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Finding a Unicorn (left) and *White Cake Palace* in Ai Kijima's "Fused and Quilted" at Franklin Parrasch Gallery



Ai Kijima
Finding a Unicorn
2005
Franklin Parrasch Gallery



Ai Kijima
White Cake Palace (detail)
2004
Franklin Parrasch Gallery

CRAZY QUILTS

by Ben Davis

Ai Kijima, "Fused and Quilted," Sept. 12-Oct. 18, 2006, at Franklin Parrasch Gallery, 20 West 57th Street, New York, N.Y. 10019

Ai Kijima's brightly colored Pop quilts exude a low-voltage schizophrenia against the white walls of Franklin Parrasch Gallery, the 57th Street space long known for shows of contemporary ceramics and sophisticated crafts. The works manage to incarnate the joyous, if demented, fecundity of the contemporary visual environment -- and also draw out its hidden underside.

Born in Japan, Kijima graduated from the school of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2005 and now makes her home in the Windy City. Her artistic method is simple: She collects fabric scraps, often with patterns featuring popular animated characters, then fuses them into candy-colored cartoonscapes.

In the large *Finding a Unicorn* (2005), for instance, Kijima stitches a quilted volcano, spewing a lava of yellow cartoon flowers, a sword-wielding elf (Link from *The Legend of Zelda*), carousel horses, Belle (from *Beauty and the Beast*), a waterfall, a rearing gargoyle (from the cartoon *Gargoyles*) and a large, scowling gray male face. The result is like a kid's ride that's just a little too aggressive for comfort.

Going over Kijima's dense compositions carefully, one can discover -- or one can think one discovers -- suggestions of connecting narratives. On one side of *White Cake Palace* (2004), two men in nightcaps, faces romantically turned towards one another, curl up beneath a blanket adorned with soldiers and a military coat-of-arms incorporating a cartoon bird. A rainbow shoots from their heads, connecting to the lower half of a cowboy jutting into the picture, as if he were part of a homoerotic dream.

On the other half of the quilt, a flower-bearing Belle bats her eyes at a girly cartoon elephant, while Superman, a floating Evil Eye and two male zookeepers look on in alarm, and a stitched-in figure from a Persian miniature prays for them below. Precisely because they are so sanitized, kid's cartoons seem to provide a space to project weird libidinal associations into (something the endless rumors about subliminal sexual content in Disney films attests to.) Here, what keeps Kijima's innuendos from being ham-fisted is that they seem to be merely freeing up energies that are already there, submerged.

Most often, however, Kijima simply bounces the prefab emotional content of images off one another. In *Let's* (2006), the composition reads left-to-right like a musical score, methodically alternating major and minor chords: first, a Goth figure resembling Brandon Lee from *The Crow*; then, cartoon roses; followed in turn by a sinister howling wolf, psychedelic wallpaper patterns, a bullfighter taking on a raging bull, a kitten, a skull, a rainbow and a rushing sea pattern from a Japanese kimono. The flow of affects is both high-key and rather impersonal, not pinned to any real emotional narrative.

For all the chaos, the formula here -- James Rosenquist meets Gee's Bend -- is neat and tidy. The strategy of cross-pollinating time-



Ai Kijima
Let's
 2006
 Frankling Parrasch Gallery

consuming craftwork with splashy mass media imagery is very much of the moment. Kijima gives us a hint as to why. In one small, placemat-sized work, a bonneted Holly Hobbie walks, zombie-like, towards a traditional Chinese dragon. Another features Harry Potter (with a mutant arm) fleeing a field littered with Power Rangers, flamenco dancers and the names of Spanish locations.

The effect is narrative and semantic uncertainty -- who's alien and who's at home? Are these adventure or horror stories? The subtext is the interpenetrating euphoria and panic of cultural globalization, symbols colliding randomly with one another far beyond their original context. (For this reason, Kijima titles this series "Erehwon.")

With the theme of globalization in mind, Kijima's recourse to craft takes on an impressive dialectical significance. While Rosenquist's expansive billboard-style paintings pay homage, however critical and ironic, to a certain kind of American cultural power, the images in Kijima's fabric collages lack this sense of force and centeredness. Instead, her imagery comes off as a sort of disembodied, global visual static (fittingly, she draws them from kids' bed sheets, curtains and other such background paraphernalia). And, reacting to this feeling, instead of taking her cues from the domineering mass-media, Kijima adopts the intimate physicality, care and focused labor of quilting, a medium associated with a certain kind of incarnated experience.



Ai Kijima
Erehwon 23
 2006
 Franklin Parrasch Gallery

To treat Kijima's quilts as purely graphic emblems is to miss half the picture. It is best to take in both sides of her pieces -- the swirling parade of readymade cartoon specters on the front, and their negatives on the back, each line retraced with care by sewing machine. Viewed as objects, the association that pieces like *Finding a Unicorn* conjure is of children's security blankets gone haywire, the artwork as comforting, neurotic fetish in a dehumanizing world.



Ai Kijima
Erehwon 10
 2004
 Franklin Parrasch Gallery

In an interview with PixelSurgeon.com, Kijima insists that she expresses "a universal viewpoint," rather than a specific "Japanese" style, adding "I would rather remain anonymous." Her practice, aggregating visual flotsam culled from all over, is a way of enacting this unfettered sense of self. And the resulting visual phantasmagorias become a kind of allegory for global culture in general, with artists jetting nomadically from one international event to the next.

An image of Kijima's studio on her website -- rows of shelves stacked with fabric, neatly and precisely catalogued -- provides a telling contrast to the chaotic, every-direction-at-once feeling of her compositions. It is as if the attention lavished on the materiality of quilting were the flip-side of the interest in rootless, free-flowing images. Viewed in this light, Kijima's work speaks for a generation of artists to come, for whom staying still is not an option, but endless circulation is not enough.

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Detail of the reverse of Ai Kijima's *Let's*



Photo of Ai Kijima's studio by David Ettinger, from www.aikijima.com