

THE BAROQUE SUPERFLAT, AN ANTIPHRASE OF BEAUTY.

BY MARIKA MARCHESE

Before talking about the contemporary and Tomoko Nagao, the super Japanese artist I will interview, we need to take a big step back and go to Pop Art, 60 years ago.

What was this phenomenon?

Anyone who has always been involved in art was born with this knowledge, but for newbies or non experts, a refresher is needed.

Art from the late 1950s to early 1960s is called POP (popular) Art, not as one might think, an art of or for the people, but a mass-produced art and therefore known.

By representing the mass, art becomes as anonymous as possible and thus understood by as many people as possible. The objects, in this case, the works, were found on the shelves of our common supermarkets. Small, banal but necessary premise, this type of art was born and evolved in large urban centres, mainly between London and New York, where we meet the main proponents. But those who did not live in these large centres, but in small or very small realities, these shops were real amusement parks, full of oddities. Thinking about this reminds me of the many stories about my Sicilian grandparents, that coming from small peasant realities, were amazed and sometimes even afraid to see, for example, a coloured detergent, liquid and in a bottle. They were used to making handmade soap, strictly solid. They marvelled to see pasta in packages or in receiving from relatives who came, from Milan or Turin, colourful packages of sugared almonds or other surprising gifts.

Pop Art wanted to bring to the highest point the cultural and above all, social revolution

that was taking place between Europe and the United States, praising consumer goods. Yes, because the artists of this period, with the increase in wealth in Western countries and with the birth of consumerism, which leads precisely to the production of a large number of goods and the spread of household appliances, cars, mass, including television, make their way and bring men back to the centre, like a new Renaissance, this time social, which has never ceased to be.

Art no longer wants to express hermetic emotions, but to represent itself. There are no desecrating or ironic intentions, but they simply document the changes in values that we find in the new consumerist city and in the great industrial reproduction in series.

When mentioning Pop Art it is inevitable to follow the name of Andy Warhol, who created his “Enterprises” by placing the faces of actresses and politicians among his works like any other consumer object.

The task of art has also changed thanks to continuous changes of direction, awareness and important continuous revolutions, as society changes the way of thinking and the way of representing it has changed.

Since the 1980s we have witnessed the growing affirmation of China and Japan, the success of these two powers from an economic, strategic and military point of view, in fact, is the consequence of a long process that began the last century and at its peak, precisely in the eighties there is a new economic boom.

So what changes between these two economic

Name
Title, year
Description





and cultural increases? We would say only the geographical coordinates, but no. The scope of the new Asian Pop Art influences everything thanks to fashion, and new communication systems, the mobile phone, but also video games, being involved in all social aspects, from the way of thinking, to the way of dressing, with cartoons, films and the growing interest in martial arts, in short, rooting a new way of life full of charm in our culture.

The artists of the new Asian pop wave are, therefore, spokespersons for a new nationalism, to overcome the sense of powerlessness created by the United States at the end of the Second World War. In fact, after the war, the Otaku and Kawaii subcultures (Otaku, manga's obsession; Kawaii, cute) would have proliferated among the younger generations to seek and obtain the sense of escape and leave behind the traumas of conflict. The one who creates the neologism Neo-Pop is Noi Sawaragi, a Japanese art critic and close in the nineties to the artists Takashi Murakami, Yoshitomo Nara, Mariko Mori, Kenji Yanobe, to name a few, who have transformed these subcultures and their marginality into a new art style.

Today we are used to inserting icons in instant messaging that should accompany the words and represent our emotional state. Takashi Murakami with the Superflat had made these emoticons the subject of many of his works. The term Superflat was invented in 2000, in which Super indicates superior quality, superlative and Flat, uniform, smooth. This flat style, according to Murakami, was present in the Ukiyo-e genre, images from the floating world translated into prints

and paintings of the Edo period. So Murakami's Superflat not only deals with flattening in formal terms but wants to smooth out borders and cultural references.

When did Warhol's Brillo Box ever smile at us? Certainly, the smile is not the exclusive prerogative of Murakami, but the Neopop has entered our veins and has understood our mood as well as the artist ambassador of the Neopop in Italy, Tomoko Nagao, who for Streams will speak to us through his works of current themes. Tomoko, in fact, through the reworking of famous art icons, first of all, the Mona Lisa, analyzes the role of women in contemporary society and the marginalization of women in some cultures. In Kawaii playfulness, ironic and erotic, "the ever-growing competition towards appearances, the weakened contents of communication, the vocation for the ephemeral and the superfluous" are mixed. (Tomoko Nagao - Iridescent Obsession, 2018 - exhibition catalogue at Deodato Arte curated by Christian Gangitano and Paolo Campiglio)

The symbolic importance of the compositions emphasizes clear, defined cultural and moral messages.

Name
Title, year
Description

Name
Title, year
Description



Tomoko Nagao (Nagoya, 1976), lives and works in Milan. She graduated from Chelsea College of Art & Design, MA Fine Art in London in 2003, she participated in the Botticelli Reimagined exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2016.

Tomoko's art has an approach inclined to the contamination of languages and adheres to Neo pop and Superflat cultural experience, capable of elaborating stratified reading devices only apparently trivial: at a first level, in fact, we are witnessing the grafting of traditional Japanese of Souls in the myths of Western culture, already sifted by the long Pop experience, from Caravaggio to Leonardo da Vinci, from Botticelli to Titian, to Velasquez, from Scuola of Fontainebleau in Delacroix. In this contamination and rereading the icons of the contemporary world of the most famous brands, introduced with a taste between irony and satire.

