GENDER BENDING AND COMIC BOOKS AS ART: ISSUES OF APPROPRIATION, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY IN JAPANESE ART

by

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DEPARTMENT OF ART AND ART HISTORY

ABSTRACT

In Japanese high art, popular art (such as comic books and animation), theater, and music, representation of gender is a blurred line that is commonly crossed, more so than in the West. I argue that this fluidity is the result of disparate artistic sources that have filtered through Japanese culture since the Edo Period (1603-1867) with the flourishing of Kabuki Theater (in which men played women on stage) and the emergence of ukiyo-e (particularly shunga/erotica prints). This artistic lineage impacted arts of the Showa Period (1926-1989) notably Takarazuka Theater (which feature an exclusively female cast that portrays men) and the rise of comic book culture (manga) following World War II. Heavily influenced by the shunga prints of the past, ecchi manga and anime (erotic comics and animation) emerged in the 1980s. Inevitably, contemporary manga culture and its spin offs (such as cosplay, the act of dressing or cross dressing as popular fictional characters) have contributed significantly to contemporary Japanese art.

The work of Superflat artists (Takashi Murakami, Henmaru Machino, Yoshitomo Nara, Mr., etc.) that emerged in the 1990s, profoundly influenced by the style and content of manga and anime, can be read as commentaries on the over-sexualization of anime and the increasing Westernization of Japan. Their portrayals of gender identity are influenced by what is seen in typical manga and anime and are often the antithesis of the
reality of Japan. Their figures are exaggerated with large breasts and multi-colored hair which contrasts with the very homogeneous culture of Japan.

This thesis analyzes gender ambiguity and the pervasiveness of cross-gendered performance in contemporary Japan, focusing on Takarazuka theater, anime, manga culture and the Superflat movement as case studies illustrating the cross fertilization of high art and popular art and the complex engagement with and transformation of Western culture in postwar Japanese art culture. Superflat art, which comments on the vacuousness of Japanese society and its continuing obsession with youth, sexuality, and sexual identity parallels the Japanese search for identity, as a whole, following World War II and America’s occupation.
To my parents, Charles and Sandra, for their encouragement, and my brother, Dylan, the good twin.
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My Little Sister


Handsaw


Nevada-tan

Reproduced from 2ch.org <http://www.2ch.org>.

Hiropon


I Love Crabbly Crabs


Perverted


Stomach Sword, Mayu-chan

Reproduced from the Kaikai Kiki Official Website <http://www.kaikaikiki.co.jp>.

Crayon

Reproduced from the Kaikai Kiki Official Website <http://www.kaikaikiki.co.jp>.

Honto ni atta iroi hanashi


Koe-chan


Efes Cybele

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CHAPTER 1

GENDER ISSUES ACROSS JAPANESE ART

Gender issues and gender ambiguity have played a unique role in Japanese history. Cross-dressing and androgyny have developed within the mainstream of Japanese culture— without the negative connotations frequently imposed in the West by religious and societal mores. By examining gender representation and the role of cross-dressing in Japanese art— not only high art and the performing arts, but also “low” art such as manga (comic books) and anime (animation), it becomes apparent that Japan’s unique engagement with the issue of gender ambiguity has been of enormous influence on contemporary Japanese culture. In particular, Takarazuka Theater— with its own interpretation of gender bending and its own aesthetic traditions— functions as a link between old and new theater traditions, turning on its head the cross-dressing and gender obstruction visible in Japan’s older, more traditional performing arts traditions, — Noh and Kabuki in particular. The new aesthetic of Takarazuka sets the stage for many of the concepts that develop in contemporary Japanese pop art. This thesis examines the artistic implications of Takarazuka Theater and its larger influence on Japanese contemporary art, particularly manga and the Superflat movement.
Androgyny and Aesthetics

Takarazuka was initially developed as an answer to Noh and Kabuki, replacing the all male cast with women and the traditional Japanese stories with plays that often deal with Japan’s increasing engagement with the West. The *otokoyaku*, actresses playing male roles, quickly became the main attraction of Takarazuka Theater, their short cropped hair, stylish suits, and masculine swagger were new ways of seeing Japanese women, while the *musumeyaku*, who played the female roles, wore blonde and brunette wigs and European dresses. All of these aesthetic aspects were adopted from the West, and the *otokoyaku* created a new hybrid “Japanese woman as Western male” that was entirely different from anything the Japanese had seen before. The development of Takarazuka androgyny and aesthetics into a contemporary gender “ideal” begins to take hold in the early 1970s with the release of Riyoko Ikeda’s *manga*, *The Rose of Versailles*. The *manga* takes place in the days prior to the French Revolution and focuses on a female cross-dresser named Oscar, and her adventures protecting Marie Antoinette. The *manga* was adapted for the Takarazuka stage and proved to be their most popular play. It was from this point on that the aesthetics of Takarazuka and *manga* began to become more intertwined, blonde Japanese characters began to appear in comics more frequently, and cross-dressing became more commonplace in Japanese comics, while Takarazuka continued to adapt popular *manga* for the stage. As *manga* art began to influence fine art, younger postwar artists introduced non-traditional subject matter and techniques as a way of coming to terms with the influence of the West, especially the United States in a way that is uniquely Japanese.
Elements of a Western “look,” in particular Western modes of dress, coiffure, and facial appearance have been adopted by contemporary artists, who wish to deal with the West on their own terms, by adapting Western concepts such as large eyes and non-traditional hair colors to create a non-homogenous, hybrid Japanese image. Some contemporary artists, notably *manga* artists, take a similar approach to gender ambiguity and cross-gender as well, by creating hybrid concepts drawn from traditional Japanese theater, new Takarazuka concepts, and their own unique artistic perspectives. Two movements that show interesting interpretations of this Takarazuka aesthetic are *manga* and Superflat.

**Takarazuka, Manga, and Superflat Art**

Although scholarly work regarding Takarazuka is beginning to appear, it primarily focuses on the theater’s historical background and gender issues, but does not address its aesthetics as a whole or its influence on contemporary Japanese art. Likewise *manga*, though widely recognized as a cultural phenomenon, is only now being considered critically as an artistic medium. Superflat has been more seriously studied as an artistic movement, but its aesthetic associations with Takarazuka via its connection with *manga* have not been broached.

I argue that the common attitudes visible in Takarazuka, *manga*, and Superflat result from a common lineage of disparate artistic sources that have filtered through Japanese culture since the Edo Period (1603-1867) with the flourishing of Kabuki Theater (in which men played women on stage, proceeded by the similarly structured
Noh Theater in the fourteenth century) and the emergence of *ukiyo-e* (particularly *shunga* /erotica prints) beginning in the seventeenth century.

It was through Noh Theater that issues of gender ambiguity first arose in Japanese culture. Women were barred from the stage, so men performed both male and female roles. Noh Theater made extensive use of masks, and so the actual “playing” of a different gender role was relatively simplistic and highly stylized. Kabuki Theater, Noh’s theatrical successor, depicted more depth and nuance in gendered performances and cross-dressing on stage. Actors known as *onnagata* sought to capture the movements, appearance, and overall womanliness of their characters and went to great lengths to portray women, including continuing their effeminate behavior off-stage. The *onnagata* became increasingly fashionable and were popularized in the *ukiyo-e* prints of the day that focused on Kabuki actors.

In many ways this marked the first important instance of theatrical gender politics seeping into the art world. The cross-dressed *onnagata* depicted in *ukiyo-e* would later be mirrored by the equally effeminate characters popularized in modern *manga*, which blossomed out of the Showa Period (1926-1989) alongside Takarazuka Theater. Just as the style and fashion of the Kabuki theater played an important role in *ukiyo-e*, so too would Takarazuka’s unique aesthetic sensibilities influence *manga* and art movements that drew inspiration from the pages of comic books. Beginning in the 1990s Japanese celebrities began to adopt more androgynous appearances inspired by the look of Takarazuka actresses, which were also reflected in fashion trends.

The rise of comic book culture following World War II was heavily influenced by the *shunga* prints of the past as well as visual cues from Takarazuka Theater. Comic
books are much more widely read in Japan than in America (*Time Magazine* has a circulation of approximately four million in the United States, while *Shonen Jump*, the most popular weekly *manga* magazine in Japan, has an average circulation of three million with a high of six million in the 1990s), with stories that appeal to much larger audiences, including everything from romance, action, and science fiction comics, to series that deal with golf, economics, cooking, and politics.\(^1\) In the 1980s, *ecchi manga* and *anime* (erotic comics and animation) began to develop as children who grew up reading *manga* were becoming adults. Pornographic series were introduced to hold their interest as well as allowing the easier circumvention of Japanese laws regarding pornography. *Ecchi manga* and *anime* are quite explicit in terms of sexuality and quite similar to *shunga* erotica prints of the nineteenth century. Contemporary *manga* culture and its spin offs (such as *cosplay*, the act of dressing or cross-dressing as a popular fictional character) have contributed significantly to the development of contemporary Japanese art. While issues revolving around the theater have often been examined in their relation to cross-dressing, no comparative research has been devoted to the influences that filtered from theater into art. Beginning with the actor prints made popular by *ukiyo-e* printmakers, and eventually evolving into artwork that plays with gender, such as Yasumasa Morimura’s “Actor Series,” or the androgynous or sexually charged work of the Superflat artists, it is obvious that Japanese artists have long toyed with gender and sexuality.

In using gender related-themes visual artists have created a unique and distinctive style all their own. Cross-dressing on the stage, especially in the modern theatrical movement of Takarazuka, has also played an important role in developing the idealized
androgynous concept that is embraced by Japanese women who see these actresses as bold and daring, while the feminized men who are influenced by the look of the theater are viewed as caring, gentle, and more approachable.

It is from these influences that modern artists such as Yasumasa Morimura and a group collectively known as “Superflat” artists have emerged. Morimura is a male artist who almost exclusively photographs himself in iconic female roles. Some are fictional (such as Manet’s *Olympia* or one of Cindy Sherman’s many guises) while others are not (Marilyn Monroe, Madonna, Audrey Hepburn, and Brigitte Bardot). In the *History of Japanese Art* Penelope Mason remarks that Morimura’s work “draws parallels between… the characters found in Japanese cartoons about futuristic worlds dominated by freakish monsters and their equally freakish superheroes.” Morimura explores gender identity by elevating cosplay to an art form.

The Superflat artists (Takashi Murakami, Henmaru Machino, Yoshitomo Nara, Mr., etc.) are influenced by the style and content of manga and anime and can be read as commentaries on the over-sexualization of anime and the increasing Westernization of Japan. Their portrayals of gender identity are highly influenced by what is seen in typical manga and anime and are often the antithesis of the reality of Japan. Their figures are exaggerated with large breasts and multi-colored hair which contrasts with the very homogeneous culture of Japan.

Each of these three areas (Takarazuka Theater, manga/anime, and Superflat) is also associated with response to Western influences and the search for identity in postwar Japan. Takarazuka Theater stages performances that are often set in Europe, with characters frequently donning blonde wigs and wearing make-up to imitate Western
features. Early pioneers of manga were inspired by comic books, such as Betty Boop, that were introduced to Japan through American GIs following the Second World War. Following the war, some of the most successful Takarazuka plays were adaptations of manga, which helped blend the manga aesthetic with theater. Manga, too, makes use of the large eyes traditionally associated with occidental nations, and Takarazuka imported this concept as well. Ryoko Ikeda’s The Rose of Versailles, Osamu Tezuka’s BlackJack, and Noriko Kasuya’s Where the Wind Blows were all popular manga adapted for Takarazuka that featured characters of Western appearance.

While Superflat grew visually out of the manga aesthetic, the impetus was to create something uniquely Japanese. In a country that has become all too comfortable in eschewing its own historical tenets in favor of the next new thing, Superflat sought to address the essential shallowness or “flatness” which characterized postwar Japanese culture. This flatness evolved from the impotence felt by Japan following its defeat in World War II. With its constitutional prohibition against forming a military, the country soon found itself as America’s surrogate child, dependant upon its “parent” for cultural and economic direction, for better or worse. The Superflat artists address this complex love/hate relationship with the West by striving to create art that is uniquely Japanese, while at the same time commenting on the superficiality of contemporary Japanese culture. The Superflat art movement is analogous to a teenager searching for independence without the means to achieve it.
Methodology and Historiography

My approach to my study is threefold: (1) I analyze the gender politics of Takarazuka Theater, as well as the aesthetic and the performative aspects of the tradition that I see as migrating off the stage into the lives of its actresses (particularly those who portray male roles) and into the broader popular culture of Japan; (2) I examine the manner in which these elements appear in manga, particularly aspects of cross-dressing and transexualism, which are prominent themes in contemporary manga; (3) I analyze a selection of Superflat artists to reveal how these concepts are reflected in their work.

Much of the subject matter my thesis explores has received little attention and been deemed unworthy of serious academic study because of its connection to popular culture in Japan. However, Jennifer Robertson’s writings on the Takarazuka Theater are an invaluable source of background information and history of the theater itself. Robertson frames her study of the theater against the background of gender politics in modern Japanese society, as well as the latent homosexual undercurrent in Takarazuka that has long been taboo in Japanese publications on the theater because of the tight control of the Takarazuka Theater administrators over much of what has been written about it. She also documents her efforts to delve into unexplored areas of Takarazuka Theater and to discuss elements of homosexuality that the theater’s administration is quick to dismiss in order to maintain a wholesome, family-friendly image. She has interviewed many fans offering a unique perspective not found in other sources that focus on the performances.

