

# Painting Superflat: post-painterly figuration, commodity-life and spectral return in Japanese contemporary painting

Ana Matilde Sousa

When presented with the challenge of thinking about painting in the age of new media and global information, an intriguing if possibly paradoxical characteristic of Superflat — Japan’s most iconic contemporary art movement, led by the prolific and controversial visual artist, theorist and art impresario Takashi Murakami — immediately came to mind. My question is: why is it that Superflat, known for its close association with the internet-driven, multimedia-sensitive and post-human-friendly subculture of *otaku* (a modern Japanese slang word roughly equivalent to “geek” or “nerd”), has proven to be so relentlessly preoccupied with the seemingly anachronistic medium of painting?

The artists I will address fit into a loose assumption of Superflat that includes the self-styled “group nineteen-sixty-five” — Takashi Murakami, Yoshitomo Nara, Mariko Mori, Makoto Aida — and a younger generation of Japanese artists associated with Murakami’s Kaikai Kiki studio, such as Chiho Aoshima, Aya Takano and Mr. (Masakatsu Iwamoto). Although these authors are better filed under the umbrella of “visual artist,” they have thoughtfully explored painting and painting-related grammar(s). Some, like Mori and Aoshima, address the history and traditions of painting by means of digital and photographic technologies. In Aoshima’s case, she uses the vectorized brush of Adobe Illustrator to create otherworldly “gardens of earthly delights,” usually made into large-format inkjet prints but existing, primarily, as geometric primitives which can be scaled to virtually any size and even re-arranged into new compositions. In Mori’s case, her pop-infused pastiches of Buddhist, Shinto and New Age imagery are brought to life through digitally manipulated photographs and videos, allowing the artist to have her own image repeated

throughout the “canvas” as well as inserting 3D computer graphics into photographic sceneries (e.g. 1996’s *Burning Desire*, or 1996-98’s *Mirror of Water*). In both Aoshima and Mori, this playfully mischievous back-and-forth between, on the one hand, recognizable eastern and western stylistic conventions and spirituality, and on the other, the glossy kitsch of electronic media is critical in making their works visually and conceptually challenging.

Others Superflat artists, such as Murakami, Aida and Mr., engage with computer graphics imagery and rendering processes via “old school” paint-on-canvas. In their works, computer graphics and software applications are absorbed into the medium of painting, both in the processes of materializing these works, and their content in a strictly representational sense (i.e. what is actually portrayed on canvas). The use of computers and graphics programs such as Photoshop in studies of composition and color is well documented, not only in interviews with the artists, but in the case of Murakami and Mr., through video-sharing and social networking services such as *Instagram* (in which their daily lives and the practice of painting are documented alongside each other) [Figure 42, left]. Nonetheless, the paintings alone reflect their computer-mediated creative processes — or, at least, the presence of the computer monitor as a phantasmatic horizon — in the clearness of shapes and outlines of vector illustration, gradients and cell shading,



**Figure 42** Left: Misteryanen. *S/t*, 2014, 17 February. Instagram post<sup>2</sup>. Right: Mr. (Masakatsu Iwamoto). *Urryyaa!! (Wrea!!)*, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, 162 x 130,3 cm [detail]

and screen-like flatness. In some cases, the materiality of desktop environments, or even the applications used to generate 2D graphics, become themselves part of the depicted subject. For instance, in Murakami's paintings featuring gray-and-white square patterns as backgrounds, alluding to Photoshop's empty window-canvas. Or Aida's *Jumble of One Hundred Flowers* (2012), a painting over 17 meters long where dozens of laughing, naked young women disintegrate into confetti over an endless frieze of colorful pixels (or, as described in the press release of his retrospective "Monument for Nothing", "virtually bear down like characters in a zombie game"<sup>1</sup>). Or in Mr.'s recent paintings like *Urryyaa!!* (2013), where his trademark *anime* girls appear among Photoshop toolbars, Windows' graphical interfaces, desktop icons and web browsers (we can even spot the Mozilla Firefox icon in the top right of the picture) [Figure 42, right]. In truth, some of Mr.'s previous works already resembled monumental-sized desktop wallpapers, teasingly blurring the line between the politically engaged legacy of muralist painting and 16:3 LCD displays overflowing with *otaku* imagery (e.g. *Desire*, *The New Me*, or *Seven Colors In The Spectrum*, *Ten Colors In The Mind*, all from 2011).

