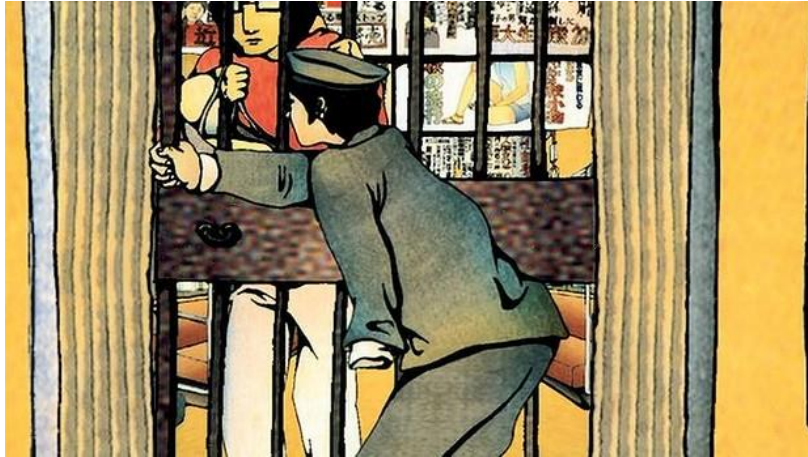


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Japanese artist taps into fears

By John McDonald



Detail by detail: Japanese Commuter Train.

Tabaimo: Mekurumeku Museum of Contemporary Art, until September 7

It would be fascinating to try to understand why some cultures are fixated on one art form more than others. The period we call the Golden Age in the Netherlands, which spanned the 17th century, produced one of history's greatest flowerings of the

visual arts but little in the way of notable literature or music. Britain, since the time of Shakespeare, has produced any number of great writers but only a handful of outstanding artists and composers.

Japan has its share of great writers and composers, but it is a predominantly visual culture. One indication is the prevalence of anime and manga, which enjoy a status far in advance of the place occupied by cartoons and comic books in most Western countries. We tend to believe that comics are for children, although many grown-ups who think this way are happy to consume Hollywood movies in which actors portray cartoon superheroes. The problem is not that we outgrow cartoons, it's what replaces them in our affections – usually nothing of greater value.



Suburban nightmare: Haunted House.

Japanese artist, Tabaimo, is at pains to point out she has been more influenced by the Ukiyo-e prints of Katsushika Hokusai (c.1750 -1840) than by contemporary anime and manga.

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Nevertheless, she owes much of her success to a cultural environment that is highly attuned to the permutations of audio-visual media and animation.

Tabaimo is still in her 30s but has already won a succession of prestigious awards as well as representing Japan at the 2011 Venice Biennale. Her exhibition, *Mekurumeku*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, brings together six large-scale video installations, including two specially commissioned pieces, and a suite of seven drawings called *Flow-wer* (2013), in which delicate roots, stems and blossoms grow out of body parts.



Immersive installation: BLOW.

The artist's real name is Ayako Tabata. She re-christened herself "Tabaimo" by combining her surname with the Japanese word for "little sister", imoto. The result is as memorable as any brand.

The title of her show is translated as: "to be dazzled, to be dizzy, or to be fascinated, losing one's reason", which is an apt description of what we experience in one of Tabaimo's immersive installations. In *BLOW* (2009), or even the earliest piece in the exhibition, *Japanese Commuter Train* (2001), we literally inhabit the work, assailed by images flickering on all sides. She wants us to feel enclosed within an installation, as if we had entered a parallel world both similar and dissimilar to our own. The experience of time is crucial because scenes that seem familiar are gradually infiltrated by small, disturbing elements.

The effect, in the broadest sense, is to undermine our confidence in everyday life. She chooses images that tap into our fears and anxieties in the same manner that one finds in the more subtle varieties of horror or science fiction. Tabaimo understands how things that are completely fantastic are ultimately less unsettling than small disruptions in a fabric of life rendered featureless by habit and repetition.

Curator Rachel Kent quotes an interview in which the artist expresses her frustration at our "entertainment culture" and the passivity it induces in audiences. She hopes that her own works require a higher degree of participation on behalf of the viewer, both as observer and interpreter. "I am trying to affect the viewer's imagination," she says, "by showing aspects of the unseen or unconscious."

