“Superflat” is the brainchild of the Japanese contemporary artist Takashi Murakami, a concept that has spawned a book, a traveling exhibition, and even an art movement, according to one Los Angeles art critic.¹ The term has even passed into more general parlance, recently making it past the proof-readers at the New Yorker and bolstering student presentations in architecture school critiques.² Yet in spite of its almost self-deprecating etymology, “Superflat” is far from unnuanced or superficial and has cracked open the discourse about contemporary Japanese culture and society. Its reverberations are now starting to be felt in Western cultural circles. Like a Japanese transformer toy, it has the capacity to move and bend to engage a wide range of issues: from proposing formal historical connections between classic Japanese art and the anime cartoons of today to a Pop Art–like cross-contamination of high and low to a social critique of contemporary mores and motivations. As such, “Superflat” requires examination from a number of different angles in order to be fully appreciated and understood, and the best place to start is with Murakami himself.

Murakami has emerged as one of the most important artists currently working in Japan, exhibiting internationally and creating an increasingly ambitious range of work. From massive paintings on canvas to finely crafted figuative sculptures, giant inflatable balloons, and a panoply of more readily consumable objects such as keychains, mousepads, and T-shirts, Murakami and his Tokyo-based Hiropon Factory blur distinctions between fine and commercial art. This nexus is of special concern to the artist, as his products not only straddle the markets for high-end gallery art and mail-order trinkets, but the themes they take up in his art often confound traditional value judgments. His Pop strategy for mixing references to canonical art-historical figures or subjects with consumer sources is analogous to the work of Andy Warhol or Roy Lichtenstein in the early 1960s, and the name Murakami has given to his atelier—Hiropon Factory—makes direct allusion to Warhol’s own Factory. Like earlier American Pop artists, Murakami has also taken the most base and overexposed elements of popular culture—in his case, animated and still cartoon characters and styles—and brought them into the realm of fine art. In Japan, this kind of cultural slumming has been looked down on by the critical establishment, while in the West it is recognized as a time-honored artistic strategy. Murakami holds a Ph.D. in traditional Japanese painting or nihon-ga, and his studied interest in popular culture and Western contemporary art provides him with a rich and unusual background on which to draw. Contributing further to the controversial nature of his endeavor (at least in Japan) is his embrace of otaku culture—the Japanese version of computer geeks who retreat into the fantasy realm of cartoons for entertainment and even sexual fulfillment. This subculture is viewed pejoratively by mainstream Japanese society, in part because of its seeming unproductivity, but also because of the Miyazaki incident, a notorious mass murder committed in 1989 by a self-proclaimed otaku that further tarnished the image of the otaku lifestyle. The sociologist Sharon Kinsella has written that the opponents of Japanese comic-book or manga culture have described it as “a vulgar

Michael Darling

Plumbing the Depths of Superflatness

16. Los Angeles-based architect Barbara Bestor, who teaches in the architecture department at UCLA, reported to me that her students were using the term “superflat” to describe their building projects during critiques.
or low-class media which undermines education, public morality, and national intelligence.” At the same time, she also notes that “Left-wing intellectuals and class-conscious workers and students have simultaneously regarded manga as a progressive social medium which flouts repressive social taboos.” She went on to write that “An additional attraction of manga in the eyes of many intellectuals is the fact that it is an authentic, home-grown, modern Japanese culture with its roots in Japanese social experience, rather than being an American or European political or cultural import.”

Likewise, Murakami sees the cultural products of the anime and manga industries as some of Japan’s most valuable and innovative contributions, and doubtless also appreciates their aforementioned subversive powers. He has attempted to upgrade their status by comparing them to the work of famous Edo-period artists such as Hokusai, who also worked in a commercial realm but are now regarded as iconic art-historical figures. Artistically, Murakami is interested in the formal connections between the new and the old—stylization, pictorial flatness, all-over composition—finding numerous examples of these elements among the graphic designers, animators, and cartoonists working in Japan today. The formal quality of flatness, from its historical sources to its contemporary manifestations, forms one facet of Murakami’s theory of Superflatness. In the book Super Flat (2000), he juxtaposes animation stills from Galaxy Express 999 (1979), by the influential Yoshinori Kanada, with one of Hokusai’s Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji prints (1831), or MTV animations by Koji Morimoto with Ito Jakuchu’s eighteenth-century work Pennies. Murakami’s own work has also bridged these genres and generations. Milk (1998) and Cream (1998), enormous multipart canvases depicting stylized splatters of fluid, recall Hokusai and Kanada, as well as Roy Lichtenstein and, by extension, Jackson Pollock. Deeply referential to the nth degree, these works dizzyingly balance East and West, new and old, reality and representation, purity and carnality in an extremely sophisticated way.

