

Hanayo at the Gallery Koyanagi

by Monty DiPietro

I remember the first time I met Takashi Murakami, now one of this country's leading international art stars. It was in the late summer of 1998, just as the neo-pop painter's career was really taking off. Entertaining a circle of admirers in the street outside his Tomio Koyama Gallery opening party, Murakami was a study in irreverence -- underdressed in a pair of knee-length khaki shorts and a dirty t-shirt, chomping on a fat cigar, booming laughter. Being new on the staid Tokyo art beat, I was immediately impressed with Murakami's cockiness. It seemed he had borrowed a page from Andy Warhol's book (actually Murakami has taken whole chapters from Warhol's book), specifically the part that says an artist's public image often plays a bigger role in advancing their reputation than does the work they produce.

Because there is still such a dearth of 'characters' on the Tokyo art scene, it was a real treat to meet the positively wacky Hanayo Nakajima last week. The 32 year-old, Berlin-based "Hanayo," as she calls herself, has built quite a cult following in Europe and America over the last decade. The multi-disciplinary artist is now in at the Gallery Koyanagi, on the Ginza Strip, where she is showing some 50 color photographs.

These are recent works, taken over the last 18 months, but you wouldn't know that by looking at them. Hanayo uses an old camera and -- I'm guessing because she won't say -- out of date or treated film, with the result that her prints have the sort of soft-focus, pale-hued look of 1960s snapshots. The print sizes and frame types vary throughout the show, and many of the pictures are of Hanayo's now five year-old daughter,

Tenko, which further reinforces the old-family-snapshot aesthetic Hanayo has created here.

These are personal and fairly intimate glimpses of the world that a mother sees through the eyes of her young daughter. Although most of the backgrounds and thus the locations are vague at best, it certainly seems that Hanayo and Tenko get around. A manic existentialism in the stream of images communicates a shared love of life, while bringing about a sort of real-time nostalgia -- the present is gone, Hanayo is saying, bring on the present.

Hanayo's pictures have their appeal, but they are not necessarily being shown in as respected a gallery as the Koyanagi on their own merit. The reason they are here, and what is more interesting anyway, is Hanayo herself.

Weird is the word to describe Hanayo's background: She was born in Tokyo, the daughter of a scientist, and in her late teens to train as a "junior geisha," publishing an account of the experience in her 1991 book, "Oshakuchan No. 1." She got a scholarship, and went truant at the ne plus ultra of French academia. Hanayo then became an au pairs girl, but out of boredom made a point of stealing from her Parisian employers. She was caught and deported, ended up in Tokyo where she hosted the television show "Super Natural-Nenten Story," got involved with musicians and bands such as "Violent Onsen Geisha," and released an album, "Queen of Pseudo Psycho," with "Vapid Dolly," (great band name, Hanayo is -- her latest ensemble is called "Pain Cake (with Locust Fudge).") Hanayo has done theater, starred in a Shane O'Sullivan film, and modeled for a Jean Paul Gaultier advertising campaign. She is on record saying the duty of a woman is to be a companion to a man, and she admires the writing of

Yukio Mishima, whom she has referred to as her "only real teacher." Some people say Hanayo's two front teeth are removable.

Fact or fiction? A little of both, I would guess, but it doesn't really matter -- an image is an image, even when it's an illusion.

Hanayo plays a little game when I talk to her at the Koyanagi opening party. She pretends to be devastated when I tell her I want to mention the type of camera she uses to achieve the effects in her pictures. She pouts, her eyes pleading, "Please, that's a secret" and now coquettish, "don't tell, please..." I find myself thinking that Hanayo has bought me into her confidence, and that gives me a little thrill. One wants to believe that Hanayo's behavior isn't affected, one wants visit her world and find it extraordinary.

Last week I heard from a Canadian art writer friend that Takashi Murakami's new show, at Toronto's respected Power Plant Gallery, features a video of Japanese World War II propaganda films spliced with images of the World Trade Center collapse. My friend described the work as "fallacious revisionist history" that leaves the viewer in "biting confusion." Some people, I guess, will do anything to get noticed, and I suppose Hanayo is like Murakami in that she needs to be famous for her art to work.

The difference, I think, is that Hanayo just can't help being an artist. And this comes through enough at the Koyanagi to make the show fascinating.

Notes: Hanayo is showing to March 15 2002 at the Gallery Koyanagi (1-7-5 Ginza, Chuo-ku, Tokyo; 03-3561-1896; open 11-7; closed Sundays and public holidays)

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