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The Punk Spirit: Japan's hippest young fashion designer makes his first foray into the world of art

by David McNeill

In a cavernous basement-style studio in Tokyo's hip Harajuku district, Takahashi Jun, the man some call the future of the Japanese fashion industry, is drawing a picture of a pistol. "This is what we call an 'art jam session,'" he says, through a cloud of smoke from an ever-present Marlboro Light, passing the sketch to his friend, the Japanese-American artist Madsaki, who draws what looks like the US White House underneath Takahashi's original gun.

The picture spells out the letter 'T' and goes on the wall next to 'S,' amid a jumble of pop art references around the studio that include punk icon Iggy Pop, a wonky reproduction of The Last Supper and a life-size model of a Star Wars storm trooper. The two have almost worked their way through the entire alphabet; by the end of November, the product of these sessions will be on view in the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Science, in what is Takahashi's first foray into the world of modern art.

Why HK? Takahashi says he "feels close to" China. "We are all Asians and we need to realize that despite our historical differences." At the moment he believes the center of Asian art is still Tokyo but this will change. "I think art in Asia will become very interesting."

The slight, 52-kilo designer once sang lead vocals in a punk band called the Tokyo Sex Pistols, and many of the stylistic features of punk – irreverence, improvisation, the collective approach to creativity, and the recycling and mixing of cultural artifacts -- still influence what he does. It is one reason why he has been called, not always complimentarily, a fashion DJ, sampling riffs from a grab-bag of styles and images.

"Spiritually, the punk aesthetic still has an impact on my work," he says. "Concretely, street fashion, high fashion and punk are all mixed up."
In another life, Takahashi might have ended up playing punk covers in Tokyo bars, but his restless creative energy took him elsewhere. He began designing clothes for friends while still at college, before starting his design label, Undercover, and selling his creations through his own nationwide chain of shops. Today, following a series of sell-out shows in Paris, he is being called Japan's hottest young designer in two decades, a worthy successor to Miyake Issey and Watanabe Junya. Rich, talented and famous, he is still only 35.

As Martin Amis wrote when he met director Steven Spielberg: What's he got? How do you get it? Can I have some?

Frustratingly for those who believe artists should be difficult and that genius comes from pain, Takahashi is disarmingly polite, modest about his talent and says he had a very ordinary childhood in rural Gunma Prefecture. Japan. "I was the son of a salary-man. I liked going outside and playing baseball like the other kids," he says. "I never had any particular ambition or dream to be an artist or designer. I just had this drive to create things for myself, not to make lots of money. If you try to make things just to make money you won't end up with art."

"That's what I respect about him, he does his own thing," says Madsaki, who grew up in a white suburb of New Jersey. The two met three years ago at one of Takahashi's shows. Madsaki says he "knew nothing" about fashion. "It was the first fashion show in my life, but it just blew my mind. It was the same fantasy world that I live in. He invited me to his house and he said, 'By the way, I paint too.' He offered to do something together and here we are, but I never expected it to be this big!"

Oddly, they profess no particular liking for contemporary artists and only one for a pre-modern painter – the Dutch medieval artist Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516). Both share the same anarchic, free-thinking approach to drawing. "For me it's just an exercise to make my brain more flexible and soft," says Madsaki. "I'm just tapping into my unconsciousness. Maybe there's a message in there but painting is just a form of vibrating energy." Takahashi agrees: "Its stream of consciousness. If you think too hard about it, the art will stop flowing."

Takahashi says this is one of the reasons he took to drawing. "I have to concentrate when I design clothes but with art I just draw stuff that comes into my mind. It goes straight from my head to the page. I don't like to think too much about it because that gets in the way. I like the freedom of it."

There is an obvious political message in Takahashi's work: from T-shirts that carry anarchist-type slogans such as "Fight War Not Wars" and "Violence Invites Violence," to the supposedly subconscious melding of the White House and guns in the HK-bound art. He insists though that he is not trying to be explicitly political with the HK exhibition. "I have my own views of course but I'm not trying to make a political statement. The pictures are part scary, pretty, funny, bleak and cute; there are a lot of different elements in there. I'd like people to look at them with an open mind and enjoy them, not ponder too much what I'm trying to say."

Still, the conversation often becomes political, especially when it turns to the current White House incumbent and to the repeated visits by Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro to Yasukuni Shrine. "Koizumi's opinions are not the same as all the Japanese people," says Takahashi. "I think when you push your views that hard you risk being misunderstood. Koizumi represents a view among some people of his generation, but not by any means the views of all Japanese."

Both men believe the influence of the US in Japan and the rest of Asia is waning among young people. "It's not good to be controlled by a country," says Takahashi. "Young people have to come forward with this own views." Madsaki says he has "had enough of" America. It's just gone so dumb," says Madsaki. That's why I came back here. New York is always going to be New York and the vibe is still there. But I knew that Bush was going to win again and I didn't want to leave a single penny in that country so I said 'Fuck it, I'm going to come home.' If I go back, it will be to Hawaii. If you didn't turn on the TV there you'd never know it was part of the US."

Takahashi continues the US-theme: The West and East coast are bad enough but the center of the country is worse," says Takahashi. "The scary thing about America is that is supposed to be a global power but it is divided into two; this Christian, conservative, right-wing that only thinks about supporting its own kind. And I really don't understand how Koizumi can go along with that. I have this strong sense we're all moving in a very bad direction."

And his message to the HK audience? There is a lot of history between us, but let's get over the past and the brainwashing on both sides and move together toward a peaceful future."

Jun Takahashi and Madsaki's exhibition "Intermission – Dark Pop Fantasy" ran at the HK Museum of Medical Science from November 27 to December 5, 2004.

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