In the Superflat exhibition, first shown at the Parco galleries in Tokyo and Nagoya in 2000, and later in an expanded version that I brought to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (MOCA) in January 2001, the formal aspect of the Superflat concept was primarily and spectacularly represented by selections from three animated films by Kanada—Galaxy Express 999 (1979), Goodbye Galaxy Express 999 (1981), and Armageddon (1983)—and a wall
of digitally printed stills from the same films. For Murakami, Kanada is the link to the past, and therefore a key figure in the development of Superflat. Kanada’s fantastic, lyrical, and decidedly unrealistic depictions of explosions and fiery demons are direct successors to the lineage of Hokusai, but also pave the way for the burgeoning market for Japanimation in the 1980s and 1990s. The pictorial flatness of Kanada’s work, where depth is banished in favor of colorful arabesques that press against the surface of the screen, also leads thematically to one of the most compelling points of the Superflat concept. Kanada’s fanciful images of destruction serve to distance the viewer (and the creator) from the real horrors of war, and can be seen as a symptomatic retreat from an honest reckoning with the ravages of World War II and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Murakami has noticed dramatic differences in how Japanese and American cultural producers depict war. He cites the tendency of American video games toward ever-increasing levels of illusionistic reality, while Japanese gamers prefer the distance of more two-dimensional animation. In a recent lecture, he showed clips from the opening scenes of Steven Spielberg’s film Saving Private Ryan (2000), in which he described the hyperrealistic fetishization of bullets piercing flesh as particularly American and the melodramatic, balletic slow-motion as Superflat.

The after-effects of World War II still loom large over culture and society in Japan, whether it is the coming to terms with the material, human, and spiritual loss of the war, or in the postwar importation of Western values and products; both are crucial to the thinking behind Superflat. In fact, the central work in the MOCA presentation of Superflat was a lifesize reconstruction of a World War II-era Zero fighter plane, cobbled together with 15,000 color photographs and Scotch tape by the artist Katsushige Nakashashi. ZERO, Type 52/Los Angeles (2001) was made by meticulously photographing a plastic model of such an airplane with a macroscopic lens, then printing the resulting photographs in order to return the plane to full scale. The end product is a limp, sagging carcass that embodies defeat and dejection. Murakami installed it almost as if crucified in the space of the gallery, so that it comes across as a bold gesture of atonement. The work is not to be consumed or collected as an art object, but is meant to be ritually burned at the end of the exhibition, essentially reduced again to zero.

Other works in the exhibition allude less directly to the dynamics of the war, but could not have come into being without the circumstances of the

6. In the book Super Flat, Murakami has used two words—"Super" and "Flat"—to describe his concept. However, when the exhibition came to the United States, I proposed using just one contracted word in all publicity related to the exhibition. This is the reason behind the two uses in this essay. In the English language press, the single term "superflat" also has become the preferred moniker.


American occupation of and reconciliation with Japan. During the Allied Occupation from 1945 to 1951, Disney comics and animated films were sold and distributed throughout the country. As Kinsella writes, the large “pie eyes” and “distorted physical features” of the Disney characters strongly influenced local approaches to comic illustration. As Japanese animation and comics developed in the latter half of the twentieth century, the exaggerated round eyes of early Western comics became the standard convention for Japanese comics, and now seem more Japanese than American because of their entrenchment in the graphic traditions of anime and manga. Examples of this cultural exchange course throughout the exhibition, from the blank stares of groovisions’ *chappie 33* (2001), a lifesize army of genetically identical mannequins that have been individualized through changes in hair color, hairstyle, and other accoutrements; to the erotic *manga* of Henmaru Machino. Large, round eyes have become rich signifiers of not only Western influence, but also innocence, childhood, and the unthreatening cuteness or kawai that has become known around the world through such saccharine products as Hello Kitty or Pokémon. The artists included in *Superflat* deploy these signifiers in various ways, and to varied effect.