While such strategies may at first glance appear gimmicky, I argue that this crossbred, "updated" pictorial surface has shaped something of a "post-painterly figuration," to wordplay on Clement Greenberg's famous "post-painterly abstraction." Both share a tendency towards a "clear, unbroken, and sharp definition"<sup>3</sup> even if the line separating the "painterly" from the "linear" is, as Greenberg himself points out, "by no means a hard and fast one."<sup>4</sup> Contrarily to Greenberg's abstraction, however, Superflat is rooted in Japanese comics and animation, resulting in paintings that are nearly always figural in nature. In fact, they are almost *excessively* so, offering us a viewing experience that, as Thomas Lamarre suggests, may become closer to that of "reading up" an information field. Indeed, in the case of Aoshima, her works are quite literally data, Adobe Illustrator data. But the analogy between Superflat painting's surface and information fields is as easily traced, for instance, in Murakami's or Mr.'s paintings, which can be seen as a kind of detachedly rendered, large-scale paint-by-numbers.

In her essay "From Superflat Windows to Facebook Walls" (2012), Jinying Li traces a connection between Superflat and the concept of "hyperspace" in 1980s American films such as *TRON* and *Blade Runner*.<sup>5</sup> This "hyperspace" is described as a "screengenic" "surface for play and dispersal," achieved either by a "deflation of space," an "inflation of space," or a combination of both.<sup>6</sup> We can observe these two spatial modes if we compare, for instance, Aoshima's or Mr.'s tightly packed *mise-en-scène* with Murakami's paintings of characters (e.g. Mr.Ko2, My Lonesome Cowboy, DOB) plastered over flat color fields, often using metallic paints to emphasize the presence of "empty" space. As Li points out, both the "excess of surface" of deflated space and the saturated complexity of inflated space are fundamental visual cues present in Superflat that reflect the material reality of cybertechnologies.<sup>7</sup> The canvas affinity with the screen —

both are, after all, well familiar with the metaphor of the “window,” from Alberti to our computers’ and tablets’ operating systems —, makes painting a deft medium for expressing this flattened visual logic of a “nonperspective vision,”<sup>8</sup> gazing “across the field (instead of into it).”<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, by interweaving painting’s eastern and western traditions with millennial cybervisuality, Superflat painting successfully represents the “depthless,” the “floating” and the “timeless,” appealing to a techno-fetishistic disavowal of human limits and the hallucinatory pleasure of boundless possibilities. (Mr.’s 2014 painting *Tokyo* comes to mind, where a dozen lively young girls in cute clothes, a dog and a plush bear float freely over a picturesque view of Tokyo, leaving trails of sparkling stars and hearts along the way). In this sense, even most Superflat sculpture is better defined as “tridimensional representations of thoroughly two-dimensional works,”<sup>10</sup> akin to the process at work in turning flat anime characters into sculptured figurines. This is something we see systematically in Murakami’s sculptures, from his human-scale *anime* figures such as the “infamous” *Hiropon* (1997) or *My Lonesome Cowboy* (1998), to the collectible miniatures in *Superflat Museum* (2005), or the mock-cardboard *gurafigu* version of MissKo2 (*Big Box PKo2*, 2011); but also in those of Nara, Mr., or Aoshima, who have all translated their characters into tridimensional incarnations; or even in Mori’s *Star Doll* (1998) for Parkett 54, a 26 cm height figure of her earlier life-size photographic image *Birth of a Star* (1995).

From techno-fetishism to commodity fetishism, Superflat also tackles head-on with the issue of painting’s own status as a market-friendly practice, whose production of transactional material objects is often perceived as compromising any claims to avant-garde. While the history of modern western painting is inseparable from the raise of the commercial bourgeoisie — pivotal in such genres as landscape painting and still lifes —, art’s radical interrogations are nonetheless expected to belong within the virgin white corridors of contemporary art museums; not in the corrupt netherworld of the museum shop. In (post) modern-day Japan, however, the avant-garde has long since inhabited the shelves of mass retailers and shopping malls: in the comics, animation and videogames which are some of the country’s most exploratory, thought-provoking and grassroots artistic productions, sold alongside merchandise and “related goods” such as collectible figurines and fan-drawn manga. Not only that but, while avant-garde groups such as Gutai have remained a side note in history (albeit one well-loved by the art-savvy crowd), manga and anime have risen globally as a soft power to be reckoned with, challenging western (and, in particular, north-American) cultural hegemony. Murakami describes the porosity between pop culture and avant-garde in Japan as “the shared center of art and entertainment.”<sup>11</sup> Such a flattening of hierarchical divides between fine art and commercial entertainment perceivably gives Superflat artists the home-field advantage in understanding how “commodity-objects” are no longer the endpoint but the beginning of *worlds* that unfold from them — what Thomas Lamarre calls “commodity-events.”<sup>12</sup>



of a commodity-life,”<sup>14</sup> strategically employing painting to tease the boundaries between specialist and amateur, reception and production, original and derivative.