A second interpretative level concerns the choice of the subjects of eradication, which affect often subtly erotic female figures or myths of Western beauty, translated into kawaii aesthetics: figures that the artist intends to rehabilitate as heroic icons of femininity always subject to the stereotypical violence of the culture of the male eye, from which they would like once and for all break free and break in as protagonists. It follows a further and more intimate sense of work, which connected to her own experience as a woman artist in the world of art, with the difficulties and ambiguities that the creative story entails, but she intends to expand on contemporary Japanese female condition, increasingly fragile and yet able to conceal the most suffered drama behind a happy and carefree icon.



On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the famous art movement, and with the reopening of museums after an intense year of the global pandemic, Streams then wants to pay homage to Pop Art, through three important themes, not three simple words. If we were to say what the lockdown period has taught us, perhaps among the first places there would be the figure of women, LGBTQI rights and the fight against hunger in the world, with the value of food. We made bread, prepared cakes, exchanged recipes, experimented with new dishes: food was, for several weeks, our little great salvation, as much symbolic as it is factual, but how many men and women will have suffered indoors with their torturers?

It is hoped that this unprecedented experience has left a legacy, therefore, a greater awareness of the importance of accepting our differences, supporting each other and not wasting what the earth and the effort of men and especially women produce, but to use it with conscience and respect.

It, therefore, becomes even more decisive and morally necessary to fight domestic violence, hatred and food waste, given that almost a third of all food produced each year is wasted or lost before it is consumed.

Returning to speak about art, for example, for Andy Warhol, a simple soup is not a plate of steaming broth, but a cold can on which the flat and colourful words “Campbell’s” appear. In the most different ways, food enters the artistic circuits, but if it is true that food becomes art, it is first of all true that art becomes food, because it nourishes man in an “integral” way. Art is food for the eyes, for the mind, for sensitivity, but above all, it is food for the soul.

Name
Title, year
Description

Name
Title, year
Description



WOMEN

EQUAL RIGHTS

FOOD

Marika Marchese: Thanks, Tomoko for your support. Let me start by asking you, you have often treated the woman's body in your works and you have told me that, just like the principles of Pop Art, you feel the viewer consume yourself and your works at the same time, at this very moment how can we free the woman from obsolete stereotypes? (But also obtaining simple recognition such as the right to education?) In the Iridescent Obsession catalogue a performance with Arab women is mentioned, how did it go?

Tomoko Nagao: Many problems in the society; gender, discrimination, poverty, declining birthrate today... And the problems are hiding behind the surface of society, which is colourful, designed, fashionable, mass information...My art telling these situations.

I don't want that "my art and I are consumed by people", but it is true, I only want to tell the truth. My art and I are consuming by people on many kinds of websites and social ...even I do not want. I am confused sometimes by my artworks on websites or social. Because I know I cannot control the images, people make copies and screenshots as they want, when they want... it is very fast to go away from me the images of my artworks and me.

I don't know how we women can be free from this situation. For me, it is important to be a testimonial and tell about these situations of today for the future.

MM: Another point that branches out, against the background of Pop Art, thinking about the social aspect that your works have, especially with regard to public art, we know how important the appearance of the product is, you have described two things: - the first that I was struck by the idiosyncrasy towards certain foods, such as ham when you arrived in Milan and then you created the *Madonnina di carne= Princess meat and the Duomo di Carne (Sweetly duomo)*. So I ask you if you could explain this double soul of your works, on the one hand, the Kawaii synonymous with freedom and carefree and on the other, the desire to make people think.

TN: Kawaii is my way of communication, I use it as my language, not only because I am Japanese and originally from traditional Manga.

I think it is suitable for contemporary society very much. Because it is simple and fast image communication and easy to understand... You can tell many things correctly and fast. About paintings *Princess meat, Sweetly Duomo* are ideas, that I had an opportunity to make for the company which made a result of research for the consumed food in the world, it is many countries who have strong Catholicism's influence, they have a strong economy, then they are buying and throwing out more foods, especially meat. These artworks, the way of communication and the contents of communication made particular effect.

MM: The third point, that is the gender-fluid aspect of some works such as San Girolamo in the studio or Fuwari which means "soft", I read Male in parenthesis and I wanted to ask you if you could tell about the transformation of San Girolamo and the vein Manga that unites all the artists of FlatArt. Does it have anything to do with the Otaku subculture? Could you tell us why?

TN: I liked to transform myself, from San Girolamo in traditional to a Japanese woman in 2020. This transformation from a man to a woman, from tradition to contemporary, from temperance to cosmism, from wildlife to technology life...etc

"Fuwari" means soft and light, like flying. It is a big balloon with PVC. It is a contemporary sculpture artwork for me, not heavy like traditional sculpture.

The idea based on the Nio (two wrathful and muscular guardians of the Buddha standing today at the entrance of many Buddhist temples in Japan), some animation characters (Doraemon, Shojō Manga...). One side is female, the other is male. I am not interested to pursue otaku culture, I use it as a contemporary language.

A special thanks to Tomoko, Paolo Campiglio and Christian Gangitano.



富嶽三十六景

神奈川沖
浪裏

Tomokonal's

TOMOKO NOODLE
TOMOKO NOODLE
TOMOKO NOODLE

TOMOKO NOODLE
TOMOKO NOODLE
TOMOKO NOODLE

TOMOKO NOODLE
TOMOKO NOODLE
TOMOKO NOODLE