In the work of the graphic-design firm groovisions, for instance, these round, never-changing eyes are key features of the “chappies”—colorful, increasingly international-looking characters that grace mousepads, calendars, T-shirts, packing tape, and even the jewel boxes of groovisions compact discs.
Broadly defined, chappies are unisex figural units that change only in outfit, hair, and skin color. Their graphic style and sophistication have made them extremely popular in Japan. Usually, chappies appear as emphatically two-dimensional characters, embodying the formal characteristics of Superflat, but sometimes, as in the MOCA exhibition, also take three-dimensional shape without compromising in the least their Superflat qualities. When confronting the three-dimensional chappies, one becomes acutely aware of the soulless qualities of the figures, the dumb smiles and vacuous expressions, all style and no substance. It is the zombie-like, posthuman character of the chappies that fascinates Murakami and that he sees as an indication of a social crisis in Japan. Elsewhere in the exhibition and book one finds similarly disengaged figures, often in the process of mutating into half-human, half-animal form. The collaborative SLEEP, for instance, has a photograph in which Yuki, the lead singer of an immensely popular band called Judy and Mary, kneels on all fours with a protective dog funnel around her neck and a distinctly passive expression on her white washed face. Similarly, the sculptural heads of young children by Yoshitomo Nara, some with animal-themed headgear, have doe-eyed stares or eyes closed altogether, suggesting an unaware state of being. Nara usually installs these works high on the wall to give them a weightlessness that further emphasizes their detachment from reality or even their removal from the embodied world of the living.

The presumed innocence of children is a contested concept in Japan, which has a thriving market for pedophilic manga cartoons. Characters with a child’s face (with big round eyes) and a woman’s body are ubiquitous in Japanese pop-cultural imagery. Preteen female characters proliferate in Japanese comics and animated films; they are often the creation of male cartoonists and aimed at a male readership. So-called “compensated dating” and cell-phone sex between schoolgirls and business men have also developed into mini-industries and even form the plot for a film by Hideaki Anno called Love&Pop (1998) discussed in the Super Flat book. The fascination with young girls has become so widespread that it is known as the Lolita Complex, or
“Lolicom,” and represents a genre unto itself in manga, anime, and Japanese pornography. Uniformed schoolgirls are the usual protagonists in these dramas, outfitted with short pleated skirts that have an uncanny tendency to ride up and expose white underpants, starched shirts, knee-high socks, and penny loafers. Kinsella writes, “The little girl heroines of Lolicom manga simultaneously reflect an awareness of the increasing power and centrality of young women in society, as well as a reactive desire to see these young women infantilized, undressed, and subordinate. Despite the inappropriateness of their old-fashioned attitudes, many young men have not accepted the possibility of a new role, encompassing greater autonomy for women, in Japanese society.” Lolicom imagery is one of the most popular preoccupations of the otaku, but as the Miyazaki incident revealed, has also placed the otaku in a negative light with the mainstream media and the general public. They are characterized as lonely and psychologically disturbed young men who exemplify the “murderous and anti-social effects” of Lolicom manga and anime.

Lolicom imagery is well-documented in Superflat, and relies on the angelic stare of the young girl for its erotic charge. The work of Hitoshi Tomizawa, a card-carrying otaku who built his own computer from scratch and spends long days in a cramped apartment drawing manga, is an example of male-authored stories featuring young girls. In the series Alien 9 (1999) and the subsequent Milk Closet (2000), prepubescent girls in short skirts and rollerblades go off on adventures that cause them to lose limbs and even die, only to have their bodies posthumously colonized by strange animals and brought back to life as quasi-human superheroes. The painted porcelain sculptures of Bome, who has risen to prominence as a master translator of popular manga and anime characters into three-dimensional form, likewise derive from genuine otaku subculture. Widely collected at otaku conventions and mass produced in China, Bome’s works break with the flatness of the printed page or television screen to bring the romantic fantasy figures into full-bodied form. The devotional use of these works, coupled with their exotic pastiche of bodily attributes (Pamela Anderson-style curves, attenuated legs and arms, and schoolgirl faces) exemplify the media-induced retreat from reality that Superflat seeks to illuminate.

