

# Impressions of Japan

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CONSIDERING THE CRUCIAL ROLE JAPANESE CULTURE has played in the evolution of international modern art it has not had a formative influence (with the exception of ceramics) on the development of Australian art. What influence there has been is explored in two current exhibitions looking at Australian artists from differing historical periods whose work is seen to draw upon elements of Japanese art. The National Gallery of Australia's touring exhibition *In the Japanese manner: Australian prints 1900-1940* profiles Australian printmakers' works from the early 1900s whilst the current Queensland University of Technology Art Museum (QUTAM) exhibition, *Zen to Kawaii: the Japanese affect* looks at the work of seventeen contemporary artists influenced by Japan.

What is apparent from both exhibitions is that although Australian artists have incorporated elements of Japanese art into their works this influence has been based upon an impression of Japan, often following the lead of artists working in Europe and America, rather than an informed understanding derived from a fuller engagement with Japanese art. Such an impression, where artists use their visual intelligence to interpret, can result in interesting art but not one that provides many insights from Japanese culture. What is also apparent from the works in the *Zen to Kawaii* exhibition is that there has been little historical development in Australian understanding of Japanese culture since Japanese art travelled to the West in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This neglect has much to do with the dearth of any in-depth engagement with Japanese art by our educational and cultural institutions.

When, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Japanese art was first seen by European artists they were entranced by its visual language and began to integrate the same into their artistic repertoire. As with many contemporary Western artists, lack of knowledge about Japan did not impede this artistic exchange but it did lead to misinterpretations of artistic intent and the religious and philosophical beliefs underpinning its expression. When seeking to understand this East-West artistic exchange it is important to acknowledge that what we are seeing is a Westerner's impression of what constitutes Japanese culture and that the resultant artistic expression is limited by the extent of this understanding. When curators, dealers and art historians assign Japanese aesthetic concepts such as *wabi*, *sabi* and *kawaii* to the works of Western artists influenced by Japan, art history is often misrepresented. Instead what we are often presented with is a superficial interpretation that appeals to the Western taste for the exotic.

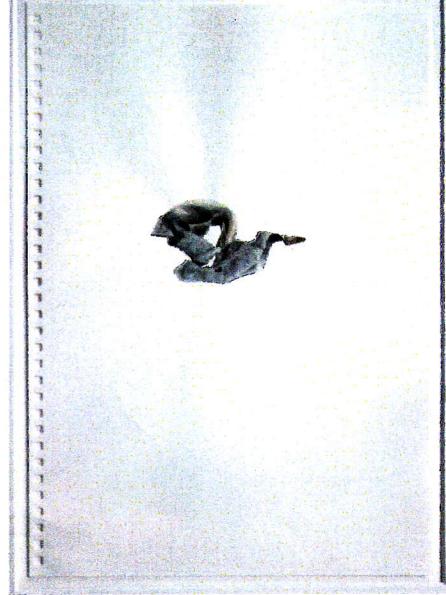
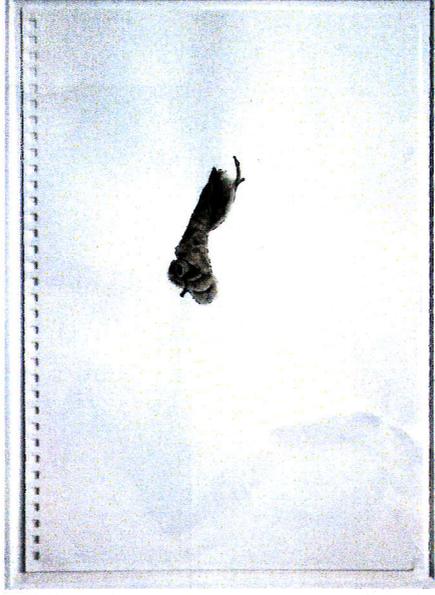
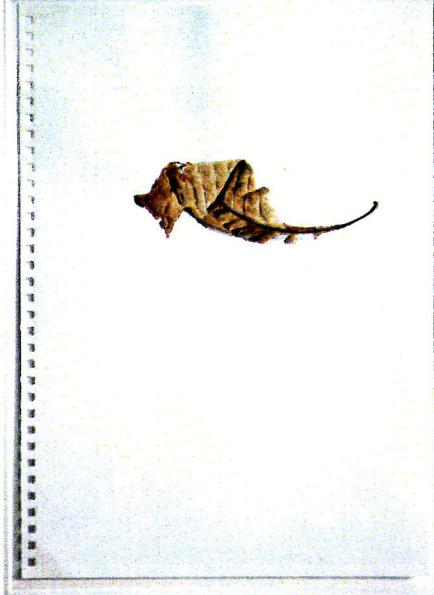
The proliferation of these Japanese aesthetic terms in interior design magazines is indicative of this superficiality. This is especially the case when it comes to philosophical and aesthetic concepts associated with Zen Buddhism. This branch of Buddhism has found particular resonance with Western



artists seeking meaning through an un-impinged freedom of expression – what results may have great beauty but often has little to do with Zen Buddhism. This misunderstanding is often perpetuated by curators who assign Zen-like qualities to a Western art work influenced by Japan.