Robertson, whose background is in anthropology, does not discuss the artistic implications of Takarazuka Theater and its influence on contemporary art. I will analyze
the aesthetic choices made by Takarazuka and its broader cultural implications focusing on the public’s increased tolerance for cross-dressing due to the theater’s influence and its connections with manga and Superflat art. The theater has been influenced by shōjo manga (girls comics), both in terms of the artistic design of the characters shaping the look of modern Takarazuka, as well as the types of stories that are told being increasingly adapted from girls comics. Increasingly manga is becoming a major contributor to all aspects of Japanese culture and this has in turn contributed to the development of the Superflat artistic movement.

The most prolific writer on the Superflat movement thus far has been its creator and spearhead, Takashi Murakami. He has published two books, Little Boy and Superflat that deal with the cultural context out of which the Superflat movement emerged, the role that manga and anime played in its creation, and his fellow Superflat artists. Murakami’s detailed writings on manga and anime are invaluable in providing a framework for the obscure references made in many of the Superflat pieces to animation and comics dating from the 1960s and 1970s that are little known outside Japan. Murakami not only writes about Superflat in the context of its evolution from manga and anime, but also discusses its relationship to Japanese video games and fashion, and its connection with ukiyo-e forefathers Matabei Iwasa and Kuniyoshi Utagawa, among others.

While Murakami takes a “social history” approach to the development of Superflat, he does not focus his analysis on the significance of gender issues. Much Superflat art centers on images of young women, some of it almost pedophiliac in its content; the female artists of the movement create equally provocative images of young women. Surprisingly, however, there has been little discussion of the subject matter
outside of its anime/manga based influences. Analyzing these artworks in relation to gender issues and performativity will reveal new insights into their creation and function.

In terms of gender studies and identity politics, Judith Butler’s work, especially Gender Trouble, and Laurence Senelick’s Changing Room: Sex, Drag, and Theater, are essential sources. Butler has developed the concept of gender performativity, which is especially centered on cross-dressing and drag performance, as a way of escaping the limiting male/female gender definitions and concepts of identity. Senelick provides overview of the history of cross-dressing in theater throughout the world, including a brief discussion of Takarazuka Theater.4

Takashi Murakami’s social history approach to the development of Superflat helped inform my approach to tying the various themes of my research together. Tracing the historical links of Noh and Kabuki and the influence of Kabuki on ukiyo-e which in turn fostered the development of manga, helped establish an artistic lineage and allowed me to incorporate important developments such as the creation of lolicon (Lolita Complex) artwork, the replacement of shunga style ukiyo-e with ecchi manga, and the development of Takarazuka Theater as a counter to Kabuki and Noh Theater.

An iconographic approach is also helpful, due to the highly character-based nature of the Superflat movement, which is predominantly figurative and inspired by the character-driven work of anime and manga. For instance, Murakami’s Second Mission Project Ko² (1999) (Figure 23), which is discussed in the final chapter, can be analyzed from a social history approach as a reference to the 1986 anime film, Project A-ko (itself a reference to the 1983 Jackie Chan film Project A), while the figure of the woman transforming into a futuristic jet and the specific steps of her transformation depicted are
an iconographic alliteration to the 1982 *anime* television series *Super Dimensional Fortress Macross*. Combining social history, iconography and gender studies, this thesis seeks to illuminate the unexplored connections between the gender politics of Takarazuka Theater, and developments in *manga*, which were adopted by the Superflat art movement. It also sheds new light on the cultural impact of theatrical cross-dressing on Japanese society, with its tolerance of gender ambiguity, and its influence on artistic developments stretching from *ukiyo-e* to Superflat art in the twenty-first century.

By exploring these relatively new areas of Japanese art history, this study provides new insights into the centrality of gender issues in contemporary Japanese art and the role of popular culture in these developments. Because Takarazuka, *ukiyo-e* (which began simply as book illustrations) *manga*, and *anime* were not considered “high” art, there is little existing literature that approaches these subjects in a serious manner, and no writing that deals with them critically and collectively as artistic and cultural phenomena or examines their connections (whether it is gender issues, or their relations to one another). The second chapter examines the origins of Takarazuka Theater, with its unique approach to gender, and its symbiotic relationship with the artistic developments of *manga*. The third and fourth chapters explore *manga* as the connection between the earlier Japanese prints, *ukiyo-e* and *shunga*, and the Superflat art movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Superflat, with its use of *manga*-inspired gender issues, is analyzed as a significant development in contemporary Japanese art. In particular, I will address the connections linking these artistic forms, their common origins as commercial endeavors and their transformation of Western cultural influences
and hybridization to highlight the continuing significance of gender issues and gender ambiguity on Japanese art.
CHAPTER 2
TAKARAZUKA THEATER AND GENDER

Gender roles in Japanese theater have been complex for many centuries and continue to be so to this day, due to adherence to the practice of gender segregation. Women were excluded from Noh and Kabuki Theater, and men are excluded from the Takarazuka Revue, an exclusively female institution. Each of these widely accepted forms of popular entertainment incorporates cross-dressing. Theatrical cross-dressers, and the actors who played against their gender roles, became celebrity subjects—first in ukiyo-e prints in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and later in glossy magazines, the contemporary progeny of ukiyo-e. The aesthetics of Noh and Kabuki and their interpretation by ukiyo-e artists, such as Katsukawa Shunsho, Toshusai Sharaku, and Torii Kiyonobu along with the aesthetics of Takarazuka, heavily influenced the art of manga and Superflat artists, whose work will be discussed in later chapters.

Early Traditions, Noh and Kabuki Theater

The conflagration of gender roles has been a significant feature in Japanese theater since the inception of Noh Theater in the late fourteenth century. While the practice of men playing women’s roles was also common in the West, notably in the Elizabethan theater, only in the East did such performers play women exclusively. The reversal of gender roles was a common element throughout much of Japan’s literary and
theatrical history. Twelfth century court dancers known as the Shirabyoushi (White Rhythm) were comprised of women, who wore men’s armor during their performances. Numerous popular stories also incorporated gender-role reversal as a significant plot element, for example Ariake no wakare (Parting at Dawn) (twelfth century), and Tosa nikki (The Tosa Diary) (936 AD), and Torikaebaya Monogatari (The Tale of Torikaebaya also known as The Changelings) (794-1195 AD), which deals with a courtly daughter and son who trade places and live their lives as the opposite gender. As these themes became commonplace in the early literary tradition, they found their way into the popular theatrical movement of the day, Noh Theater. The Noh play Sotoba komachi is an interesting example of the complex gender representations that took place on the stage. In the play, Ono on Komachi is a renowned beauty and poet who had many lovers. Komachi sets difficult tasks for her suitors, and one dies in the process of trying to prove his love. This suitor, Shii no Shosho of the Deep Grass, returns as a spirit and possesses Ono no Komachi, which creates the complex role in which a male actor must play a woman who is possessed by the spirit of a man.

Though Noh began to lose favor to the frenetic Kabuki Theater in the 1600s, the tradition of cross-dressing on the stage continued to be an important part of Japanese theater. The actors that played female roles became known as onnagata, and many went to incredible lengths to get into character, some going so far as to live permanently as women. One author recounts, “in order to preserve the illusion of femininity even in their daily lives (onnagata would) claim any illness to be due to “female trouble” (chi no michi), walking about in the Tokugawa equivalent of high-heeled shoes (takai bokuri), and gingerly clinging to male attendants.” In his book on cross-dressing in the theater
Laurence Senelick describes a scandal tied to Kabuki Theater that captured Japanese interest at the beginning of the twentieth century:

Many ambitious young men became kabuki patrons to learn the art of behaving exactly like well-bred young women. This fad was frowned on by military circles and cultural conservatives, but was not subject to official bans until the Tsuneko case of 1938. It was customary for wealthy widows and prosperous geisha to send gifts of flavored seaweed or raw fish to onnagata and to invite them to supper after the show. When the geisha Tsuneko discovered her favorite Zaemon with another lady, she struck her rival with a heavy parasol… The Japanese press became obsessed with the affair, until officialdom decided that the space (in the newspapers) should be devoted to reportage on the invasion of China, and forbade backstage contact of onnagata with the public.⁶

The concept of “acting as a woman” received a concentrated rethinking in the late 1940s when the actor Senjaku Nakamura applied Freudian and Marxist interpretations he learned from his teacher towards the onnagata concept. Rather than relying on stylized movements and gestures that were defined as suggesting femininity, he took a more natural approach as if to say there was no classifiable set of female behaviors and movements.⁷ The blurring of gender lines in Japanese theater became a much more significant element than in Western countries, where males and females performed together on stage. To the Japanese, embodying the essence of “the other” still holds an important and powerful place in the acting community, which has gone on to influence the culture at large.

In her 1990 book Gender Problems theorist Judith Butler suggests that the Western feminist movement has created a problem by essentially denying the capacity for “the other” that exists in Japanese theater (and has begun to spread into Japanese society). She states that by dividing issues into dealing with either “men” or “women,” feminism limits the choices allowed to women, and rather than empowering them and allowing
them to define their own identities forces them into one of two narrow categories. Butler states, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; ... identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.” What this means is that gender is not about sex, rather it is a choice made by the way someone speaks, the way one carries oneself, or the way one reacts in certain situations. Gender then, is a choice and is essentially performative.

This performative understanding of gender, and the concept of subverting traditional gender roles, not only onstage but off, becomes tacitly permitted by Japanese society as long as it is done within the context of Takarazuka Theater. The actresses can continue their macho “performances” offstage without raising the ire of mainstream society.

The Beginnings of Takarazuka

An interesting way of approaching this issue is to look within the microcosm of Japanese society, where gender identity and social expectations are much more concrete than in the West. From birth, men are expected to be admitted to the best schools, work hard, and be financially successful so that they can remain the sole breadwinner of the family. Women, on the other hand, are expected to attend school, work briefly— usually in a secretarial position— until they marry and have children, at which time they focus on raising their children and running the household. Consequently, there are intense expectations placed on the Japanese to fill their particular gender role. While the Japanese government is aware of the problems of gender discrimination, anti-discrimination laws are structured to favor full-time employees, with very little protection for part-time
workers. This is particularly troubling for women, who make up a large majority of the part-time labor force. In a February 2001 survey, out of 20,760,000 Japanese working women who were surveyed, 42.9% of women were classified as part-time compared to 8.9% of men. In the early part of the twentieth century there were reports of women cross-dressing in order to work as “rickshaw drivers, construction supervisors and laborers, fishers, department store managers, [and] grocers.”

Women who find these gender-based expectations stifling have few alternatives, but one interesting exception is participation in or patronage of the Takarazuka Theater.

Takarazuka Theater is essentially the gender-opposite of Japan’s more traditional theatrical forms such as Kabuki and Noh, which do not allow female actors: Takarazuka is comprised exclusively of women. It was established in 1913 by Ichizo Kobayashi (1873-1957), the president of the Hankyu Railway line that runs through Osaka to the city of Takarazuka. Kobayashi felt the need for some sort of tourist attraction in Takarazuka city to increase ticket sales on his railway. He thus created the Takarazuka Revue, an all-female theater company producing contemporary plays and musicals. The novelty of the new theatrical form made it an instant hit, and soon the town’s name became synonymous with the theater troupe, and the new genre became known simply as Takarazuka. The initial productions were based on folktales and children’s stories, and the costuming borrowed elements of Kabuki Theater, primarily the use of white face paint. The innocent stories reflected the conservative restrictions placed upon the actresses in the troupe. Kobayashi insisted that the actresses remain chaste and unmarried. They were not allowed to date, or be seen in the company of men. These rules still hold true today. The Revue was one of the first places a Japanese audience could see an
actress perform on a public stage since the Tokugawa Shogunate barred their participation from Kabuki in 1629. If the Revue’s early productions lacked any real depth, it was of little consequence, as the main attraction was seeing women on the stage.

This was how Takarazuka began; it was simply an oddity constructed to bring in tourist dollars to a small town at the end of a railway line. However, while the beginnings of Takarazuka were merely commercial, it has come to represent much more to modern fans and actresses—an escape from the restrictions placed on women by Japanese culture. Many of the actresses who desire to become *otokoyaku* (players of male roles) wish to escape the traditional limitations society has imposed upon them, and by “becoming men,” even in this limited manner, they are able to transcend the rigid restrictions of Japanese society (Figure 1). It is the desire to surpass the gender confines imposed by the cultural status quo that has contributed to the success of Takarazuka. For actresses, it represents a socially acceptable way of breaking with norms, allowing women to inhabit an intermediate identity that is a hybrid of male and female by cloaking their desired behavior as a theatrical performance. For Takarazuka’s female fans, it offers them the ability to live vicariously through their favorite actresses. Some younger fans wish to free themselves from gender-based societal expectation; others (usually older, married women) see the *otokoyaku* as a kind of ideal man, one who understands a woman’s feelings. At times, these older fans seem to redirect the feelings they would normally reserve for a husband onto Takarazuka actresses, creating an idealized surrogate that is more emotionally available to them than their often absentee husbands who spend significant time at work and away from wife and family. As Laurence Senelick, summarizing Lorie Brau’s position, notes, “the *otokoyaku* as man purified of any
undesirable masculinity, is an attractive simulation with no substantial existence, a pretext for reverie and mythopoeia.”

