

A Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art

1. "Japan" and "Art"

We want to see the newest things. That is because we want to see the future, even if only momentarily. It is the moment in which, even if we don't completely understand what we have glimpsed, we are nonetheless touched by it. This is what we have come to call "art."

When one tries to express something artistically, that expression's background, motivation, and premises become vital. The more works you produce, the more you have to ponder such premises as the "self" that was born and raised in "Japan" and the nature of the "art" you are producing, if you are going to make any progress at all. The reason that I produce works is not a logical one, but is because I want to integrate disparate background elements as preparation for understanding that "miraculous moment" and because I want to store that away in my mind in a highly accurate shape. Unfortunately, I can never give "Japan" a fixed shape. I cannot meet my real "self." Nor can I discern what "art" really is.

Since that is the case, I thought perhaps I could solve the problem by lining up a series of images in a powerful procession that words could not clarify. Let me explain the scene I saw the moment I fused those many windows into one.

2. "Super Flat" in Images

The Japanese art historian, Nobuo Tsuji, in his book "The Lineage of Eccentricity," produced the concept of "eccentricity", which was a revolutionary concept in the understanding of post-war Japanese art history.¹ This study of "a lineage of artists with expressionistic tendencies from the Edo period whose shared characteristic was the production of eccentric and fantastic images" looks at six artists: Iwasa Matabei, Kanō Sansetsu, Itō Jakuchū, Soga Shohaku, Nagasawa Rosetsu, and Utagawa Kuniyoshi. While praising them as the avant-garde of their day, Tsuji implies a similarity to what he calls contemporary "manga and poster art." His

work introduces these "eccentric artists" who had not received much critical attention prior to his contextualization of their work. The sequel, "The Categories of Eccentricity", takes up the works of Katsushika Hokusai and Itō Jakuchū, arguing a theory of "decorative culture."

The strange style of timing structure in Japanese television animation, which I had been interested in for some time, matched perfectly with my interest in the six eccentric artists discussed in "The Lineage of Eccentricity." In the past I had thought about the logic of that animation by thinking about the movement of the observer's gaze along planes in Japanese art using reproductions of Hokusai and Shohaku's made by the German artist Horst Janssen. I was unsatisfied with the answers I found until I came across the word "eccentricity", which I thought fit perfectly. Having majored in Japanese painting at university, I was surprised to discover that all of the artists I liked fell into this "lineage of eccentricity." At the same time, the book also was a great help in thinking about the formula for composition structure that I am always concerned with as an artist.

I thought that perhaps the way that a picture controls the speed of its observer's gaze, the course of that gaze's scan, and the subsequent control of the information flow might match well with the artists' concepts that Tsuji described in his book. It was from that hypothesis that my theory of "super flat" was born. All of the "eccentric" artists shared a certain structural methodology, in which they created surface images that erased interstices and thus made the observer aware of the images' extreme planarity. I would like to clarify this assertion using works by Jakuchū, Shohaku, and Sansetsu as examples.

In Itō Jakuchū's "A Group of Roosters" a rooster has its face directly toward us, calling our attention to the rooster and obstructing our line of sight. One thing that is particularly emphasized here is that the other roosters are only shown in profile. Even in terms of composition, the observer's gaze moves from the roosters at the top of the image downward, zigzagging left and right until it arrives at the forward-facing



狩野山雪
Kano Sansetsu
「老梅図」
[Old Plum Tree]
1647



狩野山雪
Kano Sansetsu
「梅に山鳥図」
[Pheasant and Plum Tree]
1631

rooster just above the base of the image. There is a mechanism at work in which the rooster's eyes fix the image and make the layers of the zigzagging scan fuse into one.

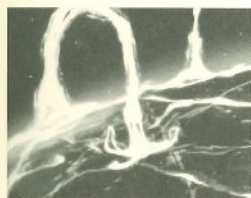
Let us look at "Birds and Animals in the Flower Garden." This work, which is distinctive even within Jakuchū's oeuvre, is thought by some to have been based on Western embroidery. Jakuchū must have been interested in embroidery because of its emphasis on planarity. Dripping color into a finely demarcated grid, he produces birds and beasts that crowd the image. The structure of the image's primary subject, a white elephant, is a great success for Jakuchū. Above a white mass facing forward there are two narrow eyes that are oriented toward the observer, riveting the observer's gaze on the elephant. Though the image as a whole initially appears to be made up of a grid of colored squares with rounded corners, on closer inspection one discovers that each block has its own independent shape, making the picture into a kind of optical illusion. In this way a planar work can create a kind of tension by freezing the gaze of the observer. The technique is similar to that used by Chuck Cross in his portraits. In Jakuchū's work, however, the absence of humans from this purely planar work is also palpable. In that it is connected to a contemporary Japanese sensibility.