One step further from Bome and Tomizawa is the work of Henmaru Machino, who more than any other artist in Superflat manipulates kawaii imagery to its darkest, most menacingly otaku ends. In works such as Untitled (Green Caterpillar’s Girl) (1999), Machino characteristically inserts the smiling, round-eyed face of a preteen manga girl in a concoction of preposterous and sexually explicit characters or scenarios. Here, a segmented cartoon caterpillar with a smiling female face sprouts many engorged nipples and two penises along the length of its taut, fleshy body, while displaying a prominent vagina at its end. Machino has a peculiar penchant for schoolgirls with multiple sexual apparatus, confounding traditional gender-based biology, and who thus become superhuman sex fiends. Machino pushes his sexual Lolicom fantasies so far toward the grotesque that one can’t help wondering if he intends to lampoon tamer, yet still morally speccious Lolicom stories in the mainstream manga industry, or if

Painted porcelain. 37 3/4 x 16 1/4 x 8 1/4 in. (95.2 x 39.6 x 20.4 cm).
Courtesy of the artist and Kaiyodo Co., Ltd., Osaka.

10. Ibid. 122.
11. Ibid, 11.
he actually represents the outer edges of manga propriety. The morally ambiguous territory traced by Superflat suggests the possibility of a broader social critique of the decline in Japanese mores and values—for which otaku are common culprits—and hints at the dangers faced by a society that has lost its economic might, its job-for-life company loyalty, and even its sense of security.

All of these circumstances befell Japan in the 1990s, from the bursting bubble of the Japanese economy, to unheard-of job layoffs, and the poison gas incident in a Tokyo subway perpetrated by a fringe religious sect. Government corruption and global humiliation from art-market speculation have also contributed to a questioning of the direction in which Japan is headed, resulting in a widely felt malaise. Rabid consumerism and the slavish following of fads, especially in fashion, have further contributed to a culture of surfaces and superficiality, representing still another facet of the Superflat concept. Photographs by the fashion photographer Chikashi Suzuki drive this point home, documenting the Tokyo branches of the high-end fashion houses Gucci, Miu Miu, Jil Sander, and Comme des Garçons. The fact that these facades and the clothes displayed within are indistinguishable from their sister stores around the world, whether in Milan, Beverly Hills, or London, attests to the globalization and concomitant homogenization—superflatness—of not only Japan but the industrialized world. Recognizable fashion brands, interpreted as status symbols around the globe, have become perhaps the most fluid cultural currency in the world. In Japan the display of branded clothing and accessories takes on almost messianic fervor, and has arguably spawned the recent fad of excessive label consciousness among the top-level designers themselves. It is a process one could call superflattening, as the essence of the coveted object—in this case a brand-name dress or purse—is transformed through hype and consumer demand into a stylized graphic object that is almost nothing but brand.

Just as the broader fashion world has responded to Japanese consumption of its own goods by making increasingly self-referential products, a similar cycle of production, imitation, and still more mannered production within the
art world reflected in Superflat. Murakami has adroitly included both Masafumi Sanai and Hiromix in the book Super Flat, and Sanai in the MOCA exhibition, to indicate an interesting lineage that arguably began in Japan, but has now more global adherents. Both Sanai and Hiromix have been called “Araki’s children,” a reference to the influential photographer Nobuyoshi Araki. Araki is famous for his photographs of everyday objects and surroundings, in addition to a large body of erotic—and some would say misogynistic—photographs. He is a direct predecessor of such like-minded photographers as Nan Goldin and Wolfgang Tillmans, whose casual, personal style of capturing everyday life and often touchingly romantic scenes has in turn been widely copied. The work of Sanai and Hiromix is very close in content, attitude, and style to that of Tillmans and Goldin, crossing back and forth between art photography and commercial work, and often featuring pop-star portraits and fashion shoots among more personal photographs of lovers or street scenes. Their laconic snapshot style has become a global symbol of world-weary coolness, evidence of an international flattening of regional differences, as well as a reflection of the youthful ennui of the photographers and their audiences. Sanai’s work in the exhibition, Hard Folk Photo (1998–2000), is a salon-style collage of over two hundred color photographs, sums up this international aesthetic although he cannot avoid a distinctly Tokyo feeling the buildings and interiors he documents and the local pop stars he celebrates. The lack of urgency in Sanai’s style and subjects alludes to the wayward boredom of the post-bubble economy generation Murakami is concerned with, and this has not been lost on