Author Ian Buruma describes the Japanese as being capable of “irritating infantilism” and describes postwar Japanese culture as "the ubiquitous chirping voices of women pretending to be girls; the Disneylandish architecture of Japanese main streets.” Many Westerners share Buruma’s perspective that the Japanese at times seem to suffer from a case of “Peter Pan Syndrome,” an unwillingness to grow up and leave behind childhood fantasies. It is not uncommon to see a businessman riding the subway lost in some pulp adventure, and the Takarazuka Theater provides a similar escape for women. Here they can interact with their heroes (who often actually resemble characters from popular manga of the day [Figure 2]) and intermingle with women who have escaped the traditional role ascribed to them by the public. Essentially these fans, who associate themselves with the otokoyaku (and desire to have the otokoyaku’s perceived power to escape the limitations imposed by Japanese society) find the role of being a traditional Japanese woman too stifling. Because Japan is a homogenous society, the smallest differences (i.e. gender) become significant in the roles Japanese society expects its citizens to play. Butler asks, “if one ‘is’ a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, … gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities.” What Butler proposes then, is that there are degrees of femininity and masculinity; the John Wayne and Donna Reed archetypes for masculinity and femininity no longer exist, if they ever did in the
first place. However, in Japan there is still a strong desire to remain true to these very clear gender roles.

**Subverting Gender: The Otokoyaku**

Perhaps this is what contributed to the appeal of Japan’s Takarazuka Theater—the ability to slip out of narrowly defined sexual categories and embrace something in between “male” and “female.” This is ultimately what Butler calls for, a subversion of certain gender specific traits, which will lead to a profusion of genders. Butler is not the only theorist who finds feminism to be too confining a movement. Penny Florence, author of *Sexed Universals in Art*, echoes Butler’s sentiments in her discussion of gender in relation to art:

> One source of my own conflicted relation with feminism over the years is that my position in relation to work by women is as contradictory as my relation to work by men. I do not identity or define myself in relation to the conventionally feminine or domestic, in life or in art, and I cannot identify this as my space. Nor do I reject it. It is just too limiting… The point is to come fully into one’s humanity.15

Trying to make a judgment based solely on one’s gender is unsatisfying and pointless. “Feminine” and “masculine” are not criteria for quality, and increasingly they are not proving to be satisfactory markers of sexual identity or gender.

Specifically, sexual identity and issues of gender are very closely tied to performativity, and the Takarazuka Revue is an excellent study in how these two issues are connected. Our gender is conveyed by more than just our reproductive organs; after all, we do not strip from the waist down every time we wish to see who is a boy and who is a girl. Instead, our gender is projected through our behavior, mannerisms, dress, and language. It is by examining the markers of masculinity and claiming them for
themselves that the women of Takarazuka Theater are able to “become” men and present characterizations that are not allowed in their everyday lives. The actresses’ portrayal of men runs the gamut from the passive, sensitive man to the errant knight, all of which are portrayed in a somewhat stereotypical, hyper-masculinized fashion. Japanese women are not expected to be active, forward, or daring, but by playing these roles both actresses and fans are allowed to be. Takarazuka performance— on and off stage— allows female players to transcend their gender, and to go even beyond that to surpass their national identities by putting on an alien Western persona— the braggart, the lothario, the impulsive foreigner who does not have to hide what he wants.

It can be problematic to apply feminist theory steeped in Western traditions, to non-Western cultures. Butler states, “feminist theorizing has come under criticism for its efforts to colonize and appropriate non-Western cultures to support a highly Western notion of oppression, but because they tend as well to construct a ‘Third World’ or even an ‘Orient’ in which gender oppression is subtly explained as symptomatic of an essential, non-Western barbarism.” 16 Western writers on Takarazuka invariably cite the theater as a method of liberation for women, but Japanese fans themselves are quick to downplay these notions, perhaps because they do not have the same outsiders’ perspective on their culture as foreigners do and do not see themselves as unequal, though this is an attitude that is quickly changing amongst younger Japanese. Taking note of this precaution, one has to be careful not to assume the women of Takarazuka turned to cross-dressing initially as some grand feminist statement against male oppression. While modern Takarazuka Theater certainly has an underlying sense of throwing off the male hierarchy, the movement did not start out with such high ideals.
The main draw of Takarazuka Theater is the *otokoyaku*, the players of men. They are the primary roles of Takarazuka Theater, and are the perennial favorites amongst fans. Once accepted into the Takarazuka Revue, the young actresses are allowed to choose whether they will play men or women. After taking into account personal preference for their “secondary gender role” (in other words, the gender they will play for the rest of their careers), other gender markers are looked for in the actresses. Characteristics desired in an *otokoyaku* are described by Robertson: “Men ideally should be taller than women; should have a longer, more rectangular face, a broader forehead, thicker eyebrows and lips, a higher bridged nose, darker skin, straighter shoulders, narrower hips, and a lower voice than women; and should exude charisma, which is disparaged in women.”¹⁷ These are some of the criteria by which an actress is assigned a male or a female role within Takarazuka.

Another part of the performance aspect is the “costume” of the *otokoyaku*. Short hair is one of the most typical masculine signifiers, and before the 1920s short hair on Japanese women indicated her withdrawal from “secular and sexual affairs.”¹⁸ In response to American and European trends beginning in the 1920s, however, short hair began to symbolize the nonconformist, sexually active woman. Takarazuka embraced this as a masculine signifier, but it was seen by the public as promoting this new proto-feminist lifestyle.

The costuming of Takarazuka Theater and its connection with the fashions of Revolution-era France comes directly from *manga*. The theater’s most popular play, *The Rose of Versailles*, follows the adventures of Oscar, a young woman raised as a man who joins the French military at the urging of her father, a general. *The Rose of Versailles*
manga, created by Riyoko Ikeda in 1972, was inspired by an earlier work, Osamu Tezuka’s 1954 manga Princess Knight (Ribon no kishi). Interestingly, Tezuka himself was born in the town of Takarazuka and was influenced by the theater to create his cross-dressing heroine. This symbiotic relationship between manga and the Takarazuka Theater continues to this day, and can be seen in both genres which feature extremely Westernized characters both in terms of physical appearance and costuming. Heavy make-up around the eyes is often used to create the look of larger, more European eyes, consequently mirroring the large eyes that have become the hallmark of Japanese comics and animation.

Many otokoyaku also dye their hair to create a more Western appearance, in addition to wearing wigs. Traditionally, the wigs worn by the otokoyaku were of standard Western hair colors (blond, brunette, red), but the increasing influence of manga aesthetics have seen the introduction of brighter, less naturalistic hues of yellow, red and even solid white wigs.

Otokoyaku are encouraged to emulate certain kata (behavior, actions, and acting styles) of famous male actors, not only Japanese actors, but foreign ones as well, such as James Dean, Elvis Presley, and Jack Nicholson. It may seem unusual to those unfamiliar with the tradition that the actor known as the “Japanese James Dean” is Daichi Mao, a Takarazuka actress. The idea that this hyper-sexual, rebellious, machismo-driven, white, American actor could be embodied by a Japanese woman may be shocking to some, but reclaiming these quintessentially “male” gender markers fits perfectly with Judith Butler’s desire to expand simple male/female categorizations. By performing this James Dean persona, Mao defies the typically demure female gender expected of her by society.
Additionally, she is able to incorporate these qualities into her personal life because of the intermingling of the *otokoyaku*'s performance with her everyday affairs through this “James Dean” persona. An *otokoyaku* cannot completely abandon masculine gender markers offstage, because fans do not wish to see a feminine *otokoyaku*. To avoid shattering their conception of their re-gendered hero/heroine, she is expected to be “butch” off-stage as well as on. In this way the act of performance onstage enables an actress more freedom offstage where she continues to wear masculine clothing, adopt masculine behaviors and retain the freedom of Japanese men, including—because of the Revue’s regulations—remaining unmarried or otherwise unattached. As one Takarasienne recounts, “When I see a man, somehow that leaves an impression— I walk with a wide stride, sit like a man, even my thinking is like a man. But we aren’t men. We are women being men. We have a sexiness that men don’t have.”

Continuing their performance offstage effectively allows actresses to mix the performative nature of theater with their real lives and bridge the gap between stage persona and everyday life. One actress, Yuri Haruna, insisted on wearing her mustache fulltime when playing the role of Rhett Butler in the Revue’s version of *Gone With the Wind*, saying she wanted it to feel like a natural experience (Figure 3). Other actresses practice *tsubusu* or “crushing” their voice through chain smoking in order to give it a lower, more masculine register. Some also adopt masculine speech, referring to themselves as *boku*, the masculine way of saying “I” in Japanese, rather than *atashi*, the feminine pronoun. This blending of male and female traits also works in reverse, with male performers adopting female personas. For example, many musicians such as Izam from the musical group Shazna and Mana of Malice Mizer, as well as the photographer
Yasumasa Morimura, adopt female identities in their respective fields (Figure 4). The performative as a venue for the blurring or crossing of gender presentation made popular by Takarazuka clearly appealed to an element in the modern Japanese psyche and influenced these later examples of performative gender-blurring in other artistic media.

As mentioned above, the role of the *otokoyaku* is the most coveted in Takarazuka Theater, and upon entrance into the Revue actresses initially have some say in whether or not they will become *otokoyaku* or *musumeyaku* (players of women’s roles). But what becomes of the young actresses who wish to play men, but are instead cast as women? One actress, Mai Minakaze, encountered just this problem. Minakaze enrolled in the Revue expressly to play men, but when it was time for her debut, the administration decided she would be better suited to playing women due to her small stature. “In order to resolve the conflict between her offstage desires and her onstage role… she ‘stopped wearing blue jeans’ and ‘always exerted [herself] to the fullest to be a *musumeyaku*, even in [her] private life.”21 Interestingly, this meshes very well with what Joan Riviere said in her 1929 essay “Womanliness as a Masquerade,”

Ferenczi pointed out… that homosexual men exaggerate their heterosexuality as a ‘defense’ against their homosexuality. I shall attempt to show that women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men.22

According to Bulter, Riviere is surmising that the woman “in masquerade wishes for masculinity in order to engage in public discourse with men and as a man as a part of a male homoerotic exchange.”23 This rationale fits surprisingly well with the reasoning many Takarasiennes give for their initial interest in joining the Revue. One stated that she joined the Revue because, “despite the fact that [she] was female, [she] could assume a masculine persona.”24 When some *otokoyaku* were asked what they would have done if
they had not joined the Revue, their answers were telling— some said they would have been an airplane pilot, train engineer, or lumber yard manager. Even in contemporary Japan, few women are employed in such occupations. These are not vocations that are typically available to Japanese women, who, despite their often high level of education, tend to work in offices or in the home.

The Women of Takarazuka: The Musumeyaku

In an unfortunate instance of art imitating life, some musumeyaku find themselves marginalized in comparison with their otokoyaku counterparts. Musumeyaku increasingly find themselves as “just a foil for masculine privilege” in regards to their on-stage relationship to the more popular otokoyaku.\textsuperscript{25} To combat this, many musumeyaku (which literally means “daughter’s role players”) have begun to refer to themselves as “onnayaku” (“women’s role players”) in order to give themselves parity with the otokoyaku (literally “men’s role players”). In the 1980s, to further elevate the importance of the musumeyaku, the theater administrators began creating more complex female roles (such as Scarlett O’Hara in Gone With the Wind and Jacqueline Carstone in Me and My Girl). However, producers ultimately came to believe that these complicated women could only be portrayed by otokoyaku actresses. “The otokoyaku have an erotic appearance (iroke) that is missing in musumeyaku. The rationale for having an otokoyaku play Scarlett O’Hara is to revive her original femininity while at the same time retaining the sensuality of her ‘male’ gender, thereby doubling her charm (niju no miryoku).”\textsuperscript{26} As one actress said, “Japanese society is a male’s world, and Takarazuka is an otokoyaku’s world.”\textsuperscript{27} To the Japanese, foreign women like O’Hara are seen as headstrong,
demanding and in-control, characteristics no *musumeyaku* is thought to have, hence the decision to cast *otokoyaku* in these roles rather than develop a multi-faceted female characters that could be played by a *musumeyaku*.

*Musumeyaku*, though, have inspired an interesting counter-movement outside of Takarazuka. Just as many women are attracted to the thought of “playing men,” there are men that have embraced the uber-feminine *musumeyaku*. While women are frequently relegated to a subordinate status in the workplace, men are denied many of the leisurely activities that women are able to enjoy. As a result, some male musicians adopt female characteristics and garb in order to gain access to areas typically off limits to them, such as the “cute culture” with which much of Japanese popular culture is obsessed, in fashion, make-up, dolls, and other trinkets. These musicians are often labeled as “visual kei” artists, and share the same appeal amongst females as *otokoyaku* do, effectively bridging the gap between genders and becoming sexually neutral figures seen as being more relatable to women and young girls than normal men.