The intention of Kanō Sansetsu's "Old Plum Tree" might be to present an odd shape that makes one aware of a sense of speed, bears a certain prestige, overflows with the eccentric desires of the artist, and possesses a luxuriousness in accordance with the wishes of his sponsor. The trunk of the plum tree, which is slightly right of center in the painting, provides a starting point similar to that of Kanō Eitoku's "Cypress Tree" by using an open and stable gaze. Immediately after that is a branch to the left that extends vertically, with small white plum blossoms spreading out in a strange zigzag at the top. These blossoms fix the viewer's gaze. In order to make the blossoms come alive, below and to the left of these blossoms there are a number of rocks that are (rather artificially) distributed along a horizontal axis. Perhaps as an

antidote to that artificiality, there are also a number of scattered peony blossoms. The observer's gaze moves above the horizontal axis and to the right, returning to the starting point of the trunk. The horizontal, thick trunk is waiting to lead the observer into the drama's climax. As a conclusion there is a vertical rock placed in the lower right portion of the painting. Following that rock's dynamic leads to a small branch that provides a respite from the linear movement of the viewer's gaze, much as the peony blossoms had previously. Able to relax there for a moment, the viewer's gaze then begins to retrace its path.

Sansetsu's "Pheasant and Plum Tree" is similar. The painting spans four sliding doors. The observer's gaze starts on the main panel, the second door from the left, with a beautiful plum tree that spreads out in a "v" shape. The painting allows one to rest one's gaze here momentarily, but soon it begins its story with the zigzagging, inclined trunk that extends off to the right. Midway there is some withered ivy that shows the Japanese tendency to search only for ephemeral beauty. This brings us to the second door from the right. A plover steals one's attention for an instant, but it can be ignored. One's gaze then follows the trunk further and further down. In order to maintain balance, a number of vertical branches are placed growing up from the left side of the trunk. Allowing one's gaze to slide sideways, there appears a rock that also suggests a zigzag motion. Here some bamboo leaves are thrown in to break up the linear movement. The pheasant is something that is thrown in as a bonus, like dessert. Using that metaphor, the camellia blossoms on the far right are the espresso that pulls together the dessert.

What about Soga Shohaku's "Lions"? The observer's gaze initially fixes on the line of sight of the lion facing forward, but then suddenly moves off both upward and downward. As one's gaze moves upward, it begins to follow the flowing water that moves down and to the left. Continuing to follow the flow of the water, the gaze will move to the right, until it reaches the splash where one's initial downward gaze



金田伊功
Yoshinori Kanada
「銀河鉄道999」
「Galaxy Express」
1979



金田伊功
Yoshinori Kanada
「さよなら銀河鉄道999」
「Goodbye to Galaxy Express 999」
1981

may have broken off. After a brief rest, one's gaze will move back to the left to the artist's signature, which reads, "Painted by the Wastrel in the Imperial Garden, Soga Kiyū." Shohaku was his penname and Soga was a name he used despite having no relation to that family. He had taken the name to imply, ironically, that he descended from the famous Soga Family. As a satire on Chinese intellectuals who would take long names, he used a variety of long names, including this one used to sign the painting.

In "Han-shan and Shi-de", Shohaku composed a relatively gentle picture, by making Han-shan's laughing face the focus and then making his eyes, seen straight on, the focus of his face. The texture of his rough brush is visible on the rock upon which Han-shan sits. The true subject of the picture, however, is Shi-de. The profile of his bald pated head is bumped like a monster, and the lines used to draw his body are drawn unsteadily and lightly, as if to melt away. Though it seems that one's gaze will move to the long nails on his fingers and toes, it instead moves to the fragile bamboo broom he holds. Looking at the picture of this pair, one begins on Shi-de's bald head and then moves quickly to his face. After briefly moving toward his hands and feet, one is drawn to the broom. After looking at the darkened area that seems to be a rock near his back, one is fixated not on Han-shan, whom Shi-de is directing with his outstretched hand, but on Shi-de's strange eyes. Afterwards, having grown accustomed to the image, one realizes that it is a work that violently accelerates and decelerates the gaze as it swings it from side to side.