American observers. One critic, reviewing Sanai’s contribution to the Superflat exhibition, flippantly, characterized it as “Tillmans-lite (if such a thing is possible),” unwittingly making Murakami’s point through a bit of cultural chauvinism.9

The flattening effect of international stylistic fashion is also seen in the work of Hiro Sugiyama, who sometimes goes by the name Enlightenment. Sugiyama is a postmodern recycler of found imagery, pushing fashion, product, and art photographs through his computer and spitting them out again in digital prints that reduce shade and nuances to jagged stylized areas of monochromatic color. His pictures have the slick, sophisticated, up-to-the-minute style of concert promotional materials or pop-culture magazine graphics from any part of the world, and are indistinguishable as Japanese. For the Superflat exhibition at MOCA, Murakami commissioned Sugiyama to make two mural-size digital prints of dead pop figures—Karen Carpenter and Ayrton Senna—who continue to enjoy wide popularity and influence despite their literal lack of vitality. The zombielike nature of these figures, looming large over the exhibition as ghostly counterparts to the defeated airplane of Nakahashi, exemplifies the colorful flash, style, and graphic sophistication of contemporary Japanese culture, which often values image and surface over substance.

Just as Murakami has made a compelling career out of paying close attention to the dynamics of nationalism, globalization, consumerism, and youth fads, other emerging artists in Superflat have begun to exhibit powerful bodies of work influenced by these same forces. Chiho Aoshima is one of the most exciting artists to emerge from Superflat, and has developed a highly original practice entirely based on digital illustration programs. Drawing exclusively with computer tools, Aoshima makes her own Lolicon scenarios, featuring nymphettes cavorting with animals, cheerleaders gone awry, and blood-stained sashimi slicers, all depicted with soft, cool colors, little modeling, and a dreamy, teen point of view. For Superflat at MOCA, Aoshima scaled up

---

a highly detailed landscape filled with stylish young women, originally made for an Issey Miyake advertisement, to a massive fifteen by fifty-two feet. Titled The red-eyed tribe (2000), shares with other pieces in the exhibition a preference for disorienting fantasy spaces. Up cannot be distinguished from down, and we cannot say whether the figures inhabit earth, an underwater realm, or outer space. The women in the picture seem to hover on the cusp of animality, their red eyes looking suspiciously familiar to the reptiles that also occupy their alien landscape. Because of the nature of the medium, there was no loss of clarity in the production of the giant digital prints, and the transference of the intimate, hand-held scale of manga to billboard bombast illuminates the possibilities of the simplified manga look for environmental applications.

Similarly, the Lolicon dramas concocted by Aoshima’s promising colleague Aya Takano, previously limited to small paintings, watercolors, and digital animations, were enlarged to room size at MOCA. Takano’s Universe Dream (2001), a site-specific wall painting, featured her recognizable variations on self-portraits welcoming visitors at the entrance to the museum galleries. The artist’s figures float and swim through space and under water, encountering friends, foes, and lovers in lush, jewellike settings that practically induce day-dreaming. Her distinctively romantic, female perspective and adolescent sensibility bring a palpable humanity to manga typologies and align her work with some Western artists who work in similar territory, such as Rita Ackermann and Elizabeth Peyton.

A different kind of reverie is enacted in the work of Mr., who, like Aoshima and Takano, is a member of Murakami’s Hiropon Factory. Mr. taps into the Lolita Complex as well, but from a more disturbing male perspective. He makes seemingly endless sketches and paintings of young pixies in bathing suits, skirts, and ninja outfits. The serial repetition of his output—on the backs of receipts and prestretched canvases alike—gives his project the appearance of an unhealthy obsession, yet the girls’ exuberant smiles, spunky hairstyles, and candy-colored outfits temporarily derail more sinister readings. Mr.’s work is in fact so cheery and sweet that it reads as ironic rather than pathological, and his hilarious video Ours, London (1998), in which he clumsily rehearses ninja steps with swords in front of a video camera, steers his project toward parody. The titles the artist has given his paintings likewise ape kawaii absurdity and suggest the language and preoccupations of teen girl publications:

I love Lip Gloss; My dimples are gone; Michael Jackson is coming; Strawberry make up; Chatting in café; feeling a bit grown up. Mr. has also expanded his work to environmental scale, creating two site-specific wall paintings of cartoonish bamboo forests that play with clichéd images of Asian exoticism in the same way his cute girls and ninjas do. The implied ambition of such a shift in scale from the original context of comic books suggests the extent to which Murakami and his protegés are interested in engaging Western contemporary art audiences, where size traditionally matters.

