily understand my reference to the strength of the female heroine in *manga*, while the western audience might see weakness in the female form.

Where then is this space between in which I have placed myself both from the point of view of a Japanese audience and a western audience? There are elements of the *otaku* yet I find myself exhibited in a public space in a way more similar to a *kawaii* fashion conscious idol. How would a Japanese audience interpret this position? Perhaps they would see me as *cosplayer*



Cut outs during final installation

hiding behind the character which I wear. How would a Western audience interpret my use of the female form and the possible erotic interpretation? How do I negotiate between the potentially opposed audiences? The answer may well lie in humour. No matter who the audience is, there will likely be element of amusement when viewing my work, as they try to reconcile the unusual position which the works occupy.

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