Only these eccentric artists could capture such directness and gaze movement in a single image.

3. The "Super Flat" Lineage

The people who brought this "eccentric" composition to animation were Yoshinori Kanada and his disciples. That is not to say that they were consciously molding their images after these models from the history of Japanese art.

Nonetheless, the compositional dynamic of their works resembles that of the "eccentric" artists to a startling degree. While the earlier artists picked up natural phenomena as the subject matter for many of their works, Kanada's tastes ran more toward explosions, and strange poses and movements for humans and robots. Like the dynamic natural phenomenon of cresting waves used by Hokusai in his "Thirty-six Views of Mt.Fuji", Kanada was drawn to the human form. Kanada's popularity caused him to have many followers, who assembled in a single studio to produce Kanada-style film animation. Kanada and Masahito Yamashita had a spiritual relationship of mentor and disciple much like that between Kanō Eitoku and Sansetsu. (Though Sansetsu's actual mentor was his foster father, Kanō Sanraku.) If Yasuo Otsuka and Hayao Miyazaki of the Tōei film animation team were the fathers of Japanese anime special effects, Yoshinori Kanada was part of the first generation of effect animators for television, in the 1970s. One of the key issues in the history of animated movies was the integration of images made by multiple animators, each of whom had a different style. Under the directorial system, the shapes and lines of drawings would be edited and a system was developed in which color was put on the back of the transparent celluloid in order to eliminate variations. One special characteristic of Kanada's was that he rebelled against this system, allowing each animator to assert his or her individuality. In the field of Japanese television animation, low wages and inferior conditions of employment led to a shortage in workers. This, combined with insufficient budgets and limited time, made it difficult to bring a work together seamlessly. Meeting the deadlines set was always a unique challenge. At the same time, the art form began to draw the attention of maniac fans who were starting to realize that television animation was a special means of expression. The journal "Animage", for example, was founded after the unprecedented success of "Space Cruiser Yamato". Kanada had distinguished himself as a star animator by that time and had such influence that at one time all explosion scenes were

done in the Kanada style.

The special characteristic of his style lay in his ability to produce effects like those of Sansetsu, Shohaku, and Hokusai in images of warships, tanks, robots, and girls. The formula for creating those images was startlingly similar to that used by the "lineage of eccentricity" artists. The climactic battle scene of one representative work, "Galaxy Express 999", is thought to have influenced the liquid metal motif of the later film, "Terminator 2". The scene in "Goodbye to Galaxy Express 999", in which a shape-shifter metamorphoses, and the scene in "Harmageddon", in which a dragon changes shape, are other examples given. Ironically, the success of the principle of limited animation, created out of the reality of insufficient budgets, brought its strange movements and timing into areas with no such shortages. This timing is similar to Aphex twin's use of digital audio sound on the second track of their album, "Windowlicker". When I heard this song, the space before my eyes warped and squirmed like a Kanada effect. Sadly I was unable to analyze the song in the same way I would have a single image. Listening to the song, however, one definitely recognizes Kanada-esque timing.

Despite these many accomplishments, his work was seen as part of a temporary animation boom and has now begun to be buried in history. He should be recognized, however, for being an historic artist whose animation froze time just as Shohaku's direct line of sight in "Lions" had. Because of his work, there was a period in which the special effects created by a succession of special scene animators became the centerpieces of many works. Ichirō Itano, Hideaki Anno, and Masami Obari were a few of the leaders at that time, though Kanada was the pioneer. In contrast to that situation, the famous quote of first generation Toei animator Yasuo Ōtsuka, "How about animators who can't draw people, but only draw explosions?" is a kind of praise for "eccentric" artists. Their approach to images is extremely Japanese, with single-perspective painting never crossing their minds. Instead, they constructed their images along vertical and

horizontal lines. Rather than balancing the main picture, they establish a minimum balance that reaches out toward each of the four corners of the square. As I mentioned before, they also went in the direction of strange movements for people and animals, and focused the greatest interest on their effects, like explosions. That extreme planarity and distribution of power allowed the viewer to assemble an image in their minds from the fragments they gathered scanning the image. This movement of the gaze over an image is a key concept in my theory of the "super flat."