In the didactic text accompanying *Zen to Kawaii*, the QUTAM liberally uses terms which include *Zen*, *wabi*, *sabi* and *kawaii*. By doing so the museum gives credence to the art works as somehow representative of these concepts. For example, in the wall text accompanying his 1993 *Mirror mirror on the wall* we are told that Max Gimblett was influenced by the Japanese Zen monk Sengai Gibon's 'circle, triangle, square'. By aligning Gimblett's work with an iconic Zen painting that epitomises insights drawn from long periods of intense meditation, *gravitas* is given to Gimblett's painting, whereas, for one knowledgeable about Zen painting, let alone the general public, one is left bewildered finding any such depth of meaning. Similarly, in the wall text accompanying his 1990-1993 painting *The king's pillow*, we are told that Gimblett was influenced by both Zen and the work of the *mingei* potter Shoji Hamada. Visually there is little to make this connection. Alternatively, where the connection to Japan is strongest, such as in the unassuming but strong ceramic pieces by Reg Preston and Marea Gazzard, there is no interpretative text.

Interestingly ceramicists have incorporated Japanese aesthetics into their works more succinctly than other Australian artists. This has much to do with their interaction with Japanese ceramicists, contact needed to acquire the requisite technical skills. This development of skills acquired through an interaction with Japanese tradition is not apparent in many of the other works in this exhibition. For example, Eugene Carchesio's *Japan* (2002) may have been inspired by the design on a Japanese matchbox and his 1999 watercolour series *Dead leaves of*



Brisbane may be delicate and beautiful but his works offer no insights into how the series '...reflects on the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi*...' in painting. The brushwork has none of the spontaneity associated with Zen painting and has more to do with Western botanical studies.

Both the exhibition title and the accompanying text for *Zen to Kawaii* suggest an in-depth engagement with some key elements of Japanese aesthetics. Without this text it would be interesting to see how the public interpreted the works in this exhibition. For example, looking at Kate Rhode's 2009 glass dome works (*Crab* and *Tarantula*), as their label text states, one is reminded of the traditions of Western museology conventions in the display of natural history, but whether or not her ostentatious displays of bric-a-brac in densely packed glass domes has much to say, as the label text goes on to state, about Japanese Zen, Shinto and *ikebana* is contentious. This imposition of curatorial interpretation within the first part of the exhibition, whose works represent the 'Zen' component of the show, may be spurious but the exhibition is on safer ground when looking at artists whose works draw upon more modern Japanese culture, broadly contained within the 'Kawaii' component of the exhibition. This accessibility has much to do with the closer alignment of artistic ideas between Japan and the West from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

The popular nature of Japanese prints from the *ukiyo-e* school of the 17<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> century, with their emphasis on unusual compositions, boldly outlined figures and flat colours, has, since they were first seen in Europe, provided a more accessible aesthetic to Western artists than more traditional Japanese art. Part of the accessibility of these prints is that this was the first art movement to merge Western and Japanese traditions. Western artists learnt much about composition through the study of masterworks by *ukiyo-e* masters such as Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). So too the artists in this exhibition who have most succinctly integrated a Japanese aesthetic into their works are those who have studied works by *ukiyo-e* artists. Both Matthew Sleeth and Natalya Hughes have drawn inspiration from Hokusai's series profiling Mount Fuji. In the use of seriality in his photographs, *12 views of Mt Fuji*, two of which are profiled in the exhibition, Sleeth has appropriated Hokusai's method of looking at this mountain from various viewpoints. With its ability to succinctly evoke the natural beauty of this iconic volcano seen from the interior of a room and framed by curtains, his #44 (*Lake Kawaguchiko*) (2006)

print from this series is one of the stand-out works in this exhibition. Unfortunately the exhibition text confuses our interpretation of this work by stating that, unlike Hokusai's images of Fuji, 'Sleeth presents it as obscured by the landscape' when in fact Sleeth has, like Hokusai, used a foreground element to frame a partial view of the distant mountain. Such a dramatic juxtaposition of near and far was one of the most revolutionary techniques that *ukiyo-e* artists provided to the West.

