

MIXED MEDIA
Tabaimo

T A B

A Reality
Bites:

I M O

ONE OF JAPANESE ART'S RISING STARS BRINGS HER SURREAL
WORLD OF FRIGID OFFICE WORKERS AND COMMUTER
CANNIBALISM TO PARIS'S FONDATION CARTIER.

words SKYE SHERWIN

ArtReview



ArtReview

Tabaimo

A BOUQUET OF CHRYSANTHEMUMS

nestles in the arms of a Japanese woman sitting in the corner of a train carriage. Slowly, the flowers fill the foreground, the carriage dissolves into an inky blue background and a disembodied hand snips off the blooms, which dance freely against the darkness. This sequence, from *Japanese Commuter Train* (2001), an animated work by the artist Tabaimo, collapses the distance between the two stereotypical poles of Japanese art: executed in a style that is strikingly reminiscent of ukiyo-e woodblock prints, her images are brought to life by an imagination raised on anime and manga cartoons. Explaining her unique fusion of art-historical past and present, Tabaimo has said that she animates her drawings because she cannot express herself in a single image; she needs hundreds. Likewise, it is not enough for her simply to project the animations onto a wall, it is necessary to screen her work in an installation that engages the viewer in a participatory rather than passive manner.

Though only thirty-one, Tabaimo through her mix of surreal beauty, social comment and an irreverent attitude to cultural signifiers, has established a notable presence within the Japanese artworld. This winter she brings that presence to Europe. Her first solo show

opening page: MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, 2006.
VIDEO INSTALLATION, © TABAIMO.
Courtesy Gallery Kyogaki, Tokyo



ArtReview



in France, at the Fondation Cartier in Paris, features three works that chronicle her development over the last five years: *Japanese Commuter Train* (her first major work after graduating), *Haunted House* (2003) and this year's *Midnight Sea*. Visitors accustomed to the better-known Japanese exports are in for a surprise: hers is not simply the Japan of cutesy nympho-schoolkids or manga cartoon violence with which the country's culture is often glibly associated. While Tabaimo's installations recreate familiar environments – a bathhouse with a watery floor, or a house interior with mats to kneel upon and hand-painted scenery – her use of absurd, fantastical elements realised through animation nonetheless serves to make the familiar seem distinctly unreal. People passively cook and cannibalise each other while watching TV (*Japanese Kitchen*, 1999),

a moth with camera shutters for eyes takes a voyeuristic turn around a ladies' loo (*Public Convenience*, 2006) or a woman's pregnant belly is bloodlessly slit open with a knife and fork beneath the Japanese flag (*Dream Diary NIPPON*, 2002).

Her survey of the life around her in Kyoto reveals a world that is at once recognisable and exotic: familiar stereotypes of Japanese culture, from beleaguered businessmen to exploited schoolgirls, sushi chefs and sumo wrestlers, are wittily invigorated with a hit of what Breton termed psychic automatism. That is, her series of images unravel according to what seems at first to be a free association of ideas. In *Japanese Commuter Train*, for example, eggs fall from between a schoolgirl's legs, while in *Japanese Kitchen* a miniature office worker is found hard at his job in the fridge, before being decapitated and cooked. It's no surprise that Tabaimo states: "I don't worry about whether an event is sensational or not with regard to society; what matters first of all is what it represents to me personally."

Tabaimo's subject is the media and how it affects her understanding of the world. While this only appears in the corners of her work, as a television cooking programme or ads on the train, for example, the sense of 'unreality' that media representation of the world fosters permeates the work. She is responding to the disconnect that arises between tragedy and an emotional response as

a result of the numbing effect of continuous reportage. Her calm interjection of events that might otherwise be shocking into everyday backdrops reflects how extreme human behaviour is rendered bland through tonally flat media coverage and overexposure, and furthermore how we fail to respond to such stories.

In *Japanese Commuter Train* there is no ethical hierarchy to her choice of imagery: beautiful cut flowers or a child hung by its mother from a train strap are all presented in the same dramatic key. Tabaimo doesn't force a definitive value judgement. The train carriage is exploited as an enclosed site of urban theatre in which every character type rubs shoulders, and realised in a painted animation installed over six screens. The experience engulfs the viewer: things happen on a screen depicting one side of the carriage, come towards you, seemingly pass through the space you're in, then reappear on the opposite as they move away. The most recent work on show at Fondation Cartier, *Midnight Sea*, is a similarly immersive experience: projected onto the ceiling of the Fondation, it's an invitation to visitors to lie on the floor and languish in the depths of Tabaimo's cryptic vision.

Tabaimo is happy to play with confusion. Indeed, the title of her exhibition at the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in Japan – *Yoroyoron* – was a play on the Japanese words *yoro yoro*, which means to stagger, and *yoron*, which means public opinion, expressing what she has described as the "wobbly, ambiguous and inconclusive state" of her opinions. Ultimately these works feel like an exploration of the subjective nature of perception: at the close of *Japanese Commuter Train*, the animated vision is reduced to a single sheet of paper that is crumpled up and thrown away, as if to say this is an artist's vision of the world, take it or leave it.

Tabaimo, until 4 February, Fondation Cartier, Paris, www.fondationcartier.com

PEOPLE
PASSIVELY COOK
AND CANNIBALISE
EACH OTHER WHILE
WATCHING TV. A
WOMAN'S BELLY IS SLIT
OPEN WITH A KNIFE
AND FORK



above and left:
Japanese Commuter Train, 2002,
mixed media installation
© Tabaimo. Courtesy Gallery
Pierogi, Tokyo