

the ichigo shrine vs. the inquisitors

introduction

As a consumer / observer / creator of kawaii visual language, I anticipate a certain degree of viewer aversion to the cute aesthetic, especially from Western/American audiences. Although kitsch in America has connotations of ironic “outsider” humor, few designers would venture to examine its aesthetic merits. And unfortunately (for them :D), this type of work can easily be dismissed due to its saccharine first impression. For this reason, I was not surprised by the intensely critical first review of the Strawberry Project, and specifically the Ichigo Shrine. It seemed that the visuals were simply “too sweet” for some viewers to digest, as I literally filled the foreground of the Shrine with dripping desserts. However, as I fielded questions my motives and methods became clearer to me; for every query I had a lengthy and concrete response. And despite what I expected, the reactions of viewers were those I had hoped to elicit, making the visual “situation” more controlled than the viewers were even aware of. In this way I deemed the design successful, whether viewers considered the form appealing (on a personal aesthetic level) or not.

Interestingly, one viewer who stepped in towards the end of the critique, reacted with an unprompted sense of understanding—drawing connections between the Shrine and traditional doll stands for little girls’ day in Japan, remarking: “when you look at them quickly [the doll stands] look exactly like this.” Not having heard my introduction or the conversation that followed, it seemed as if the visual language I created expressed the notion of being between cultures on a visceral level. Ironically, she had lived in Japan for eight years of her childhood.

In an attempt to carefully analyze my process and the formal/conceptual aspects at play, I determined the most effective way to address the questions posed was to respond to them in an interview-style segment presented here, titled *Question/Answer: The Ichigo Shrine vs. the Inquisitors*.

question/answer

What is the context for this piece?

When I consider the point of conception for the strawberry project as metaphor for the state of kawaii culture in Japan, I picture a specific street corner in the Harajuku district of Tokyo. It lies on the border between the famous “Takeshita” shopping area—boasting a plethora of trendy and cheap clothing stores—and Omotesando, referred to in my guidebook as the “Champs Élysées of Japan.” At this particular intersection, one finds Laforet, the shopping mecca for kawaii girls. The interior is a veritable flea market, with five floors of claustrophobic passageways and hawkers shouting (or rather whining) loudly on megaphones. Yet outside is a multi-story blank canvas for elaborate advertising programs, where well-known designers realize their visual creations on a massive scale, in one of the most visited areas of Tokyo. The more I learned about Laforet, the more it intrigued me; it was one of the few places I observed “high” graphic design intersecting with vernacular kawaii culture. (In most cases, there seems to be a distinction between high-end and street-level design.) In retrospect it made perfect sense, as this was the physical intersecting point of high fashion (Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Prada, and native Japanese designers Comme des Garçons and Issey Miyake) and low fashion, or the Forever 21’s of Japan.

Although designers create fairly “decadent” and playful promotional programs that refer to the language of the vernacular (for events such as LaForet’s annual “Grand Bazar”), they should not be categorized as such. As I embarked on the Ichigo Shrine project, this landmark (and the recent design tradition that has sprung up there) were ever-present in my mind. I suppose I envisioned the piece living in that context, although it ran the risk of becoming overly self-referential.

You seem to be commenting on feminine Japanese culture, and targeting a very specific demographic: young girls. Is this your objective? Who is your intended audience?

It has never been my goal to focus specifically on contemporary feminine culture, but I suppose the project has drifted that way. In the first stages of the kawaii exploration, my scope was fairly limited. Beginning with the thesis dictionary, I focused on cute cartoons and mascots that had influenced me as a child; these were neither feminine nor masculine in nature. From this jumping off point, I allowed the investigation to follow a natural course. When I travelled to Japan I was struck by the degree to which kawaii infiltrated all aspects of life, and began to focus on the human side of cuteness culture. Although I had been there many times previously and was aware of this factor in theory, I felt as if I was seeing the landscape through an altered lens, and new concepts revealed themselves to me. I became captivated by the degree to which real people seemed to become the cartoon characters, rather than merely consuming character goods. For this reason, femininity came to the forefront. (I doubt many Japanese males go to great lengths to be cute, although they are participants in kawaii culture.)

In their efforts to be “cute” (the accepted norm) young women not only reference child-like forms, but in fact take on doll-like characteristics—dolls being idealized images of children. This is a fine line to draw, but an important one, as dolls are made of plastic. Plasticity is a major theme of the Ichigo Shrine, which is expressed by juxtaposing real strawberries, in varying degrees of perfection, against plastic strawberries, and a “real” girl from Honey Girl magazine, with a plastic doll. This begs one to ask, When does achieving “perfection” (whether it be in personal appearance or the quest to manufacture the perfect strawberry) go too far? What does it mean to go “too far”? What is to be desired about the “natural” state of things that is lost

when things become “plastic”? What is gained by becoming plastic? I would say the shrine presents more questions than provides answers, but I am comfortable with this because I am posing the questions. Viewers are given room to come to their own conclusions; I am neither advocating nor condemning this culture.