Natalya Hughes's indebtedness to *ukiyo-e* is apparent in *1-8* (from the *Hokusai* series) (2008) and *Clumpet* (2009). Her working method in both these works is to have appropriated elements of *ukiyo-e*, arranging them into a pattern that decontextualises their meaning and in doing so places emphasis on the decorative elements of the same. Contemporary artists' appropriation of masterworks is a contentious issue but in this case, by copying the work of *ukiyo-e* masters, Hughes pays homage to the artistic lessons she has learnt from them.

Popular contemporary Japanese cultural manifestations such as *kawaii* with parallels in Western art movements have provided an even more accessible artistic vocabulary. Although with roots in Japanese history, the use of *kawaii* in *manga*, *anime*, fashion and the work of internationally recognised contemporary Japanese artists such as Murakami Takeshi, has provided a visual vocabulary that is immediately recognisable as Japanese-derived. Sculptural pieces such as Benedict Ernst's *Totem* (2002) and Michael Doolan's *Chipmunk* (2008) both draw upon the *kawaii* aesthetic, but most successful in blending the childlike cuteness with the malevolence of an adult world that is *kawaii* is the artist known as Ghostpatrol whose murals dominate the final section of this exhibition.

The QUTAM needs to be congratulated on exploring the subject of Australian artists influenced by Japan but there is a sense that in this show the exhibition brief preceded the selection of artworks, with the interpretative material accompanying the pieces tailored to meet the same. A more critical interpretation of how and to what extent Australian artists have interpreted Japan would have provided a more realistic picture, one that does not reflect, as the exhibition text states, a '...rich artistic exchange [that] remains as strong today as it did in the past'. Whilst this exhibition offers some interesting responses to Japanese art there is little that will enlighten the viewer to the sophistication that underlies this significant cultural tradition. ◦



*Roving in Thomas town*, 1994 synthetic polymer paint on canvas 153 x 213 cm Private collection, Perth

## OTHER SIDE ART: TREVOR NICKOLLS

A SURVEY OF PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS 1972 - 2007

6 February - 10 April 2011

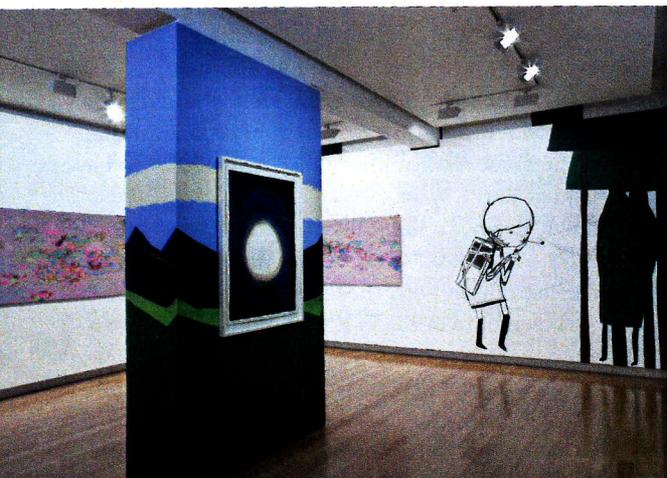


A NETS Victoria touring exhibition developed by the Ian Potter Museum of Art, The University of Melbourne



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*Zen to Kawaii: the Japanese affect*, curated by Vanessa Van Ooyen, is showing at the Queensland University of Technology Art Museum, Brisbane, 13 July to 19 December 2010.

Participating artists include: Peter Callas, Eugene Carchesio, Peter Blake, Michael Doolan, Benedict Ernst, Marea Gazzard, Ghostpatrol, Max Gimblett, Natalya Hughes, Hitesh Natalwala, Raquel Ormella, Pip & Pop, Reg Preston, Scott Redford, Kate Rohde, Sandra Selig and Matthew Sleeth.

**Dr Gary Hickey** is both a curator and art historian specialising in Japanese art. He has organised major exhibitions and published broadly. He is currently researching Australian public collections of Japanese art in preparation for a position he will take up in mid-2011 as Visiting Research Scholar at the International Research Centre for Japanese Studies in Kyoto, Japan.

P20: Pip & Pop, *Three minutes happiness* (detail), 2009, mixed media. Courtesy of the artist.

P21: 1 + 2 + 3/ Eugene Carchesio, *Dead leaves of Brisbane* (1 -3), 1999, from series of 10 watercolour on paper works. Purchased 2001 with funds provided by Lance Jones Limited and Henderson Charlton Jones Ltd during the period 1996 to 1999 through the QUT Foundation. QUT Art Collection.

P22: 1/ Hitesh Natalwala, *The search*, 2005, collage on canvas. Private collection. 2/ left to right: Pip & Pop, *Echo from a cherry cloud* (II), 2010; Ghostpatrol, *True adventures*, 2010; Pip & Pop, *Echo from a cherry cloud* (I), 2010; Ghostpatrol, *True adventures*, 2010. Installation view, Queensland University of Technology Art Museum.

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