Nothing could be more routine for many people than the carriage of a commuter train on which one rides back and forth to work. Like any passenger, in this installation we can choose

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to look towards one end of the carriage or the other, so it's possible we might miss a figure disappearing out of a window, a molester groping a woman, a child being hung by the neck from an overhead hand-grip, or a man removing his own arm. Look out the window and a giant face appears. Yet for most of the time people simply stand around wearing the blank expressions that are commonplace on trains the world over. Perhaps these masks of boredom conceal murderous fantasies.



Moving and manipulating: Dolefullhouse.

rooftops like Godzilla. The idea may be to switch between the fleeting glimpse as seen from the window of a moving train, and the image as it looms large in one's memory.

The immediate impression, though, is of a city overrun by titans.

The single channel projection, *dolefullhouse* (2007) focuses on the interior of a Western-style doll's house in which we watch the furniture being arranged by two huge disembodied hands. In the first scene, when the hands open the front of the house, water comes pouring out. Soon an octopus appears, sliding its way through doors and windows. The house seems to be alive with twisting roots or nerve endings. The artist has said she wanted the house to represent the human body, but there is something cancerous about this vision of the body being penetrated and manipulated.

The surreal nature of the imagery is reminiscent of cult movies such as *Nobuhiko Obayashi's Nobuhiko Obayashi's House* (1977), in which seven schoolgirls find themselves trapped in a haunted mansion in the country, at the mercy of a malevolent ghost. This was one of the first of a sub-genre of crazy Japanese films that might be described as horror-comedies, although they are virtually indefinable, if not unwatchable.

Tabaimo's work acts as a mild, aestheticised complement to those eruptions of cinematic chaos that seem to contradict everything we know about the formal, orderly nature of Japanese society. By using the word "Japanese" in the titles of all her early works, Tabaimo made it clear that she was engaging with specific aspects of national culture. Her method was not to go

In *Haunted House* (2003), we peer into the windows of a series of suburban houses and apartments. Among other vignettes we see a family eating dinner, a figure puffing on a cigarette, a man practising his golf swing, and a corpse hanging by the neck. As we scan back and forth across this streetscape the characters we see

in the windows reappear as giants, towering over the

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completely over-the-top, as we see with a filmmaker such as Takashi Miike, but to play it cool and tight.

For years Tabaimo was unable to decide whether she was a graphic designer or an artist, and her works have retained a strong, linear aspect. Like the works of William Kentridge her animations are hand-drawn and labour-intensive, although she also makes extensive use of scans and computer technology.

The newly commissioned works, *Mekuru meku ru* and *Tozen* (both 2104), are sophisticated and fluent in their use of technology, and less concerned with getting under the viewer's skin. Although these pieces are disorienting in the way images metamorphose before our eyes, it feels more like watching some remarkable natural spectacle, instilling a sense of wonder as forms evolve unpredictably. In *Mekuu meku ru* we witness a dense screen of butterfly wings gradually disintegrating, in a simple, poetic meditation on beauty and mortality.

Tozen, along with *BLOW*, is preoccupied with water – with ripples, bubbles, and ambiguous organic forms that drift in and out of our line of vision. In comparing these pieces with *Japanese Commuter Train*, one can observe Tabaimo moving away from social satire and critique towards more universal themes. One could say she is embracing a typically oriental style of aesthetics that emphasises the process of transformation rather than readily identifiable scenes and objects.

The ancient Chinese scholars saw a successful work of art as one that didn't offer up all its secrets at once. They sought a gradual unfolding of sensations, a progressive delectation. This idea is strangely congenial to video art, which has the capacity to reveal an image by increments, detail by detail. One thinks of a piece such as *BLOW*, in which bubbles appear beneath the viewer's feet, while fragments of bone and flesh rise to the surface and are transformed. Eventually we stop wondering about the ambiguous lumps of matter that drift past us, and realise that transformation itself is the theme of the work. The touches of Gothic horror have fallen away while the idea emerges by slow stages from the primordial sea.