Murakami understands well the impact such a scaling up can have and has used it in ambitious paintings and more-than-life-size figurative sculptures based on hand-held toy prototypes. He has also just completed a project in one of the largest and most public of spaces, New York’s Grand Central Terminal. Titled Wink (2001) it incorporated three large inflatable balloons. At
MOCA Murakami took on the architecture of the museum building itself, wrapping the facade of MOCA’s new gallery site at the Pacific Design Center with a commercially printed vinyl banner that transforms the boxy structure into a wild-eyed monster with jagged teeth. This intervention is Murakami’s only contribution to the MOCA Superflat exhibition as an artist, as he was rightly leery of upstaging the other artists inside the galleries with one of his own eye-grabbing works. Nevertheless, his commandeering of the building itself with a piece that is part informational sign, part artwork, is hardly a humble gesture. It is, however, a typically brilliant act of boundary breaking—one that Murakami has embraced within his own practice and that guides the thematic structure of the exhibition itself.

By bringing illustrators, animators, commercial photographers, graphic designers, fashion designers, and fine artists together in a fine-art space, Murakami proposes a flattening of hierarchical distinctions among genres that he finds all too confining in Japan. The banner also signifies the large role that cartoon imagery has played in the shaping of the Japanese aesthetic that he so convincingly traces in the exhibition, alerting viewers to the synthetic, unnatural viewpoint of manga and anime. The banner’s multiple eyes (familiar to followers of the various permutations of Murakami’s original characters Mr. DOB and Oval), represent the multiple viewpoints within the exhibition, and the flattening effect that multiple camera lenses have when taking pictures of a single subject simultaneously—in this case Japan. In such a scenario, detail is brought into focus and background, or depth, drops out. As in the photo-collages of David Hockney or the high-tech multi-camera wizardry of the film The Matrix, (1999) such multiple viewpoints have the power to reconstruct space in ways that human eyes are not able to do. This sense of post-human
perception ties directly into the disconnected ways in which younger generations in Japan deal with reality, immersing themselves in the Superflat fantasy realm of comics to avoid the pressures of a newly insecure world.

The concerns that Murakami raises in this exhibition about the present and future of Japanese society and culture are not new. The compelling visual evidence he has found, however, delivers the message in an especially visceral way. As Kinsella has written, “The absorption of youth in amateur manga subculture in the late 1980s and 1990s was perceived by many intellectuals as a new extreme in the alienation of Japanese youth from the collective goals of society. The dysfunctionality of otaku appeared to prove the unhealthy nature of ‘individualistic’ lifestyles. For the critics of amateur manga and animation subcultures, otaku came to represent people who lacked any remaining vestiges of social consciousness and were instead entirely preoccupied by their particularistic and specialist personal pastimes.” Murakami’s curatorial premise bears some resemblance to this kind of social commentary, but it is not purely critical and avoids moralizing. Rather, the motivation behind Superflat is perhaps more fairly viewed as observational, as he finds both disturbing and healthy signs in his diagnosis. In his own artwork and curatorial projects such as this, Murakami never shies away from complicated issues and contested histories. In Superflat he has actively cultivated complexity; from the moment one enters the body of his anime monster-cum-curatorial project, one is forced to deal with the churning forces that make up contemporary Japanese visual culture.

Michael Darling is Assistant Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Recent curatorial projects have included Superflat and The Architecture of R.M. Schindler, as well as catalogue essays on Douglas Gordon, Takashi Murakami, R. M. Schindler, and Jim Isermann. Superflat will be on view at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, from July 15 to October 14, 2001, and at the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, from November 10, 2001 to March 3, 2002.