**After the Theater**

Invariably, difficulties tend to arise at the end of a Takarasienne’s career when she is expected to return to a more traditional female gender role. The Revue is seen as a school, and the actresses as its students, therefore most Takarasiennes retire in their thirties. Some of the popular actresses are able to parlay their Takarazuka career into a mainstream acting career, but most simply marry and fade away into the anonymity of everyday life. Regardless of which path they choose, they are denied access to the freedoms they experienced while in the performative roles they adopted, and must
assume a more mundane gender identity. This can be difficult not only for the actress, but for disillusioned fans as well. The following fan letter was written to the “Japanese James Dean,” Daichi Mao, after her retirement from Takarazuka and successful transition to mainstream stage acting.

To Daichi Mao-sama: You were an absolutely new flower. There has been no other star in Takarazuka history who has displayed your gorgeous androgynous elegance. Before you, there were many orthodox otokoyaku… you gave rise to a new type of player of men’s roles… Without question your charm was your very womanliness. Not the posturing come-on of a mannish female, but an affirmation of the womanliness of female bodies. You symbolized a new era when females could begin to love themselves as themselves.

And so why have you become an ordinary woman? There are millions of actresses. There’s no reason for you to become yet another actress who titillates actual males… Now all you do is take roles that have you pout at males and say things like, “Why don’t you like me?” That kind of role is totally unrealistic; it’s a pathetic joke. You’ve gone from being a jewel to being a mere pebble. I can never forgive your betrayal in playing women who exist for males.

Yours, Sumire Hoshi

This letter helps to illuminate what the otokoyaku represents to many of their fans: they are women who not only succeed in a male dominated world, but deny men, and male sexual fantasies at the same time. When Mao left the world of Takarazuka she also had to leave behind the ability to negotiate both the male and female world as an otokoyaku and settle into the typical subordinate role of a Japanese woman, both in her new stage career and quite possibly in her personal life as well. It is somewhat ironic though that once they are freed from the conservative Takarazuka Theater, Takarasienennes are able to do simple things many women take for granted such as dating, going to bars, and not having a curfew; in exchange, however, they must sacrifice the persona they have essentially lived since they entered the Revue as teens, a persona which granted them certain freedoms from traditional female roles.
The appeal of the *otokoyaku* is the ability to transcend gender and afford Japanese women access to opportunities they are usually denied. An unmarried Japanese woman is sometimes referred to derogatively, as a “Christmas cake,” a woman who is not married by the time she turns twenty-five is damaged goods, like trying to sell a Christmas cake on December 26th. Yet Takarasiennes are not allowed to marry while they are part of the Revue, and are freed from the public’s expectations that they should be married. Thus, the institution of Takarazuka makes it possible and acceptable to break with societal norms and rise above gender roles. The theater creates a tame and safe way for transgressing gender stereotypes, obliterating the connections between gender and sex and allowing women to transcend the limiting “masculine” and “feminine” classifications and become something entirely new and unclassifiable: an individual. It is this dynamic which has influenced contemporary Japanese artists, who wish to toy with gender identity by adopting elements of the opposite gender, recrafting it, and redrawing the lines of masculinity, femininity, and androgyny.

In doing so, Takarazuka has come to significantly influence the art of *manga* and *anime*, which in turn are extraordinarily important to the development of the Superflat movement. When viewed as part of this larger cultural phenomenon, Takarazuka’s influence proves to be much more far reaching than either gender politics or aesthetics: it can be said that it has helped to shape the identity of modern Japan and perhaps set a course for its future evolution.
Figure 1. *Two Takarasiennes*, on the left an *otokoyaku* (a player of male roles) and on the right a *musumeyaku* (a player of female roles). From "History and Introduction to the Takarazuka." *Takarazuka Revue!* <http://takarazuka.sugarandspicecosplay.com/>.
Figure 2. Riyoko Ikeda’s 1972 *manga* series *The Rose of Versailles*, which influenced the look of modern Takarazuka Theater and helped bring *manga* aesthetics into the real world. From Riyoko Ikeda, *The Rose of Versailles Volume 3* (Tokyo, Hakusensha: 1972).
Figure 3. Yuri Haruna playing the role of Rhett Butler in the Takarazuka version of *Gone with the Wind*. From *Gone With the Wind Photobook* (Osaka; Shogakukan, 2002), p. 34.
Figure 4. Two men very influenced by the look of Takarazuka Theater, Izam (left) and Mana (right) are some of Japan’s best known cross-dressers. From Shazna album artwork, *Gold Moon and Silver Star*, 1998 (left) and Cosplay.com (right).
CHAPTER 3

UKIYO-E, SHUNGA, AND MANGA

In the West, Japanese society is often painted as a submissive and mild-mannered culture, whose complex and sometimes rigid social hierarchy stifles the individual. This social hierarchy focuses on the needs of the many, to the detriment of personal happiness and independence. Yet, this hierarchy has helped to shape Japanese customs and law; it has even governed sexuality and the role of sexuality in artwork. While Japanese sexuality had its own cultural taboos and intrinsic characteristics, traditionally, it was not tied to “shame” in the way it frequently has been in predominantly Christian Western societies. Instead, in Japan, sexual taboos have resulted from the fact that the needs of individuals were deemed less important than the needs of society at large; thus, engaging in wanton, frivolous debauchery could be seen not only as a lack of morals but as a lack of propriety. Yet visual representations of sex and sexuality in Japanese art are typically unabashed and even “bacchanalian.” In part this may be because behavior that was considered irresponsible in real life was often depicted in art for humorous purposes; for instance, finding absurdity in the behavior of the figures shown engaged in such immature activities.
Ancient Erotica: *Shunga*

Around the year 1600, when the Tokugawa government came to power, Japan’s merchant classes were beginning to rise to social power as they began to accumulate wealth. The merchants served as consumers (artistic patrons in a roundabout way) to the new art form of *ukiyo-e*, images of the daily events and common people that filled the streets of Edo. This new art form was deemed too common and lowly for the upper classes, resulting in patronage from the nouveau riche merchant class, who desired the trappings of wealth, but in a decidedly different, less urbane manner than the ruling class. This unique system of patronage influenced the development of Japanese art, especially erotic artwork known as *shunga*. The treatment of sexuality and sexual content in *shunga* and *ukiyo-e* directly influenced the imagery of *manga* and *anime*; these sources, in turn, have fed into the contemporary Superflat movement. By examining the depiction of sexuality in early Japanese art, a greater understanding of attitudes towards sexuality and gender ambivalence in modern Japanese art can be gained.

Sexuality explicit art emerged during the Edo Period (1615-1868), when the merchant class was becoming increasingly wealthy and beginning to push the boundaries of taste, at least as the ruling class saw it. Merchants began to flaunt their wealth by wearing luxurious clothes or spending large sums in the fashionable Yoshiwara pleasure district during a time in which samurai, their hierarchical superiors, were finding themselves less secure financially. The resulting period of turmoil as the country’s leaders tried to repress the rising middle class nurtured some of Japan’s greatest artwork: *ukiyo-e*. 
*Ukiyo-e* (浮世絵), which literally means “pictures of the floating world,” refers to images of the carefree pleasure quarters of the increasingly metropolitan areas of Japan, specifically the city of Edo (now Tokyo). The title is also a pun on *Ukiyo*, written 憂き世, which by contrast means “sorrowful world,” a reference to the mortal plane from which Buddhists hoped to escape.\(^{29}\) *Ukiyo-e* evolved from single-block, black-and-white book illustrations into complex multi-colored prints that transcended their illustrative beginnings as mere accompanying illustrations to texts. Early *ukiyo-e* focused on the popular actors of the day and expanded to include such themes as landscapes, supernatural subjects, and historical battles. Depictions of sexuality were a recurring theme in *ukiyo-e*, from which sprang the genre of *shunga* (Figure 5).

The origin of *shunga* (erotic *ukiyo-e* prints) is intrinsically tied to the beginnings of *ukiyo-e* itself. The name literally means “spring pictures,” where “spring” functions as a euphemism for *sex*. *Shunga* prints have existed from the very beginning of *ukiyo-e* as one of its earliest genres. In the years prior to the advent of *ukiyo-e*, printmakers served as book illustrators. Writers such as Ihara Saikaku and Ejima Kiseki were popular romance novelists who used Hishikawa Moronobu and Nishikawa Sukenobu to illustrate their books.\(^{30}\) As these illustrations evolved they began to be published outside of the context of these novels, and thus *shunga* was born. According to Richard Lane the earliest *shunga* artist was a figure known as the Kambun Master, who was active between 1660 and 1673. The Kambun Master was Moronobu’s teacher and hence Moronobu is often credited as the creator of *shunga* prints.\(^{31}\)

The actual content of *shunga* prints was often graphic. Romantic depictions of courtly romance were not often portrayed; instead, they focused on the actual act of sex.
Shunga most commonly showed relationships between men and women, but scenes of men with other men, men with boys, or women with women were not uncommon. Same sex relationships were not unusual in the ranks of the samurai, and therefore appear much more frequently in Japanese erotica than in Western art.

Shunga prints were not without controversy in Japan, however, as the government regularly enacted a strict set of sumptuary edicts and censorship laws to oversee artistic output, including shunga.

Numerous sumptuary regulations were issued throughout the Edo period (1615-1868) to control the expression of ideas that were deemed a threat to public decorum, safety, or morality, or that were subversive to the ruling Tokugawa shogunate. The sumptuary edicts affected ukiyo-e production significantly, and were often aimed specifically at the publication industry. Arbitrary laws included restrictions on the use of mica, the inclusion of names of non-courtesan women in prints, and eventually the outlawing of actor prints, because their popularity quickly made actors more successful than many more “respectable” members of the upper class.

The most notorious of the sumptuary edicts were the Kansei Reforms. The Kansei Reforms take their name from the era in which they were enacted (1789 through 1801), and were initially created to reform corrupt government officials and halt the recent rioting that had resulted from low rice harvests. Eventually, the reforms became focused on the publishing industry.

In the fifth month of that year (1790) no new books were to be published except by special permission. Current events were not to be depicted in prints, and gorgeous and extravagant works were to be avoided. No unorthodox theories were to be published, while the publication of erotica was to be gradually halted.
The legendary publisher, Tsutaya Juzaburo, was the first publisher prosecuted under the new edicts. Tsutaya’s series of illustrated erotic novels with such titles as *The Daytime World of the Brothel: The Other Side of the Brocade* and *Padding of Coquetry: The Courtesan's Silken Sleeve* were in direct violation of the Kansei Reforms and came to the attention of the *daimyo*. His punishment was particularly harsh: Kyoden, the artist and writer of the books, was handcuffed for fifty days; Tsutaya was fined half of his entire net worth; and the censor who let the books slip by was exiled from Edo altogether. Yet, although *shunga* was increasingly marginalized, it was able to survive despite many of the most repressive edicts.

**The Transformation of Shunga into Manga**

While it is easy to follow the artistic lineage of *ukiyo-e* and *shunga* from their seventeenth-century beginnings to the *shin-hanga* (new prints) of the 1930s and ‘40s, what of its influence after that time, particularly in the post-World War II era? This is an avenue rarely explored, but worth investigating. Just as *ukiyo-e/shunga* drew its early thematic concepts from book illustrations, a new group of illustrators turned to *ukiyo-e* for inspiration. These were *manga* (comic book) artists many of whom were born in the years prior to the war, but who only began to flourish in the 1950s and 1960s. Eventually, *manga* replaced *shunga* as the means by which erotic imagery was disseminated to the general populace, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. The earliest *manga* writer/artist of note, first publishing in 1945, was Dr. Osamu Tezuka, who is often called the “God of Manga.” Born in the town of Takarazuka in 1928, Tezuka, a licensed medical doctor, single-handedly revolutionized the concept of what Japanese comics and animation could
become. Just as Moronobu is the figure associated with the birth of ukiyo-e, Tezuka is associated with the emergence of manga.34 His artistic style was cartoonish, yet created the visual vocabulary that all subsequent manga is based upon: large eyes inspired by the American Betty Boop cartoons that he loved and cinematic panel layouts that drew more from film than comics. One of the difficulties of publishing manga during this time was the incredible time constraints placed on artists. An artist often had to publish a twenty page black and white story every week, and because of this, Tezuka’s style was not only favored for its look, but for its simplicity when working under deadlines. Tezuka’s stories initially were simple slapstick and rudimentary adventure tales, but as the physician-turned-artist became more confident in his craft, he created stories such as Adolf (1983), which deals with the rising influence of Nazism upon three men named Adolf, one of whom is Adolf Hitler, as well as Buddha (1974), a fourteen volume series that illustrates the life of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. Due to the variety and scope of his work, Tezuka’s style is considered to some degree the blueprint that all manga artists and writers have followed.

By the 1970s a new manga genre, gekiga (dramatic pictures) was coming into vogue (Figure 6). The gekiga manga movement was primarily centered in Osaka, and rather than taking the format of a weekly magazine publication incorporating the work of various artists, gekiga would allow a single artist to work without such time constraints and publish a complete volume dedicated solely to his work. This allowed artists to devote considerably more time to their artwork, which resulted in more lifelike drawings and mature storytelling. The gekiga genre began to push manga in new directions, away
from simply being illustrated children’s stories to tackling adult themes, not only dealing with sexuality, but with concepts such as violence, loneliness, and isolation.