Finally, what of the “mystery of painting” in Superflat, which often comes across as a remarkably non-mysterious art form? Indeed, it may appear hard to uphold any kind of painterly mystique against, say, Murakami’s blunt honesty towards his money-making and celebrity-seeking acrobatics, even claiming such things as “all my works are made up of special effects”<sup>15</sup>; or the many critical analysis that have effectively dismantled Superflat’s discourse as one of self-exotization and packaging of racial difference in the recognizable codes of Western art.<sup>16</sup> Yet, just like Murakami articulates a shared center of art and entertainment, I ask: is there perhaps a shared center to the medium of painting itself and this so-called “Japaneseness”? I believe there is, and it can be pinpointed to the notion of “the vanishing,” as formulated by Marilyn Ivy in *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (1995). Ivy defines “the vanishing” as that:

which (dis)embodies in its gerund form the movement of something passing away, gone but not quite, suspended between presence and absence, located at a point that both is and is not here in the repetitive process of absencing [...]. The vanishing can only be tracked through the poetics of phantasm, through attentiveness to the politics of displacement, deferral, and originary repetition.”<sup>17</sup>

Ivy argues that late-twentieth-century essentialized images of Japan’s uniqueness harbor deep anxieties about the potential loss of national-cultural identity, sprouting a series of “discourses that evoke the vanishing auratic in an age of electronic reproduction.”<sup>18</sup> Symptomatically, Murakami has continually vocalized the importance of traditional Japanese painting methods and techniques in Superflat aesthetics, such as *ukiyo-e* wood printing (including erotic *shunga*) and *nihonga* — the “Japanese-style painting” emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a response to western-style painting, defined by finely worked flat surfaces and an emphasis on lines and planes instead of volume.<sup>19</sup> Murakami also re-inscribes *manga* and *anime* (recognized for their “flattened space, lateral slidings, and still-image motion... [that] fashions itself as a dramatic paradigm shift from cinematic perspective”<sup>20</sup>) within a trans-historical continuum of Japanese pictorial aesthetics; although the line connecting *otaku* to Edo culture is presented as one deeply convoluted by the dominance of the United States. Nonetheless, as Jill Gasparina points out, “with this concept [of Superflat], Murakami also appropriates a central theme of Western artistic modernism — the ‘flatness of the surface.’”<sup>21</sup> By simultaneously calling upon both these “modernities”, Superflat discloses Japan’s and painting’s shared core as “sites of the vanishing”: on one hand, as stated by Ivy, these “repeated, fetishized assertions of Japanese cultural unity uncover the fragmenting processes of modern westernization itself and the necessity of Japanese subjects to bring together — to suture — those fragments”<sup>22</sup>; on the other, it

plays into (and with) the western art world's (fetishistic) nostalgia towards the golden age of modernist medium-specificity, by suggesting its ghostly (postmodern) reincarnation in the surface of flat-screen televisions and computers. In Superflat, artists "thematize loss in a variety of ways as they work inevitably to recover that loss"<sup>23</sup>: the loss of Japan's "nation-culture" to north-American colonial domination and consumer capitalism; the loss of aura and bodily experience through media technologies and electronic reproduction; the continual "deaths" (and "rebirths") of painting, an old-world medium permanently under threat of becoming outdated; and, more generally, the loss of a perspectival and centered gaze in post-modern subjectivity. Through its persistence within a commodity matrix of "mass-mediated dissemination and spectatorship", Superflat's (elegiac) "revival" of painting's and Japaneseness's shared "medium-specificity" — flatness — becomes a "generically representative" reminder of what both of them used to signify in the cultural world(s) where they had their place<sup>24</sup>; as a well as a seeming reassurance that they still, albeit representatively, live.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, if according to Ivy the "representative value becomes a mobile sign, detachable from locale but dependent on perpetually evoking it,"<sup>26</sup> then it merges or even becomes interchangeable with the ubiquitous "highly mobilized consuming gaze"<sup>27</sup> of contemporary commodity experience that Li identifies in her theory of Superflat art. Works such as Mori's 3D video *Nirvana* (1996-7) or Aida's *Harakiri School Girls* (2002) are good examples of such layered "generic representatives" of the vanishing, evoking on one hand kitschy, "new agey" reincarnations of Buddhist deities and traditional eastern painting, and on the other, reframing Japanese ritual suicide (*seppuku* or "stomach-cutting") and *ukiyo-e*



**Figure 44** Left: Mariko Mori. *Reference image for Nirvana*, 1997. Right: Makoto Aida. *Harakiri School Girls*, 1999. Offset lithograph, 103 x 72.8 cm.

engraving within the pop visuals of postmodern female subcultures (the *kogal* and *ganguro* school girls in miniskirts, loose socks and dark tans) [Figure 44].