Despite my fascination with the issues surrounding kawaii, at times during my trip I was bothered by the sexual implications of this doll transformation, which by nature implicates men in the web of cuteness. To a certain degree, this aspect of kawaii seeps into the realm of fetishistic fantasy, so I teetered between seeing the inflated girly sub-culture as intriguing/exciting, and deeply disturbing. This tension told me it was a fruitful area to follow in my design.

In regards to the comment about this study focusing on very young girls, I would say that is a misconception. I think Americans would be surprised to learn that many young women who appear to be pre-teens are actually in their late teens or twenties. Additionally, although young females are the most visible patrons of kawaii, in reality cuteness culture is elastic in its ability to stretch across a range of demographics: it is not just consumed by young girls, but also boys, women, and even men. An excerpt from the same *New York Times* article referenced on page 93, [of thesis book] states:

...[kawaii] has infiltrated the most masculine of redoubts. Truck drivers display Hello Kitty-style figurines on their dashboards [and] the police enliven safety billboards and wanted posters with two perky mouselike mascots, Pipo kun and Pipo chan.

Thus, although young girls may constitute the main subject matter of the shrine, I see it more as about them and the culture at large, rather than for them.

This piece seems to be about opulence, decadence and over-indulgence... I'm reminded of the recent film Marie Antoinette. Are you considering this as a cultural tipping point? And if so, are you a commentator or a participant?

It is interesting that you bring up Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*, for more than the palpable connection to the desserts in the Ichigo Shrine. It seems reasonable to conclude that the force which attracted Coppola to Versailles was the same one that drew her to modern-day Tokyo for her film *Lost in Translation* (2003): an exterior appearance of decadence with undercurrents of corrosion. A similar parallel is drawn between the Rococo (which preceded *Antoinette* by only a few decades) and kawaii culture in Tetsuya Nakashima's film *Kamikaze Girls*, as the protagonist longs to have been born in 18th century France so she could wear “A frilly dress and [take] strolls in the countryside.” (See page 117 of thesis book)

However, whereas the era of *Marie Antoinette* marked the literal tipping point that led to the French Revolution, I do not think the current “decadence” in Japanese kawaii culture can be evaluated in the same terms. This seems like a specifically Western point of reference—Malcolm Gladwell's book comes to mind. This is not to say that the pendulum does not swing there as well, for anyone visiting Japan would immediately notice the ubiquitousness of “trends,” which come and go with the seasons. However, there appear to be a different set of issues at play. For one, Japanese have been operating at this maximum capacity level, or tipping point to use your terminology, since the 1980s. But rather than collapsing after the economic bubble burst, decadence persisted, and became even more inflated, more excessive, more plastic, more colorful, and louder. Perhaps this follows Takashi Murakami's theory that kawaii and the Japanese tendency towards infantilism, is a reaction to adversity.

Another difference is the fact that, being a democratic language, kawaii culture is not an issue of wealth; it has more to do with an obsessive focus on surface-level appearance. Rather than opulence for its own sake, kawaii is about individuals painstakingly following guidelines of social conduct, laid out in magazines like

Honey Girl. This social “code of conduct” grows out of a tradition of strict social decorum and hierarchy. I do not see the “cute” bubble bursting any time soon, kawaii is too ingrained into the culture—over thirty years in, it *is* the new tradition.

Responding to the second part of your question, I consider myself a commentator *and* a participant. In the role of outsider/appropriator, I am inherently commenting on the subject matter. I am also questioning what the culture means to me through this process, and the possibilities for the use of the visual language outside its original context. One thing I hope to bring out in my work is the element of irony that is layered into the Western interpretation of Japanese cuteness culture. I am intrigued by the fact that with multiple readings, viewers will find that kawaii is complex, reflexive, self-referential—and in my understanding—at times self-deprecating. I thrive on the tension this dichotomy between surface quality and underlying psychology creates. Kawaii is smarter than people think, so ultimately, I would be flattered to be considered part of this visual dialogue!

If the traditional Japanese/Buddhist “shrine” is about ancestor worship, are you suggesting that this pop-culture, or the strawberry is replacing the worship of ancestors?

Not at all. I don’t want to suggest that it is replacing the ancestors, but merely that it is the new focus among much of the population. I recently learned that not only are these “shrines” used for ancestor worship, but also for personal prayer that relates to one’s daily life. Japanese spirituality is very flexible in a way, everyone and everything contains a spirit or “god.”