Ironically, just as the economic and social elements of the Edo period under the Tokugawa government fostered the birth of *ukiyo-e*, Japan’s unparalleled economic growth in the 1970s and ‘80s contributed to an explosion in *manga*. The late 1970s through the 1980s are often called the “Golden Age of *Manga,*” and it is hard to ignore the similarities between this “feel-good” period in Japan’s recent history and the decadent Edo period. In the 1980s the Japanese economy reached a highpoint, with a gross domestic product that was growing faster than that of any other industrialized country, prompting many to think Japan was taking over the world, or at the very least buying it. Japanese children and teenagers had more disposable income, and no longer had to ask their parents to purchase *manga* for them. Consequently, *manga* artists no longer had to make their content “parent approved” in order to sell their work. The influence of the gritty realism of *gekiga manga* spread to mainstream *manga* and soon mature *manga* found a widespread audience among teenagers and adults raised on post-war *manga*. It was no longer uncommon to see mature *manga* that contained scenes reminiscent of the ancient *shunga* prints of the past filling the magazine racks of local convenience stores: explicit images of sexual intercourse and sexuality. Adult *manga* and eventually *anime* became a massive success, with publishers and studios specializing in creating nothing but sexually-themed comics and animation. The genre, relabeled *ecchi* (meaning lewd or perverse), was now an unabashed hit.
A New Kind of Erotica

It should come as no surprise that some *ecchi manga* (literally “perverse comics”) looked to historical sources. The original erotic novels of the Edo period were called *koshokumono*, the first of which was Ihara Saikaku’s 1682 novel, *Koshoku ichi-dai otoko* (*The Life of the Libertine*). The novel,

recounts the thousand erotic adventures of the libertine Yonosuke, and is inspired, ironically, by *Genji monogatari*, the famous sentimental novel of the Heian age written by Murasaki… Yonosuke’s adventurous exploits unwind with people from all aspects of society—from virgins of the temples to girls of the baths; from actors of the *kabuki* theaters to courtesans of highest standing.\(^{36}\)

*The Life of the Libertine* was illustrated by Moronobu in 1682, and its oddly perverse humor made it a wild success in Japan. The character Yonosuke (whose name can be translated as “Man of the World”) is followed from his first sexual experience at the age of seven until he travels to Nyogogashima (The Island of Women) when he is sixty.\(^{37}\)

This novel was also considered the first *ukiyo-e zoshi*, a term that might translate as “pulp fiction;” it made no attempts to teach a moral lesson as did many of the Confucian-themed novels of the day. Despite their antiquity, texts such as these remain highly influential on contemporary erotic *manga*. For example Tatsuya Egawa’s *Golden Boy* (1992) follows Kintaro Oe, a student who decides to leave Tokyo University prior to receiving his law degree in order to travel the country on bicycle and educate himself through firsthand experiences, which inevitably wind up being of a sexual nature. The *manga* casts Kintaro as a Yonosuke-like figure whose good natured curiosity finds him humorously bedding women across the country.
A Taste for the Unusual

One of the most significant examples of shunga influence on contemporary Japanese erotica is Katsushika Hokusai’s print *The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife* (1814; Figure 7). This print is from the third volume of Hokusai’s foray into shunga, known as *Kinoe no Komatsu (Languishing for Love).* The image shows a woman sexually intertwined with two octopi. It is believed that the print reflects the influence of a reemergence of animism and its relation to Shinto (which believes kami or spirits are in living and non-living things). This print single-handedly inspired a notorious genre of Japanese erotica commonly called “tentacle pornography” (Figure 8). The anonymous image (c 2000) is typical of the genre, which shows helpless young women being molested by dozens of serpentine tentacles. More often than not, the creature is not shown in full, since the focus is centered on the victim. The genre, which started to appear in the 1980s, is quite popular throughout Japan, and is commonly seen in *doujinshi,* manga drawn by amateurs and distributed not through bookstores, but through the college campus manga clubs and the internet. Many unfamiliar with the breadth and depth of manga and anime often cite tentacle pornography as representative of Japan’s entire art industry, although this could not be further from the truth as this genre represents only a tiny fraction of the total output of manga.

A commonly cited rationale for the resurgence of Hokusai’s graphic vision in contemporary tentacle pornography is Japan’s current decency laws. The existing laws are the modern day equivalents of the Edo Period’s sumptuary edicts, and are often just as incomprehensible as to what is officially considered inappropriate. While pornography is openly sold in convenience stores and many second-hand book stores, scenes of actual
genitalia and pubic hair are prohibited. Therefore, creative artists have taken to using tentacled aliens, octopi, or snakes in the place of penises, which results in a considerably more disturbing scene. The tentacle-sex concept was first introduced in the 1986 *manga* series *Urotsukidoji* by Toshio Maeda, a *manga* artist and *anime* director, whose name has become ubiquitous with the genre. When asked how he developed the concept, Maeda stated,

> At that time [pre-*Urotsukidoji*], it was illegal to create a sensual scene in bed. I thought I should do something to avoid drawing such a normal sensual scene. So I just created a creature. [His tentacle] is not a [penis] as a pretext. I could say, as an excuse, this is not a [penis]; this is just a part of the creature. You know, the creatures, they don't have a gender. A creature is a creature. So it is not obscene — not illegal. Drawing intercourse was, and is, illegal in Japan. That is our big headache: to create such a sensual scene. We are always using any type of trick.  

Contemporary *manga* artists often run afoul of the courts just as *ukiyo-e* printmakers did during the Edo period. Japan’s modern censorship laws may have inspired more bizarre forms of pornography than would otherwise have arisen. For example, restrictions that prevent the showing of pubic hair as a means to prevent the importation of American magazines such as *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and *Hustler* helped to foster the Japanese erotic genre known as *Lolicon*.

*Lolicon*, a merger of the phrase “Lolita Complex,” is a notorious Japanese erotic trend that essentially circumvents the need to show pubic hair by showing underage characters in sexual situations. Initially the genre started by showing adult women without hair, but as time passed *lolicon* began to focus more on underage females. *Shotacon* is a kind of equivalent to *lolicon* aimed at a female audience (the name is derived from Shotaro, a young male character from the 1960s *anime* series *Gigantor*), and *shotacon* publications show young boys in sexual situations with mature women.
The visuality of \textit{ecchi manga}, whether it be \textit{loli}con or tentacle pornography, differs in terms of the dynamism of the image when compared to the somewhat static and posed look of classical \textit{shunga} prints. Modern Japanese erotica uses the cinematic arrangements popularized by Tezuka, a stylistic innovation that had not been conceived of during the heyday of \textit{shunga}, which commonly depicts its figures from a side-view perspective, and deviates very little from this formula. In many ways \textit{ecchi manga} is a modern reinterpretation of the themes developed by artists of the past.

The development of erotica for women is a new concept when compared to the decidedly male perspective found in most \textit{shunga} prints and \textit{manga} of the past. As women are increasingly finding success as \textit{manga} artists in Japan (the most successful Japanese \textit{manga} artist, Rumiko Takahashi, is a woman), stories of all variety are being created with female audiences in mind. \textit{Yaoi manga} is a major development in this field, characterized by focusing on the relationships of gay men. The term “\textit{yaoi}” is a Japanese acronym that translates as “no climax, no point, no reason,” due to the genre’s earliest \textit{manga} from the 1970s being created by fans who had little interest in characterization or plot and focused simply on sex. As the \textit{yaoi} fad caught on more sophisticated stories about male relationships began to develop. \textit{Yaoi} became an increasingly popular genre among Japanese women, for it allows them to explore a world normally considered off limits to them.

For many Japanese fans, \textit{yaoi} was a way to escape the confining story lines of \textit{shōjo, manga} intended for girls. In those books, the male almost always took charge, and if the female had the bad fortune to fall in love, she quickly turned into a blathering idiot. As the first \textit{yaoi} authors began to gather fans, Japanese publishers helped some of them turn pro, publishing their work in magazines and \textit{manga} compilations. The new stories were angsty and romantic: Boys fell in love despite their best intentions, and, after brief struggles with their feelings, plunged into deep, soulful bliss… Yet \textit{yaoi} (…) involves little casual sex. When couples
couple, it's an emotional maelstrom; even after a rape scene, the two men lie tenderly in each other's arms and profess their love. It's a visual treat with an emotional payoff, a dynamite combination for the ladies.⁴⁰

Hence, the same aspects that made Takarazuka appealing attracted women to yaoi manga: feminine male characters connoting a sense of safeness that young women did not experience with the men they dealt with in their everyday lives. Both function as embodiments of female fantasies of sexuality and freedom, allowing women to explore aspects of Japanese society generally deemed unacceptable. By immersing themselves in the worlds of Takarazuka and yaoi manga, they are able to delve into the fantasy world of idealized men who are well-groomed, interested in fashion, and as interested in boys as their readers. The description and accounts of female fans’ reactions to yaoi call to mind Carol Maver’s discussion of female sensuality in her article “Reduplicative Desires.”⁴¹ Maver, through analyzing the photographs of Clementina Hwarden, discusses the act of feminizing fetishistic behavior, a similar occurrence in modern yaoi manga, which is almost exclusively created by, and made for, women. Maver considers whether or not the act of women creating erotica is simply a simulacrum of male perversity, but when applied to yaoi manga, this is clearly not the case. While there are similar genres for men (yuri is the opposite of yaoi and features lesbian relationships), the female-created yaoi is much more oriented to story development and relationship building with sexual gratification thrown in almost incidentally. The male created yuri genre focuses primarily on sexual aspects with very little storyline.

Depicting homosexuality in artwork is not unprecedented in Japan as it was a subject touched on in shunga with some regularity. Kitamaro Utagawa depicted homosexuality in his series The Pillow Book (1788), as did Hirakawa Moronobu, one of
the earliest *ukiyo-e* artists, in the 1680s. Homosexuality is even mentioned as early as the eleventh century in the literary classic *The Tale of Genji*, “Genji pulled the boy down beside him . . . Genji, for his part, or so one is informed, found the boy more attractive than his chilly sister.”\(^{42}\) Ultimately Genji resists temptation, though the same cannot be said about the Japanese fascination with sexual taboo.

Ultimately, Japanese erotic imagery has evolved across time, has been reinterpreted for new audiences, and altered to suit the whims of each generation, from the pleasure quarters of Edo to the Kabuki-cho night clubs of modern Tokyo. *Shunga* has come to be recognized as a uniquely Japanese artistic genre that is widely collected and has received scholarly attention, while its contemporary descendant, *ecchi manga*, is often looked at as artless pornography. A reevaluation of this mindset is long overdue as the artists of the Superflat movement are increasingly drawing upon the taboo and bizarre subjects depicted in these adult *manga* as a basis for their paintings and sculptural works. The stylistic depictions of figures and the sexualized nature of contemporary *manga* contain a new visual language that is as meaningful to contemporary Japanese (and a rapidly increasing world audience), as the “blown off roof” and “lines for eyes, hook for nose” abbreviated features of historical *ukiyo-e* and *shunga*. 
Figure 6. Two examples of the *gekiga manga* style by Ryoichi Ikegami (left) and Takao Saito (right). Reproduced from Ryoichi Ikegami, *Crying Freeman* (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 1985) (left) and Takao Saito, *Golgo 13* (Tokyo, Shogakukan, 1980), p. 54 (right).
Figure 7. Katsuhika Hokusai *The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife*, 1814. Reproduced from “The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife” Wikipedia.org <http://www.wikipedia.org>
Figure 8. An example of tentacle pornography inspired by the *shunga* print work of Hokusai. Reproduced from "Manga Artist Interview Series." *Sake Drenched Postcards.* <http://www.bigempire.com/sake/mangal.html>. 
CHAPTER 4

THE ARTISTS OF THE SUPERFLAT MOVEMENT

The treatment of gender in contemporary Japanese art, as exemplified by the works produced by artists of the Superflat movement, continues to develop along two different tracks explored thus far, both of which are centered on the iconography of femininity. One track is preoccupied with “cuteness” and “youth” and results in pedophiliac, yet cartoonish images of prepubescent girls in sexualized situations. The second track deals with the transformation of gender, boys into girls, girls into creatures or robots, and the juxtaposition of extreme violence onto scenes of innocence. Young women are the predominant subject in figurative Superflat artwork, and to understand the genesis of the Superflat movement, one must look to the origins of *otaku* culture. *Otaku* (オタク), a Japanese word that originally meant one’s house or home (御宅), was adopted as a word to mean “enthusiast” or, more negatively, “geek” with the publication in 1983 of *Otaku no kenkyuu* (An Investigation of Geeks) by writer Akio Nakamori. “Geek,” though, is not quite a strong enough translation of the term *otaku*. To the Japanese ear, the word *otaku* has more ominous overtones and denotes someone with anti-social characteristics as well.