Against a common misconception, Cindy Lissica argues that even as Superflat artists thoroughly challenge the conceptual distinction between art and commodity, they do not seek to erase the “aura” as much as they reinvigorate Benjamin’s concept of the aura by applying it to the contemporary art context — namely, by deploying brand identity as an aura transmitted onto anything the artist produces<sup>28</sup> (Murakami’s provocative incorporation of the copyright symbol in his retrospective show for MoCA, ©*Murakami*, is the very embodiment of this). Yet Superflat also stands for, as phrased by Murakami, the artists’ “quest to imbue works with a true soul.” And it does so by valuing copyist-like rendering of detail, the precision of professional artisans, the decorative craftsmanship of commercial illustrators, or the subcultural authenticity of amateur and fan art. For instance, Murakami’s *Instagram* account (<http://instagram.com/takashipom>) repeatedly shows us images of his crew of assistants minutely rendering new creations into dozens of canvases (a process that includes the erasing of silkscreen marks for an extra smooth, digitalized surface), in a blatant disclosure of the workshop-like production line of his studio. Interestingly, the comment sections often become, themselves, a site of discussion over the legitimacy of Murakami’s painting practices, e.g. in one such photo some people question “art of who?” and “wonder how much of your art is even yours anymore,” while others rush to his defense. The same goes for Mr., who can be often seen replicating his pre-made computer illustrations in a paint-by-numbers fashion; or Aida, known for exhaustively retouching his creations; or in fact most of the artists I’ve been addressing, whose painting practices often involve small brushes and big canvases. Such valuing of technical painting skills largely unacknowledged by dominant modernist rhetoric’s in the West — copying, illustrating, decorating; in short, those seemingly depoliticized “special effects” Murakami speaks of — teases Western expectations of the Japanese as “colonized copy,”<sup>29</sup> the “adept mimics, good at copying but lacking originality.”<sup>30</sup> To be sure, critiques of Superflat are more often than not plagued by racist notions of mimicry towards the Western artistic canon — namely, the deeper and more mature “big brother” of Pop Art — with the artists’ Japanese identity playing a role in the attacks.<sup>31</sup>

To conclude, as stated by Lissica, “the superficial surface of Superflat is a terrain of complexity marked by both a layering of identities and a flattening of (but not absence of) hierarchical divisions between fine art and commercial culture.”<sup>32</sup> Like a Dickensian tale, these “layers of identities” — Japan’s and painting’s shared and convoluted notions of “flatness” — are haunted by the ghosts of past, present and future, persistently lingering, vanishing and returning in today’s globalized millennial capitalism. It is no accident that Murakami’s *Superflat Manifesto* starts off by boldly stating that “the world of the future might be like Japan is today — superflat.”<sup>33</sup> If, as postulated by Derrida, “at bottom, the

specter is the future... it presents itself only as that which could come, or come back,<sup>34</sup> then Superflat's fascination with painting may very well come to this: the hauntological mystery of painting as spectral return, its inner logics of phantasm and fetish, so close to Japan's own identity anxieties in late modernity.

- 1 MORI ART MUSEUM — Aida Makoto: Monument For Nothing Press Release Vol. 2. September 27, 2012. [http://www.mori.art.museum/jp/press-re/pdf/aida\\_120927\\_en.pdf](http://www.mori.art.museum/jp/press-re/pdf/aida_120927_en.pdf) (2014-08-11)
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- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid, 212.
- 8 Ibid, 207.
- 9 Ibid, 205.
- 10 AZUMA, Hiroki — Super Flat Speculation. In MURAKAMI, Takashi (Edit.) — *Super Flat*. Tokyo: Madra, 2000, p. 147.
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- 17 IVY, Marilyn — *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 20.
- 18 Ibid, p.12.
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- 20 LI — From Superflat Windows to Facebook Walls, 208.
- 21 GASPARINA — Murakami's Conquest of Ubiquity, p. 162-163.
- 22 IVY — *Discourses of the Vanishing*, p. 20.
- 23 Ibid, p.13.
- 24 Ibid, p. 12-13.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid, p. 13.
- 27 LI — From Superflat Windows to Facebook Walls, 214.
- 28 LISSICA — *Beyond Consumption*, p. 134.
- 29 IVY — *Discourses of the Vanishing*, p. 7.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 LISSICA — *Beyond Consumption*, p. 116-117.
- 32 Ibid, p. 117.
- 33 MURAKAMI — *Super Flat*, p. 5.
- 34 DERRIDA, Jacques — Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International [1993]. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. London: Routledge, 1994, p. 39.