4. Changes in "Art"

The words "art" and "artist" are tricky. What sort of foundation are they premised upon?

Noriaki Kitazawa defines the Japanese terms *geijutsu* and *bijutsu* (both of which are often used interchangeably with the imported word "art") in his book, "The Temple of the Eyes".² According to Kitazawa, "the word *geijutsu* means technique and learning."³ At another point he writes, "*Geijutsu*, or the technique of creating beautiful things."⁴ *Bijutsu*, on the other hand, was a term developed around the time of the 1872 Vienna Exhibition "as the official government translation for the German term *Schöne Kunste* when Japan participated in the Exhibition."⁵ According to another translation authority, it was used as a translation for "fine art." One definition of the term *bijutsu* includes the following: "In the West, music, painting, sculpture, poetry, and the like are called *bijutsu*." As you can see, the definition includes both music and poetry as well. Today, the differences among the terms *geijutsu*, *bijutsu*, and "art" have become very minute. Although I know little about their historical roots, I use the words based on an instinctual understanding of their differences. *Geijutsu*, which has a slightly older feel to me, I use to refer to all forms of art. *Bijutsu*, on the other hand, refers to the visual arts, does not include music or poetry, and is divided into Japanese painting, Western painting, and sculpture. Art, however, seems to me to

be the contemporary form of the term *geijutsu*. The concept of "freedom" within these various terms for art in Japan is not freedom in the sense of discovering oneself and then examining one's surroundings from that perspective. In the Japanese context, the term refers to a state like that of a newborn: not bound by limits, not connected to the system, not filled with information. It is a blank slate.

In recent years outsider art has experienced something of a boom in Japan. The reason for that and for the popularity of Picasso's later works is the Japanese view of art, in which a non-discriminating "freedom" equals "art."

On the other hand, what is Japanese society looking for in artists? What sort of structure determines those artists' actions? Let me begin with a review of the different genres in the postwar art world.

Japanese painting, Western painting, sculpture, design, and crafts. These are the names of the departments at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts and Music (now the Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music) established in 1889 by Okakura Tenshin. These genre divisions formed separate worlds for each type of art, with Japanese painting, Western painting, and sculpture becoming the predominant arts after the beginning of public exhibitions in the postwar caused them to gain mass appeal. The art boom in Japan began with the economic growth of the late 1960s. At that time sales of Japanese painting, Western painting, pottery, and craft were growing steadily. Department stores would show (and sell) paintings in their halls and newspaper companies would regularly sponsor shows of famous Western works. At that time, Japanese paintings done in a Western style were falling out of favor due to exhibitions of actual imported Western paintings. Had this occurred later, perhaps Japanese artists would have been glad to see the latest works from another country. Unfortunately, at this stage the appearance of famous Western works showed quite clearly the difference in level of ability, putting the necessity of the Japanese artists in question. What was seen as original Japanese art – ceramics and

Japanese painting – began attracting attention at that time. Though Japanese painting had been pushed into near extinction with the importation after World War II of art theories from the West, this generation turned to it in a search for Japanese identity, leading to a great boom. At the same time within the art establishment a hierarchy was being constructed that attempted to stabilize prices. Similarly, the ceramics world linked with the tea ceremony world to maintain high prices and the status that accompanied them.