“Comparable to the American “nerd” or “fanboy”, *otaku*—literally translated as “house” from Japanese—denotes staunch individualism outside the Japanese mainstream in those personalities relegated to the debased fringes of society, further extending to fanaticism approaching cultism in its strident video collectors and techophiles divested of personal lives beyond their dominant reigning obsession.” 43
The Connoisseurship of the Otaku

Essentially *otaku* are connoisseurs of a particular interest: for example, there are military *otaku* and train *otaku*, car *otaku* and electronics *otaku*. However, the term originated and most often refers to those obsessed with *manga* and *anime* culture. *Otaku* know more than just the rudimentary story elements and plot devices of their favorite series, they can explain the workings of fictional spacecraft or list the original air dates for their favorite *anime* programs. It is from this obsessive fantasy life that the Superflat movement burgeoned.

In his book *Little Boy: the Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture*, Takashi Murakami explains the blossoming of *otaku* culture as a way for post-World War II Japanese to deal with their identity. Following the war, the Japanese government sought to distance itself from the events that took place during combat by creating a constitution that forbids the creation of a military, and by denying some of the more horrific events perpetrated by the Japanese military that fostered the ill will between Japan, China, and Korea that still persists. Consequently, many of the younger generation felt disconnected from those who had experienced the war as a reality. The children born in the 1960s could not understand the complex events that precipitated Japan’s defeat and subsequent metamorphosis into a hybrid country— one run by a puppet government whose strings were tugged by the Americans, a country quickly discarding historical identity and embracing American values, an Eastern island nation that was coming to resemble a Western superpower. As children, the future Superflat artists found answers to their
alienation in television. Takashi Murakami, the principal artist and driving force behind the Superflat movement, describes those conflicted feelings as

an abiding sense of righteous indignation at the use of atomic bombs to bring the Pacific War to a close. We level cheap shots at the Japanese government, which placed Japan in that final scenario and then concealed the truth about the bombs’ effects. We feel complex emotions towards the Americans who thrust the terror of nuclear annihilation upon Japan. Added to this is our own cowardly rage for accepting media control as a necessary evil. All of this simmered in the Japanese consciousness as dogma without direction. When these contexts emerged, the message reached its audience in the guise of children’s programming; because reality was portrayed through anime, Japan finally discovered genuine respect for its creators.

In Japanese elementary schools, we do not learn that our country has been managed in an incomplete, tentative fashion ever since the loss of the war. Nor do we seriously grapple with the issue as adults. But everyone recognizes the discomfort generated by this unnatural state of affairs. Japan is well established as a nation unable to address its bad blood. But at least the truth survives, alive and well, in stories told to children. Perhaps it’s fair to say that the unique sympathies we label as otaku were born the moment Japan comprehended the sincerity of these storytellers. 44

The first “otaku generation” was born between the late 1950s and the close of the 1960s, and is defined by those who were raised on the first anime television program, Tetsuwan Atom (known in America as Astro Boy). In addition, these children attended one of the seminal events in otaku history, the World’s Fair of 1970 held in Osaka, known as Expo ’70. It was one of the best-attended fairs of its kind, with attendance estimated at 64,210,000 people over six months.45 For the children who visited Expo ’70, it symbolized a future of world unity and space travel (one of the major draws was a moon rock from the 1969 moon landing). Unfortunately, that future never truly came to pass. “For the Japanese, their hearts, newly healed from post-war trauma, this was the perfect scenario for the future. For the children, the scenario was real. Yet that future has never arrived— their dreams were shattered. And they grew into adults, unable to relinquish those dreams.”46 Just as the expositions of the mid 1800s were so seminal in
the development of Impressionism, Expo ’70 provided the fuel for the young minds that would later become some of the most influential creators of *anime, manga*, and Superflat artwork. Science, space travel, and a sophisticated, technological future would become some of the major themes explored in *anime* and *manga*, but often tinged with an ironic disappointment.

The Elements of Superflat

Consequently, Superflat artwork is often Peter Pan-like in its obsession with youthfulness and seems to pathologically avoid any sort of mature treatment of its subject matter; even sexuality is presented in a disturbed and twistedly childlike way. The perspective is decidedly childlike in its interpretation of a variety of subject matter from war and sex to technology and modern interpretations of the classic landscape (now replaced by Japanese cityscapes) (Figure 9). All of these scenes are filled with large-eyed characters designed to play up the singularly important characteristic in contemporary Japanese culture: cuteness. The coalescing of charming “characters” with dystopian settings, sexual brutality, and a palpable subtext of danger paints a unique picture of the contemporary Japanese psyche.

Figurative Superflat art encompasses the designs used in the creation of *anime* and *manga* characters, so to understand its characteristics requires some understanding of the thought processes that go into creating the characters of both genres. Not unlike the complex iconography of Buddhist imagery, whose use of *mudra* hand gestures and varied postures helps to tell complex stories, Superflat art makes use of the concepts of *moe*, *kawaii*, and *yurui*, all derived from *otaku* culture. *Moe* is the fetishistic worship of a
character, usually a youthful, prepubescent female, who exudes a youthful energy and instills a need for protection in those who view her. *Kawaii* would seem to be what all Japanese products strive for, cuteness. Literally, *kawaii* means “cute,” and Japan has developed something of a “cute culture” that is obsessed with a girlish femininity. Not only are toys designed to be cute, such as Sony’s robot dogs, or clothes emblazoned with nonsensical English phrases, but Japan’s “cute” culture has spawned bizarre products as well, such as Hello Kitty vibrators, and condoms based on the *Gundam anime* series. This “cute” mentality seeped into the fine arts and gave birth to Superflat artwork. Fine art is regularly described in a variety of ways—challenging, daring, beautiful… but “cuteness” is perhaps a uniquely Japanese criterion of contemporary fine art. It is not without irony that Sanrio, the company behind Hello Kitty, developed a cutting edge android, the “Actroid,” that is nearly indistinguishable from a twenty-something Japanese woman; the second model of the Actroid was then based on a five-year-old Japanese girl. It was not until four years later that the first male robot was designed. Femininity is one of the driving forces behind contemporary Japanese culture, and Takashi Murakami accurately describes this feminine drive as “*kawaii culture*” or “cute culture,” the Japanese obsession with all things cute and stylish. From expensive robot dogs to Hello Kittys, Japan has become “a population heedless of the cost of embracing immaturity.”

Murakami takes advantage of this *kawaii* culture by incorporating much of it into the Superflat movement, effectively hybridizing his artwork with the iconic characters that are already entrenched in Japan’s collective minds and pocketbooks.

The final concept is *yurui*, which can be understood as a lethargic calmness. As Murakami puts it, “[*Yurui* characters] stand in for the Japanese themselves: once
everything had been blown away in a flash, an infantile and impotent culture gained strength under the rubric of an unfounded, puppet nation infrastructure. What emerged was a culture frozen in its infancy, earlier than adolescence or even childhood.

The name “Superflat” arose when Murakami listened to two Los Angeles gallery owners giving a sales pitch concerning one of his paintings. They described his work as being “super flat, super high quality and super clean!” which he felt not only described his artwork, but Japanese culture, and that “if Japanese culture could not transcend this flat surface, it would not achieve respectability as ‘culture.’” Murakami felt that his artwork lacked a dimensional depth in terms of its depiction, as well as traditional “message” when compared to other artistic movements. It would seem that Superflat is not only “super two-dimensional” in conception, but execution as well. Murakami admits that notoriety and financial gain were his primary motivations when he entered the art scene. It was this desire that led to the birth of Superflat, a style based on pop art, fads, and comic books. When taken together though, the finished products are more than a sum of its parts— Murakami’s paintings, like those of other artists under the label Superflat, represent the essence of contemporary Japan: consumerism, materialism, cuteness.

Takashi Murakami

The pioneer of the Superflat movement, Takashi Murakami, used the quintessentially Japanese concepts discussed above to develop an artistic style that is visually a hybrid of manga and anime but backed with a shrewd marketing scheme not unlike that of the Sanrio Corporation and their Hello Kitty mascot. Murakami studied traditional nihonga painting while attending Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and
Music, where he received his Ph.D. After graduating though, he lost interest in traditional Japanese genres and gravitated towards the low art of *anime* and *manga*. By 1996 he had opened his Hiropon Factory (a name he also gave his most famous sculptural work, which I discuss later in this chapter) in Saitama, Japan, modeled on Andy Warhol’s “Factory” studio where like-minded artists could collaborate and produce work. Artists who joined Murakami at Hirpon Factory include Yoshitomo Nara, whose work focuses primarily on children; Henmaru Machino, the erotic *manga* illustrator turned artist; and Aya Takano, who paints cartoonish images of young women in shocking situations. By 1998 Murakami had opened an American branch of his Hiropon Factory in Brooklyn, New York.

It was at the “Murakami-Manetas” exhibition in Milan where Murakami first began to discuss the concepts that would form the basis of the Superflat movement. As Murakami became more sought after, he was commissioned by Louis Vuitton to design handbags, and began to sell affordable model toys based on his large-scale sculptural work. Murakami’s unabashed connections with commercialism fit well with the consumerism that originally inspired the Superflat movement.

Yoshitomo Nara

One artist who makes use of many of the characteristic elements of *kawaii* and *yurui* is Yoshitomo Nara. As if he were representing a personification of the conflicted, yet childlike nature of the post-war Japanese psyche described by Murakami, Nara’s paintings and sculptural work often depict full-length portraits of children or animals innocently standing against an abstract color field background. Paintings such as *My
"Little Sister" (2001) (Figure 10) portray his characteristic children, rendered in an abbreviated manner; black circles for eyes, simple spherical hands, and elongated tube-like legs. The paintings are obviously influenced by the stylized renditions of *manga* characters, an abbreviated use of line and flat swathes of color, which has been a Japanese tradition since the days of *ukiyo-e*. Nara often works quickly and finishes his paintings in a single day as he attempts to immediately capture all the elements that inspire each work.

His use of children was inspired by his time working in Germany, when his inability to communicate in German left him feeling particularly vulnerable and childlike. He combined this feeling of helplessness with his memories of growing up in isolation in the Japanese countryside during which time his parents were often absent. His work exhibits a masterful understanding of the tenets of Superflat, with its emphasis on *kawaii* and *yurui*. His characters can easily be described as “cute:” they sport sleepy, irritable expressions as they brandish their tiny toy hacksaws and knives. This is another recurring theme in Nara’s work, his tendency to depict his child subjects with hints of maliciousness—carrying miniature weapons and looking as if they are preparing to slash at the ankles of any adult who crosses their path. In many ways the blending of childlike innocence with a capacity for violence is an appropriate metaphor for the darker side of Japanese *otaku* culture. (Figure 11)

While many artists of the Superflat movement have been inspired to make great art from the *manga* and *anime* of their childhood, others have been stirred to violence by *anime*, such as the AUM Shinrikyo religious cult and serial child murderer Tsutomu Miyazaki. In the case of AUM, the religious cult led by Shoko Asahara responsible for
the 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system, bizarre anime references were sprinkled throughout their doctrines and their unrealized Machiavellian plans that included a base of operations at the foot of Mount Fuji, radio controlled helicopters that would spread sarin gas through Tokyo, and research into plasma-based outer space weapons.\textsuperscript{50} AUM even named their detoxification system “Cosmo Cleaner,” after a similar device used in the animated series of the 1970s, \textit{Space Battleship Yamato}.\textsuperscript{51} The cult eventually went so far as to create a series of anime shorts featuring their leader, Shoko Asahara, demonstrating his powers of flight and telepathy.

This mysterious mixture of childishness and violence that permeated the AUM cult is also apparent in the work of Yoshitomo Nara. Nara’s childhood loneliness is not unique in Japan, a country where parents are often absent from their families due to lengthy commutes and occupational demands. This seems to be especially frequent among the generation of immediately-postwar children, who often retreated into fantasy and spent more time with other children than their own parents; it is these children who have grown up into adults still transfixed by seemingly childish preoccupations. It stands to reason that generations of young Japanese have grown up to produce artwork that is tied to the comic book imagery and animation that acted as a surrogate for their absentee parents or served as a soothing form of escapism from the demands of the highly competitive scholastic environment. In a sadly ironic twist, Nara’s violent-child artwork also proved prescient.