Also, as stated before, I am not categorically promoting nor condemning this “worship” of the cute as good or bad, it just “is.” One thing I try to bring out in my writing is the fact that in Japan people do not demand absolutes or complete resolutions. One thing does not have to qualify another, and seemingly contradictory “events” can occur simultaneously. I see the Ichigo Shrine as a different kind of “spiritual house,” that can coexist with the traditional type.

In a traditional shrine, is not the focal point the center? In your shrine, the emphasis seems to be in the foreground. Why have you made this decision?

Your reading of the foreground as the focal point is partially correct, this is how I intended viewers to experience the piece. Although the traditional Japanese in-home structure houses the Buddha, it is also a place for ancestor devotion and personal contemplation. Therefore, the act of worship is not only focused on the central icon, but rather a series of rituals performed by the participant in the foreground. When considering how I wanted the Ichigo Shrine to function—bearing in mind it would be a physical object in space—I focused on the ways users would physically interact with a traditional shrine. This would include leaving food offerings such as rice, mochi (pounded glutenous rice), and micans (tangerine-like oranges), periodically replacing flowers, lighting incense, ringing bells and praying.

Here, in a similar way, participants are invited to leave “offerings” of attachable flowers and desserts on the frontal layers. Although the central strawberry icon is surrounded by outer borders densely layered with information, their concentric formation ultimately lead one’s eyes to the center.

In some ways, the shrine seems too representational; do you feel transcending this “real-world” sensibility would get you closer to the system of abstracted symbology present in the traditional structure?

You are saying my representation is too literal, but also that it is inaccessible. I don’t agree with the notion that making the visual language more abstract and “symbolic” will make it more accessible for outside viewers. Although I did consider symbology as a factor, I ultimately determined that entirely iconic visual language would be too one-dimensional (both visually and conceptually).

To me it seemed important to mimic the experience of a real shrine, by combining abstracted language (the ichigo icons) with non-iconic photographic imagery. This speaks to the physical and conceptual layering of kawaii. I also tried to emphasize the process of transforming from “real” into “plastic,” that results from attempt-

How can the “uninitiated viewer” decode and gain access to this world of symbology you have established?

ing to achieve perfection. This was another reason photographs were essential, to express this transformation.

Although I am familiar with certain aspects of the Japanese culture, my position is still that of an outsider. I am continually learning new things, making new connections, and—especially with this project—finding out from native Japanese viewers what I have misinterpreted and/or misrepresented. So I would say this piece embodies a distinctly Western-based perspective. It is as much a visual recording of my interpretations and attempts to understand a complex set of cultural relationships, as it is about the subject matter.

Viewers may approach the shrine with varying degrees of “outsider-ness,” yet in the context of my other visual explorations it will begin to make sense. In other words, although the shrine is a climactic moment in the body of my thesis work, it should really be seen as one step in the progression of my thinking and process. By considering my use of the icons developed in earlier stages of the ichigo project, the meaning will become more clear.

This being said, the viewer does have to be in the right mind-set, and be able to accept this as a piece that is not only physically layered, but is also conceptually layered with meaning. So a quick pass or glance will probably not yield more than a very saccharine, and superficial reading.

As viewers we really see the visual overload aspect that you are observing and establishing as an important component of modern Japanese culture, but how are you referencing the traditional?

I made the shrine visually complex not only to evoke the filled-up-ness of kawaii, but also to reference the complex relationship between traditional and contemporary Japanese culture. Just as Japanese “decorum” or social codes of conduct act as the framework for society, the physical structure of the original shrine acts as a template. I also see parallels between kawaii girls and traditional geisha, who were also impeccably dressed and literally painted to look like dolls—their ultimate purpose being entertainment for male patrons. I suppose these connections may not be immediately apparent because they are more conceptual than formal.

Do you consider yourself an author or an imitator in this work? Where is your voice?

I am an author and an imitator. In my earliest definition of Cultural Transmography, I identified imitation, or “appropriation” as I prefer to call it, as the first, and perhaps most critical step in the process of exchange and transformation. The very notion of sampling, is central to my entire thesis! I would even consider the mere selection of items for imitation as the first step towards authorship, because the choices constitute a vision that is unique to me, although they may speak to the greater Zeitgeist... in other words, I begin to make commentary from the moment I start selecting items I deem suitable for appropriation. The groupings of these selections then begin to tell a story and express a point of view.

The “voice” also comes from the fact that I’m making these moves in a new context, and that my perspective is that of an outsider. The inversion of tradition (and the fact that tradition may not at first be apparent) functions as commentary.

The strawberry shrine is one step in my effort to consciously act out the processes of cultural transmogrification (which typically occur on a macro-scale in greater society) in a micro-setting. Ultimately, I hope this process will help me to develop a unique visual language, but this probably cannot happen in a semester’s time. I really see this as a life-long progression. ♥