Though one effect of the bubble economy of the 1980s was that prices throughout the industry rose too high, another effect was that discount travel brokers such as H.I.S. appeared, lowering the primary hurdle to traveling abroad. As a result, Japanese traveled around the world and were able to see various famous works for themselves. Information about the art market abroad also entered Japan, making Japanese aware of the imbalance between the world price standard and current Japanese prices. Leaving the development of these travelers' tastes aside, the Japanese painting and Western painting industries were only interested in the money game, and were taking great pains to protect the system and its organizations. The creation of a sense of value and vision for the present and future – what people really wanted to see – was completely forgotten. In the end, the existing art industry collapsed with the bursting of the bubble economy. "Art" has begun to disappear. Eroticism and nonsense, which the West looks for in the realm of art, have always been a part of Japanese subculture and manga; perhaps excessively so. The majority of youth in search of an identity shifted their interest to music. The latest trend has been the appearance of the genre known as celebrity art (art whose subject matter is a celebrity.) This has been the most recent product of a business that has been exploiting the genre confusion created by the explosive proliferation of media. The "art" produced by this business is made up primarily of lithographs of special effects illustrations with the motifs of celebrities, anime, manga, and Godzilla. In addition, "happy illustration art" has been very popular since



平山郁夫
「オリエントの暁」
Ikuo Hirayama
「Dawn of Orient」
1971

the mid-1990s. Today you can buy it just about anywhere. The reason that "Japanese" contemporary art and photography are getting attention domestically is because even though Japanese tastes have been developed by seeing original works abroad, artists and works have a strong Westernized identity and bearable works have slowly started to be produced. In a sense, seeing the art scene at the height of its confusion was a valuable warning for individual artists and probably acted as encouragement. Nowadays, when the music available in any large record shop contains tremendous amounts of information and distribution networks have been completed that allow us to browse foreign magazines, the material is readily available for a popular art that we can evaluate for ourselves. If we take a close look at the situation we find ourselves in, then the basis of our own lives today should become clear. The future would become visible once again.

5. The Real in Postwar "Art"

Within the meaning of "art" as it was used in Japan in the postwar, a clear line was drawn dividing avant-garde art in the Western conception and folk art such as domestic Japanese painting and crafts. As I mentioned before, the latter came to be supported as art by a mass audience. The former, on the other hand, began to develop as part of a movement by the avant-garde artists themselves to find their place in the realm of "art." The artists who burst onto the scene at the Yomiuri Indépendants exhibition were treated as eccentrics by society at large, primarily because of their belief in extreme "freedom." Still, they did gain popularity, partially as a result of attention from the media. Though their methods of searching for identity disavowed public appeals or systematizing, groups nonetheless did form, dividing into such small factions as the "Neo-Dada Organizers", "High Red Center", "The Kyushu School", "Concrete", and "The Zero Dimension." The trends of such groups were covered by media such as "Bijutsu Techō" and "Mizue." They also began

to link up with the underground theater and dance scene and became connected to such cultural figures as Shūzō Takiguchi and Tatsuhiko Shibusawa; this began to show the depth of the movement. All of their activities, including "Concrete", Rauschenberg, and Tarō Okamoto, were swallowed up into the 1970 Osaka World's Fair. "Art" had become "celebration." It was also around this time that the words "*bijutsu*" and "*geijutsu*" started to create confusion. After the World's Fair, the "*geijutsu*" movement lacked any upsurge and the "*bijutsu*" media began to lose energy. As a result a number of *geijutsu* artists began to enter directly into mass society as entertainers. Tarō Okamoto, famous for his "Tower of the Sun" at the Osaka World's Fair, was a major artist in postwar Japanese society. He gained more fame, however, in the latter half of his life as he assumed the role of "artist as eccentric" within the medium of television, and produced the well-received catch phrase "art is an explosion." At the same time, however, he maintained the position that he would not sell any of his art. By preserving his artistic purity through this rejection of the art market, he preserved the image of a Western-style artist in Japanese society.

Masuo Ikeda, the recipient of the award for printmaking at the 1966 Venice Biennale, received little attention outside of specialist journals until he won the prestigious literary award, the Akutagawa Prize, which gave him a certain degree of social status. The film based on his work, which fell somewhere between art and entertainment, was a very successful promotional clip for the artist himself. Later in his life he continued challenging the center of Japanese culture by throwing himself into creating pottery.

The avant-garde artist Genpei Akasegawa, under the penname Katsuhiko Otsuji, was another recipient of the Akutagawa Prize. Akasegawa, an artistic acrobat balancing ultra-Japanese and eccentric viewpoints, successfully transferred his unique sensibility to the literary world. Even today he maintains a serious position as an artist in Japan by working as an artist and novelist and refusing to be limited by

genre. Avant-garde artists who think seriously about the relationship between Japanese society and "art" have moved their artistic pursuits into the popular media, allowing them to enter Japanese society.