On 1 June 2004 a female sixth-grader murdered her classmate, Satomi Mitarai, by using a box cutter to cut the girl’s throat and arms; because of the age of the murderer her name was not released to the press, but a photograph of her wearing a hooded sweatshirt
with “NEVADA” emblazoned across the front earned her the nickname “Nevada-tan” (“tan” being a affectionate Japanese suffix akin to “chan,” often used with children’s names). As details of the murder began to circulate, Nevada-tan quickly became an internet celebrity as stylized anime drawings of her began to appear, clothed in her Nevada sweatshirt, gripping her box cutter and covered in blood. Japanese popular culture had effectively neutered Nevada-tan and transformed her from a brutal killer into a character from one of Yoshitomo Nara’s paintings. When viewed in light of the murder, Nara’s canvases then become a further evolution in the femme fatale concept popularized by the European Symbolist movement, pushing the concept from the innocent female turned killer into a mischievous little girl capable of unimaginable deeds. Nara’s artwork predates the “birth” of Nevada-tan, yet her actions and celebrity imbue his paintings with a new dimension the artist could not have possibly foreseen. The otaku culture that shaped Nara’s paintings and allegedly inspired the girl who would become Nevada-tan, ultimately devours them, turning Nara into a wildly successful artist among Japanese teens and an eleven-year-old murderer into a manga cult figure. (Figure 12)

This understanding of otaku culture provides a foundation for the way Superflat artists depict their subjects. The representation of gender and sexuality is of particular interest because of its unique representation in Superflat paintings and sculpture, incorporating the armor clad femme fatales of anime and the uncomfortably sexualized imagery of children found in pornographic adult manga. Perhaps no single piece exemplifies the Superflat movement’s particular interpretation of women as well as Takashi Murakami’s Hiropon (1997) (Figure 13).
*Hiropon* is an 88-inch tall statue of a pink (or alternatively green- or blonde-) haired woman with ridiculously oversized breasts spilling out of her bikini top. She grasps her nipples while a ring of milk resembling a jump rope encircles her as she stands balanced on one leg. The character is rendered in a very stereotypically anime-esque way, with large eyes and unusually colored hair. Murakami wrote that he was inspired by "a large-breasted girl game that was on a software fan magazine that I picked up at the 1992 summer Comiket (the largest convention for self-published comic books in Japan)." He states that "with these abnormal swollen nipples and breasts, I could illustrate the depth of Japan's subculture, and the excesses of its art, the psycho-sexual complexes of the Japanese, and the increasingly malformed otaku culture!" Not only is Murakami referencing low art, but Western high art such as the multitude of Venuses, breastfeeding Virgin Marys, and even the prehistoric Venus of Willendorf. *Hiropon* functions as a critique of otaku culture and serves as a twenty-first century update of the fertility goddess concept intermixed with Barbie's plasticity. Like Barbie, *Hiropon* has no genitalia, just like the dolls and model kits she is replicating. This creates an almost childish depiction of women, representing only the “seen” sexual identifiers (the breasts), but removing that which is often hidden (the vagina). In fact, her whole rendering would seem to be based on the pre-adolescent fantasies that Murakami says Japanese increasingly unable to leave behind. “Kawaii (cute) culture has become a living entity that pervades everything. With a population heedless of the cost of embracing immaturity, the nation is in the throes of a dilemma: a preoccupation with anti-aging may conquer not only the human heart, but also the body.” What Murakami is saying then, is that Japan is quickly embracing a culture centered on living in the past rather than growing up. No
one wants to grow old, but ignoring that at the cost of living in the real world is a
dangerous path to follow. General Douglas MacArthur, responsible for the rebuilding of
Japan following World War II, has been frequently quoted as saying the Japanese “are
like a nation of twelve year olds.”54 This assessment is applicable to Murakami’s work, as
well as the majority of the other Superflat artists, as they delve into imagery from their
childhood, and use it to depict events from their adult lives. Murakami presents his work
in the most palatable way for modern Japanese, by using the familiar manga aesthetic,
but the manga aesthetic and its unique visual vocabulary create their own sets of issues,
particularly in their depiction of gender.

The new Japanese gender roles are increasingly influenced by manga and anime,
a situation that has become more apparent in the popularity of androgynous male
celebrities who base their appearance on the waif-like, gentle male protagonists of shōjo
manga (girls’ comics). The opposite side of this is that much of the representation of
women in Superflat artwork is taken from ecchi manga (erotic comics), whose depictions
tend to be highly sexualized, and because the Superflat movement is predominantly made
up of male artists there is significant objectification of women in their artwork. Works
such as Hiropon serve as an excellent example of this objectification: her bulbous breasts
contrast with her impossibly thin, almost childlike, body. Her gaze is non-threatening and
innocent, with a naïve quality that often occurs in these artists’ depictions of women. In
many ways this concept is similar to the idealized males found in Takarazuka. At the
same time, aspects of their sexuality are heavily exaggerated in a very adolescent way—
in the manner of thirteen-year-old boys. The most popular characters among male otaku
invariably possess this immature, youthful naiveté. They are seen as innocent and within
reach of the socially inept *otaku* who would be unable to strive for the more emotionally complex, career-oriented woman. When describing the appeal of the *otokoyaku* of Takarazuka Theater amongst young girls, Senelick states, “displacement of sexual feelings on to such a surrogate helps retard maturity. After all, The Japanese male’s image of the sexy woman and obedient wife remains the high-school girl.”

It is this mindset that has contributed to the rise of *manga* that feature young girls in sexual situations such as those of the *lolicon* genre (short for Lolita Complex). Because of the popularity of *lolicon* in Japanese culture, it is featured often in Superflat artwork as well. As discussed in the previous chapter, the origins of the genre can be traced back to Japan’s prohibition against depicting pubic hair in artwork or photography. As a result, Japanese artists who specialized in adult *manga* simply drew women completely shaved. As time progressed it became harder to distinguish drawings depicting a petite Japanese woman and a prepubescent Japanese girl. This pedophiliac sort of eroticism became popular with *manga* and *anime otaku* because the characters they favored were small, non-threatening, and innocent, very different from the women that *otaku* encountered (and were often rejected by) in real life. Therefore, underage girls became the leitmotif in *ecchi manga* and consequently were adopted into Superflat artwork as well. Surprisingly, it is not only in the domain of male Superflat artists such as Henmaru Machino and Masahiko Kuwahara, but female Superflat artists as well including Mahomi Kunikata and Aya Takano, who have appropriated this subject that was previously used as male sexual fodder, and empowered it, creating strong and shockingly sexual images of their own, as evidenced by their depictions of lesbian relationships and brutal violence.
The relationship between manga and Superflat art should not be underestimated, though only two of the members are technically involved with the industry. Artist Henmaru Machino is the only group member who actively creates manga; Hideaki Anno, the anime director behind the most popular series of the 1990s, Neon Genesis Evangelion, has moved on to live-action filmmaking. The manga style is so ingrained in the Japanese lifestyle though, that even without publishing actual manga most Japanese adopt the manga style as children as they draw their favorite characters and doodle in the margins of their school notebooks. In Japan, comics are definitely not just for children or entertainment, they are everywhere from corporate manuals to assembly instructions for household items, and posters on the Tokyo subway depicted in this ubiquitous style. It comes as no surprise then that a fine arts movement would grow out of manga as well.

Aya Takano

While the male artists tend to depict their female subjects in an objectified way, making them the focus of sexual desire, the approach of Superflat’s female artists is different. For example, Aya Takano lends empowerment to her female figures: their nudity is not perverse or lewd as is often the case with female images made by male Superflat artists; rather her nude females are shown as unashamed and confident (Figure 14). Takano’s work is almost exclusively comprised of nude or semi-nude females laconically lying about, referencing the yurui or laziness that is characteristic of popular manga characters as well as Superflat’s own mascots; rendered in such simple, sweeping lines that they bring to mind a Japanese influence filtered through the work of Aubrey Beardsley and re-imported to Japan or the delicate line work of Egon Schiele (Figure 15).
Mahomi Kunikata

On the other hand, Mahomi Kunikata, a female artist who is heavily influenced by adult manga, approaches her work from what might be considered a very male perspective. She often depicts her female subjects in disturbing and grotesque ways. For example, *Stomach Sword, Mayu-chan* (2004) (Figure 16) shows a young girl with a sword plunged through her stomach covered in blood, while *Crayon* (2004) (Figure 17) shows a young girl putting crayons into her vagina. Her titles often are the only clue to the subject matter as the figures are usually set against a negative white background.

Kunikata’s drawings are unusually blunt. It is surprising to see a female artist depicting young women in such a brutal fashion (especially in *Crayon* where the girl is staring blankly at the viewer). Her literal reinterpretation of the frank sexuality and violence seen in *ecchi manga* is striking because of her gender. While it is not at all unheard of for women to have their own pornographic manga, which is usually centered on sexual relations between effeminate gay men (*yaoi manga*), Kunikata shuns the approach used by other female Superflat painters. Rather than empower her figures, she exploits and humiliates them just as they are shown by the pornographers that inspired her. Kunikata’s work, “is profoundly informed by her multiple inferiority complexes as a failed manga writer, an otaku, and a girl burdened by a weight problem and a complicated family situation.”

What creates this unique diffusion of gender roles where female artists are just as likely to degrade their female subjects as their male counterparts? Kunikata’s shocking portrayal of her subjects could be seen as an attempt to be accepted by her primarily male Superflat contemporaries, but more likely her art, like the increasingly popular *bishōnen*
(pretty boy) look, relates to the behaviors discussed by Maver in “Reduplicative Desires,” in which she describes feminizing fetishistic behavior, and questions whether the act of women creating erotica is simply a simulacrum of male perversity. Kunikata embraces a traditionally male perspective towards erotica in her artwork, eschewing the idealized romances found in the ecchi manga created by women, in favor of the rougher stuff appreciated by her male contemporaries, and going a step further as she draws inspiration for the ero-guro manga genre, (the Japanese shortening of the words “erotic” and “grotesque”) which delves into graphic mutilation, spilled intestines, blood, gore, and scatology as forms of erotica. While many Japanese openly read adult, sexual manga, very few find ero-guro to their tastes (perhaps it is not surprising that the aforementioned eleven-year-old girl cum murderer, Nevada-tan, was allegedly a fan of guro manga). By depicting shocking scenes, such as that shown in Crayon, it could be reasoned that Kunikata is not demoralizing her female subjects, but empowering them, openly flaunting their sexuality and capacity for violence, characteristics that are rarely approached in artwork centered on the female experience.

Henmaru Machino

Kunikata’s unique blend of sex and violence has a kinship with fellow Superflat artist Henmaru Machino. Machino is one of the few Superflat artists to actually have his feet in both the world of accepted fine art (his paintings are regularly viewed in museums such as the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles) and that of ecchi and ero-guro manga. He is notorious in Japan for the outrageous content of his manga, and his Superflat imagery often makes use of similar themes. Even his name, Henmaru [変丸], is
an allusion to this, as the first character means “strange” or “transformation” and is also
the first character of the Japanese word *hentai* or “pervert.” Like artists such as Jeff
Koons and Robert Mapplethorpe before him, Machino’s work forces the viewer to
question the differences between art and pornography, but complicates matters by
creating scenarios that go far beyond any real life possibilities. More extreme than
*Hiropon*, Machino’s female subjects often have dozens of breasts, sprout multiple
phalluses, and proceed to be gorily amputated over the course of his *manga*, with similar
subjects depicted in his paintings (Figure 18). One of his performance pieces mixes many
elements of *otaku* culture incorporating elements of *cosplay* (short for “costume play” the
act of dressing as various characters from *manga* and *anime*), *manga* art, and film to
create a filmed performance entitled *Koe-chan*. The piece centers around well known
female *cosplayers* who pose with erotic *manga* artwork painted on their bodies. The film
documents the painting process, and depicts Machino’s contribution as he paints on the
back of one girl.

The image Machino paints is of a four-breasted school girl with tentacles in place
of legs and with a large, ejaculating penis perched atop a pair of giant testicles all the
while winking suggestively at the viewer and maintaining a bizarre sense of *kawaii*
(Figure 19). Machino’s unique figures are in many ways modern versions of the *Efes
Cybele*, a statue of the goddess Cybele, unearthed at the ancient city of Efes in Anatolia
(Turkey), with multiple breasts made to lactate during ancient religious ceremonies
(Figure 20). 57 Cybele’s followers were often required to castrate themselves and become
eunuchs in order to adopt female identities, similar to the story of the goddess’s son, Attis,
who castrated himself, died, and then was reborn as a woman. While Machino is most
likely unaware of the ancient goddess, his figures and their unique sexual identities and depictions of hermaphroditic castrations oddly parallel this ancient cult’s practices.

Transexuality in Japanese Popular Art

Once again we return to the theme of the blurred line of gender representation in Japanese art, whether it is the cross-dressed *otokoyaku* of Takarazuka or the feminizing of Japanese culture and proliferation of *kawaii* as a necessary element in marketing almost any product (Figure 21). This interest in pan-sexuality, which has existed for centuries in Japan, was initially imported from China. “Persons displaying mixed sex characteristics appear in the record of many cultures, although definitions and interpretations vary with time and place. Early Japanese views of hermaphroditism were closely linked with an imported body of Chinese knowledge, which described males who turned to females and females who turned to males, sometimes, it was believed, on a semimonthly basis.”

This obsession with sexual/gender transformation is consistently referenced in manga where gender lines are not merely blurred, as with the *otokoyaku* or effeminate pop stars of contemporary culture, but shattered by popular characters that awaken to find their sex transformed completely. This is a surprisingly common narrative device in Japan, especially in manga such as *Ranma ½* by Rumiko Takahashi and *HEN* by Hiroya Oku (Figure 22).

*Ranma ½*, one of the most popular series in Japan, ran from the late 1980s through the mid 1990s and followed the adventures of a sixteen-year-old marital artist who fell into a magical pool of water. Whenever he is splashed with cold water, he turns into a girl, while hot water reverses the effect. While essentially a teenage romantic
comedy, the sexual themes of “getting wet” leading to the character’s transformation add a sexual metaphor to the series. *Ranma ½* at times deals with the challenges the protagonist encounters as he initially rejects his curse, but eventually finds it useful in walking both lines of the gender equation.

Hiroya Oku’s *HEN* is short story that takes a decidedly darker tone. The male protagonist falls victim to a sexually transmitted disease he picks up after a night of promiscuous sex, and he slowly transforms into a woman over the course of the *manga*. He is nearly raped by one of his roommates, and endures humiliating treatment from both his male friends, who are only interested in him as a sex object, and his female classmates, who are adamant in their refusal to let him wear a girl’s school uniform, which is seen as uniquely feminine, and not something that he can wear simply due to his recent change. Published in 1988, *HEN* was most likely inspired by *Ranma ½*, though it never had the same notoriety. *Ranma ½* was serialized weekly and ran for thirty-eight volumes over the course of nine years, while *HEN* was the debut short story by Oku and lasted just one chapter.\(^{59}\)

The current sex-change obsession in Japan revolves around an online web log entitled Harukarin Blog (http://ameblo.jp/harukarin-a) that details the purportedly true story of a twenty-three-year-old man’s decision to undergo a sex-change operation after his girlfriend of five years announced she was a lesbian.\(^{60}\) The webmaster photographs his chest, hands, and feet documenting his transformation with a casual style reminiscent of the Superflat photographer Hiromix (Figure 21).

These themes, as well as the concepts of deformity, transformation, and destruction are often linked with Superflat artwork and are frequent themes found in
anime and manga. From classic television shows like Ultraman (1967) and Kamen Rider (1971) to films such as Godzilla (1954), these threads are all invariably traced back to the destruction and aftermath of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Machino’s deformed women can be seen as an adaptation of the severely mangled survivors of Little Boy and Fat Man. In her article on the themes of Superflat, Julie Rauer touches on the multitude of metamorphic themes,

In the coalescence of various psychological states of the post-war Japanese psyche, the defining parameters of universal human suffering can be found: ‘subhuman,’ signifying hideous deformity and repulsion by civilized society, the monstrous underbelly in exiled fury; the unformed and incomplete ‘protohuman’; ‘flawed human’ in perpetual repair or denial of the present human condition, appropriating history as panacea; the genetic or cyborgian amalgam of man and machine, ‘hyperhuman,’ enhancements which ironically elevate and siphon life in a Faustian bargain with technology; and finally ‘superhuman,’ offering cathartic transcendence of mortal existence, encapsulation of the soul outside of its given body, fluid and transmutable, virtual immortality.

Thus transformation becomes an allegory for the constantly morphing culture of Japan itself, and is seen in Superflat artwork from Takashi Murakami, his Second Mission Project Ko² (1999) is a series of three large scale series of sculptural works that show a woman transforming into a futuristic jet, to Henmaru Machino, whose Untitled (Green Caterpillar Girl) (1999) depicts a hybrid girl-caterpillar creature.

Yasumasa Morimura

One Japanese artist who combines elements of Takarazuka Theater, cosplay (itself an offshoot of otaku culture), and Superflat is Yasumasa Morimura. Though Morimura does not identify himself with the Superflat artists he has much in common with them as he mixes Eastern and Western concepts and blurs the lines of gender. Morimura’s photographs are an appropriation of Western paintings, an allegory for the
quickly disappearing “traditional” Japanese culture, which is ingraining itself with Western clothing, English words, and American food. Morimura transforms himself just as these influences are now transforming Japan both visually and physically. Japanese researchers believe the introduction of Western food has begun to transform the typical Japanese body type, which is now increasingly taller, with softer jaw lines among other changes.62

Alexandra Munroe describes his style as,

[S]plicing himself into the narrative of Western cultural legacy, Morimura demonstrates that ‘modernization’ is a process of reproduction whose result is inevitably a hybrid imitation. His work plays upon the various inversions wrought by the contemporary dissemination of Western art historical icons via mass media, whereby unique cultural treasures are reduced to cheap, global image transformation.63

This connection between “cultural treasures” and “cheap images” is a uniquely Japanese lineage dating from the then popular art of Ukiyo-e all the way to contemporary Superflat artists.

Morimura was born in 1951, a few years prior to Murakami’s delineation of the “first otaku generation,” but his artwork incorporates some elements from the otaku subculture, particularly cosplay culture which was born out of the comic book and animation conventions that became popular in the early 1980s. Most criticism of Morimura’s work has focused on the politics of appropriation and the recasting of Western figures as Japanese, overlooking the connections between cosplay and the influence of Takarazuka Theater that help illuminate the formation of his hybrid style. Morimura’s focus on “art as entertainment” echoes Murakami’s philosophy as well.
In the *History of Japanese Art* Penelope Mason remarks that Morimura’s work “draws parallels between… the characters found in Japanese cartoons about futuristic worlds dominated by freakish monsters and their equally freakish superheroes.”

This is best seen in two of Morimura’s works, *Mother (Judith 3)* and *Brothers (Late Autumn Prayer)*, both from 1991 (Figures 25 and 26). With *Mother* Morimura explores the femme fatale but presents it in a uniquely Japanese way by mixing the thematic concepts of *anime*-like figures, cyborg in appearance as they are covered in gold; Judith’s breasts are conical and she carries a traditional Japanese *katana*. Morimura applies contemporary Japanese aesthetics and wears *otaku* culture, just as he wears his wigs and elaborate costumes. This work, as well as *Brothers*, comes closest to the themes explored by the Superflat artists. In *Brothers*, Morimura uses the atomic bomb motif so commonly seen in *manga* and *anime* and artwork produced by the Superflat movement.

[The bomb] symbolizes the visual, aural, and other sensory imprints made on the Japanese psyche, which has been completely transformed in the wake of the collective subjection of the Japanese people to the horrendous experience of nuclear annihilation. Perhaps from this national trauma did *kawaii* and *otaku* cultures emerge in contemporary Japan.

Murakami postulates that Japan’s shock and inability to cope with the results and immense death toll (140,000 people) led to the birth of *otaku* culture as a form of escapism for Japan, but also a way of processing what happened through seemingly innocuous forms of entertainment such as animation and comic books. Morimura uses *cosplay*, which in the Japanese psyche is linked with *otaku* culture. His exploration of typical gender identity in his staged photographs raises *cosplay* to the level of art.

Whether it be Godzilla empowered by America’s hazardous testing of nuclear weapons, *manga* hero Ranma Saotome, a brusque martial artist who magically transforms
from a boy into a girl, or the female subjects of Henmaru Machino who are twisted into bizarre hermaphrodites, Superflat art and the manga that inspired it are obsessed with the concept of transformation, extending even to the artists themselves, such as Yasumasa Morimura and his collection of female identities. The complex multiple identities perhaps serve as a form of wish fulfillment of a largely homogenous society where uniformity is valued over individualism. Ultimately, the varied approaches to the concept for “woman” in Superflat artwork rise above the demoralization that may seem to exist at first glance. The various identities of “womanhood” are transformed into a unique sense of female empowerment where women claim ownership of their sexuality, flaunting it openly for the audience to see.
Figure 9. Tsutomu Nihei *Megaro Mania (Nakano-ku, Tokyo)* 2000  
Figure 12. (Top) The class picture of Nevada-tan that circulated on the internet and television of the killer (left) and her victim (right). (Bottom) “Fan” artwork of Nevada-tan. Reproduced from 2ch.org <http://www.2ch.org>.
Figure 17. Mahomi Kunikata Crayon (2004) Reproduced from the Kaikai Kiki Official Website <http://www.kaikaikiki.co.jp>.
Figure 18. The cover to Henmaru Machino’s *Honto ni atta iroi hanashi*. Reproduced from Henmaru Machino, *Honto ni atta iroi hanashi* (Tokyo; Sawa Comics, 2001).
Figure 19. Henmaru Machino *Koe-chan* (2004) Reproduced from jvd.ne.jp
Figure 20. Efes Cybele, Anatolia, Turkey
Hiromix *Untitled* (1997) Hiromix popularized a style of photography which primarily centered on capturing random moments in her then teenage life. Pictures of her friends, restaurants, train stations and department stores were all shot on disposable cameras as she went about her daily routines. Her photographs have been shown with in Superflat shows, due to their ties with youth culture and daily Japanese life. This particular photograph captures the androgynous look that is becoming increasingly popular amongst Japanese youths. Reproduced from Takashi Murakami ed. *Little Boy: the Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*. (New York: Japan Society, 2005), p. 245.
Figure 22. (Left) Rumiko Takahashi’s *manga* *Ranma ½* and (right) Hiroya Oku’s *Hen*. Reproduced from Rumiko Takahashi, *Ranma ½ Volume 1* (Tokyo, Shogakukan, 1987), p. 24 (left) and Hiroya Oku, *Hen* (Tokyo, Shueisha, 1992), p. 43.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

Takashi Murakami, Henmaru Machino, Mahomi Kunikata, and Yasumasa Morimura use cross-dressing or physical transformation to reinterpret gender roles, which challenge masculine and feminine characteristics of identity in contemporary Japanese art.

With the advent of *otaku* culture in the 1980s, *manga* and *anime* began to exert an influence on contemporary Japanese art by reflecting an unusual mix of imagery such as the psychological impact of World War II, the sexualization of youth, and the superficiality of commercialism. By studying the transition from theater to *shunga*, *shunga* to *manga* and *anime*, and *manga* to high art, a common lineage is discovered and links that were obscured become clear.

Cross-dressing on stage originated with the Noh Theater in the fourteenth century; it evolved into the complex gender portrayals in Kabuki Theater in the seventeenth century, culminating in Takarazuka in the twentieth century. This interplay of theater, art, gender ambiguity, and the sexualization of these subjects brought on by *shunga* and its historical progeny of erotic *manga* merged to create a hybrid aesthetic in Japanese art.

While I have chosen to focus on the Takarazuka Theater, *manga* culture, and Superflat art, they by no means cover the entire gamut of gender and sexual experimentation in modern Japanese culture. The drag theater of Takarazuka has influenced the look of many contemporary singers who experiment with gender and
cross-dressing (Figure 4). At the same time homosexuality is more visible in mainstream entertainment, both in numerous manga and anime that deal with same-sex love, and also in one of Japan’s currently popular comedians “Razor Ramon Hardgay,” dressed head-to-toe in biker leathers and black hot pants. He minces around the streets of Tokyo bumping and grinding against strangers (including children at times). The sexualization of children is another issue that has spread from loli con manga into life with the recent development of “junior idols,” underage female models who pose in swimsuits and other revealing clothes. Tourists coming to Japan and seeing children placed in this sexual context have found these images disturbing, prompting criticism within the Japanese populace. Even this seeking of validation from the West is an interesting aspect of the Japanese mentality, seemingly reinforcing the post-war insecurities of a country that still relies upon the United States military for protection.

Only now, as these areas (Takarazuka Theater, manga and anime, otaku culture, etc.) are beginning to be studied in the West have the Japanese begun to look upon these familiar aspects of their culture with new interest. Just as with ukiyo-e, the Japanese tend not to see the inherent beauty and complex aspects of what they deem simple entertainments. It takes the wonderment of foreign eyes for the Japanese to begin to appreciate the importance of their contributions to contemporary art and culture.

The increasing global significance of the artistic influences arising from manga and anime should not be underestimated. These popular entertainments are no longer relegated to Japan, but are increasingly becoming a part of children’s artistic diet worldwide. As manga is sold in bookstores throughout the United States and anime is viewed on primetime television, the gender issues depicted in Japanese art will invariably
begin to make their mark on the artwork of future generations influenced by these Japanese exports. Understanding the history of sexuality and gender politics in Japanese theater and commercial publications presents a new approach in the understanding of modern Japanese art as well as its impact on the future direction of Western art.

With the growing attractiveness of Japanese popular culture throughout the world, now more than ever it is important to have an understanding of themes in contemporary Japanese artwork. Through examination of gender portrayals in disparate artistic sources such as Kabuki Theater, shunga prints and manga following World War II, a new trend in contemporary art is understood and thus appreciated. Superflat, with its populist origins, has the greatest potential to reach an audience, not only of art sophisticates, but of viewers who can relate to the stylized imagery and vacuous commentary Superflat embodies.

The specificity of the examination of the individual in sexual terms is an unexplored and hitherto unrecognized theme in Japanese art. My research has allowed a new door to open in the analysis of Japanese art; making connections and drawing conclusions where none had existed previously.
NOTES


7 Ibid., 94.


11 Ibid., 16.


17 Robertson, *Takarazuka*, 12.

18 Ibid., 13.


Robertson, *Takarazuka*, 83


Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 52

Kakko yosa batsugun no kiza wa nimaime (otokoyaku have good form and outstanding style.) *Takarazuka Gurafu* 1969, 12:38-40.

Robertson, *Takarazuka*, 82

Do, oiroke aru kashira (Well, is there any erotic charm?). Asahi Shinbun, evening ed., December 21, 1977.

Utsumi-sensei to onnayaku (Professor Utsumi and the players of women’s roles). *Takarazuka Gurafu*, 1967, 1:53-55.

Sumire Hoshi, “Ano onna (hito) e no rabu reta (A love letter to that woman),” *Bessatsu Takarajima* 1987, 64:55.


Ibid.


47 Ibid., 100

48 Ibid., 138

49 Ibid., 153


51 Murakami, *Little Boy*, 133


53 Murakami, *Little Boy*, 100


61 Rauer. "Little Boy",


Mason, *History of Japanese Art*, 389


<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLrO0am5j54>.
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