It is easy to forget that it was Japanese painting that most actively crossed cultural boundaries during the postwar. The most popular of these painters were Matazō Kayama, Yasushi Sugiyama, Tatsuo Takayama, Kaii Higashiyama, and Ikuo Hirayama. In particular Hirayama, whose silk road works helped launch the search for Japanese identity, could be re-evaluated as an artist who mixed media. Unfortunately, from that time until the present the various genres of contemporary art, including Japanese painting and Western painting, have not been able to cross over, but have developed in parallel without coming into contact with one another. In the world of Japanese painting especially, internal politics have played a large role, setting incredibly high prices domestically. Because of the opacity of the industry formula through which prices are kept at an irrationally high level, the popularity of and respect for the industry are low. Moreover, with the collapse of the bubble economy and the accompanying radical drop in prices for works, the market has come to lack stability. Until the bubble period Japanese painting had come to represent "Japan" and "art", but since the advent of digital production, it has failed to connect with the age and, like Western painting, is beginning to fade. What is contemporary "art"? The social stance of "artist" in "Japan", with the appearance of genres, has remained vague as always. Since the 1980s, designers, musicians, and others have begun calling themselves "artists." The fact that the established art journal, "Bijutsu Techō" has taken the title "BT", using roman letters and not the original Japanese characters, is symbolic of the shift from a Japanese conception of art, *bijutsu*, to a Western conception. Artists who copy foreign artists continue to appear, and the vagueness of their position decreases faith in the term "*bijutsu*." Weaving through the interstices of the industry, these entertainers have begun to successfully hold "art" shows as a form of enterprise.

In another sense, though, the chaos of this situation is the reality of the Japanese art production scene, in which "art" and "entertainment" are being fused.

6. The Shared Center of "Art" and "Entertainment"

An inhuman power was visible in the techniques employed by professionals, their entertainment, and in magic. The professionals themselves must have felt the power of a god in the background of their own "entertainment." That power is one that works on the border between the "secular" and the "ecclesiastic", acting as a bridge between the limitless power of nature and the society of mankind.⁶

The concepts of "entertainment" and "profession" have existed in Japan since the distant past. The imported term "art",⁶ however, has created confusion between them since the Meiji period. When I talk to the creators of otaku figurines whom I consider avant-garde "artists", for example, they just see their "art" as a "profession", albeit one performed with a high degree of technical skill. When I asked students in an oil painting class at the art university preparatory school what "art" was, I also received only unsatisfactory answers. They only have ideas that are based on their teachers' tastes and in the sketching abilities necessary to pass the entrance examination. Art university students today give similar responses. Despite the fact that we are all professional artists, it is hard to see eye to eye on this question.

While it is partially due to the ambiguity of the term "art" in Japan, it is also partially the fault of Japanese art education as it is practiced in elementary, middle, and high schools. The textbooks do not contain concise explanations of the artists presented, and though teachers probably add their own explanations, there is a great danger of distortion. For example, why is Picasso so respected in the world art scene? Textbooks focus more on his drawing ability during the "Blue Period" than they do about his avant-garde work. Either that, or they explain that a groundless "freedom" gave birth to cubism, and then from that illogically conclude that they should encourage the students to draw with a similar

"freedom", turning art into a form of recreation. If the significance of Picasso in the history of "art" is understood as no more than a question of the superiority of his technique or a simple issue of temperament, an important point has been missed. There are other, more important questions to ask. What was the role of a given artist or movement in the course of history? How did the avant-garde movement shatter the existing conception of that role? What sort of history emerged from this reconsideration? Once the axis of time has been introduced, how can we achieve "freedom"? The approach to that sort of original concept is done through the Western-style view of "art." The respect afforded to originality in that view of art is one great difference from the Japanese view.

In "Japan", where "art" been recognized by society as a medium in which a groundless freedom can be expressed, the definition of a term such as "art" has remained vague among the masses. The bases of such terms have been preserved up through the present day. On the other hand, a term like "entertainment" has a reality, and is generally understood. Japanese "art" has become attached to an idea of a creative Japanese original "entertainment." The confusion over these two terms is symbolized by the "celebratory" dimension of the Osaka World's Fair. Japanese artists, led by the elite of the Japanese architecture industry, participated in the creation of this sense of "celebration." Japanese "art" became connected to "celebration" and was thus absorbed into "entertainment." For example, there was the otaku festival for selling manga known as the "Comic Market", in which 450,000 people participated. Its management structure was consciously amateur, being primarily run by volunteers. The willful ignoring of both copyrights and sexuality censorship created an intentional chaos that is representative of the radical nature of contemporary "art" in Japan.

7. The Super Flat Image "Japan"

Like the images created by the "eccentric" painters or

the animation timing created by Yoshinori Kanada, I would like to sketch "Japan" in a "super flat" style. Collecting the images in this book, I will fuse the images together into a pair of four-paneled door. I will call this work "Japan." At the center of the image is the thick trunk of Japan's eccentric, secular, grotesque "sub-culture". Moving up the trunk to the upper left of the image, you see a small bird representing a meaningless "hierarchy", but you can ignore that. After moving your gaze slowly along a horizontal path to the left, there are "celebrations" and "media frenzies" that produce a sense of speed that zigzags up and down, but when you look at the extreme left you see a small branch growing up. At the end of the branch are two small blossoms, "eroticism" and "grotesquerie." From there your gaze speeds over to the lower center of the image, where there is something crushed beneath the thick trunk that looks a bit like a dog. Your gaze then fixes on the two dark eyes of the creature, which you recognize as an "otaku." It would not be an exaggeration to say that this is the subject of the image. Alongside this creature are bamboo leaves known as "manga" and "anime", which have been scattered about to diffuse their power. Returning to the thick trunk of "freedom" and "childlikeness", you see that it slides off to the right before curving down suddenly. Beside the trunk is the rock of "pop", whose upward directionality is emphasized. Running above the trunk is deformed "cheap ticket" moss, which sets the tempo. All along the bottom, the scattered cosmos of "entertainment" are blossoming out of season. At the top of the image are gilded clouds, above which "The West", "History", and "Art" are only partially visible. This image is, as you would imagine, very eccentric, and it is hard to say that it is beautiful. As it is done in a "super flat" style, though, it is also extremely "avant-garde" and "original." Perhaps in the future, in some distant country, a researcher will give it some unusual title and an entirely new interpretation, but that is only a nonsensical fantasy. It seems meaningless for the search for the self known as "art" to develop in a country that does not possess the foundation for "art". Still, if it is

possible to look over an image created by a gadget that constructs "Japan" as if it were a "super flat" picture, then perhaps that can become one kind of art history.

8. The Birth of "Super Flat"-ism

The chaos surrounding "art" in Japan has continued to be the source of energy for its production. The "avant-garde" lineage that I selected from that chaotic history was the lineage of "eccentricity" embodied in the animation form of Yoshinori Kanada. From that lineage I extracted the concept of "super flat", a term that integrates artists and works possessing that unique Japanese sensibility. In addition, I examined the site that gave birth to that original expression, Japan.

It is a pioneer, an epoch, and the creation of heretofore-unseen images. "Super flat", one form of

"Japanese" "avant-garde" "art", is an "—ism" — like Cubism, Surrealism, Minimalism, and Simulationism before it — only this is one we have created. Though the Japanese "avant-garde" has always been alternative and underground and has not yet made its appearance on the main stage, as the DNA that formed Japanese culture, "super flatness" has been continually producing the "avant-garde" up until the present day.

It is the art at the center of a Japanese culture that lacks prestige, authority, celebration, and cost. In it, however, one can see the budding saplings of a new future. For example, no one has yet taken a serious look at the image resulting from the integration of the layers of entertainment and art. But that integration is already occurring. Much integration is still underway. That integration is producing yet another "super flat" image: us.

Notes :

1 *"Kiso no keifu"* Perikan-sha, 1988. Second printing, 1993.

2 Noriaki Kitazawa, *"Me no shinden"* Bijutsu Shuppan-sha, 1989.

3 Kitazawa, p. 146.

4 Kitazawa, p. 148.

5 Kitazawa, p. 145.

6 Yoshihiko Amino, *"Chūsei no hinin to yūjō"* Akashi Shoten, 1994. This quote comes from the fourth printing, 1997, p. 11.