Story by Susan Corrigan

Thanks to Riho Aihara

BIFF! BANG! POW! JAPAN GOES POP

Half billboard and half canvas, the new Japanese smart art assaults the senses with a knowing smile while it waits for the world to catch up

Welcome to Japan, a modern space odyssey waiting for the rest of the world to catch up as it takes a coy glance backward. It's a culture that strikes onlookers - and maybe even those living in it - as having roots 1,000 years in the past as well as 1,000 years in the future. At once dystopia and utopia, it's a land of mixed messages and mixed media that seems to converge happily. At the very least, its overstuffed commuter trains run on time. But that's not the reason why every gallerist worth their oats, or every culture junkie conducting a love affair with the last word in ultramodernity, can't help but focus on Japan as a place where their dreams of art utopia might come true. This month, two eagerly-awaited shows under the aegis of London's Japan 2001 festival - Selfridges' *Tokyo Life* and the Barbican Centre's *JAM: Tokyo London* - are offering the great British public a chance to see for themselves just what makes Japan's art energy the envy of the rest of the world. "Maybe the Japanese are influencing others in a more creative way right now," reasons art director Koji Mizutani, whose *Merry* straight-ups project is showing at *Tokyo Life*. "It used to be that the Japanese imitated what was happening outside Japan, but now they seek originality in their own work, based on their own history."

A roll call of art world stars - some of whom, it should be noted, haven't even soloed on their home turf - are, as a result, delivering a futuristic wake-up call to the rest of the world. Working across disciplines and traditional barriers, Japanese artists like Takashi Murakami, Yoshitomo Nara and Masato Nakamura join export-only divas like Tomoko Takahashi and Mariko Mori in making playful, evocative work while a graphic designer like the acclaimed Koji Mizutani doesn't flinch at calling himself an artist as he records the dreams and ambitions of Generation Next. They're not afraid of sharing the workload to lighten it, nor are they so ego-driven they can't give their peers and protégés a break or a hand. These people invented synergy: the practice of working across fashion, photography, animation, music, art, architecture and the commercial with little regard for boundaries. It's art. Why should there be borders instead of formats?

JAM: Tokyo London has scored a real coup: the first big showing of the work of Takashi Murakami, who doesn't flinch at flying the flag for Japanese art abroad nor making it happen at home. Dividing his time between the Hiropon Factory - an art compound in the Tokyo suburbs he devised to hatch the ideas of other ultramodern artists who assist him with anime-driven canvases and sculpture - and his Brooklyn warehouse, Murakami's emerged with a manifesto he calls 'Superflat', drawing on the traditions of ancient Ukiyo-e style painting (it means 'floating world'; think of the shadow-free Hokusai prints that seem standard issue at any sushi bar) and applying it to pop culture's icons, but with a twist. "We want to see the newest things," says Murakami. "That is because we want to see the future, even if only momentarily. It's the moment where, even if we don't completely understand what we have glimpsed, we are nonetheless touched by it. This is what we call art."

Superflat isn't just another new art theory; it's also a landmark survey of Japanese art currently running at Los Angeles' Museum Of Contemporary Art - globally, the hottest ticket so far this year. On the manifesto side, in common with Ukiyo-e, Superflat shows art that exists only in two dimensions; there's no shadow. Bright and shiny, it lives on in the sensual assault inherent in modern Japanese pop culture, whether anime, graphics, manga or pop. It makes the viewer (or voyeur) want to see the world with a thousand eyes and ears, on an economy-class ticket. It's accelerated and hyperannuated; sexuality over-expressed past arousal or greed to the point of silliness; crowded to capacity. It's the first relevant 'ism' of the 21st Century and its author is both iconoclast and catalyst, artist and curator. Although hyperaccelerated, Murakami is a deeply practical man who came up with Superflat to kick-start the Japanese art market in an age of economic near-shutdown.

Since 1996, when Murakami opened Hiropon Factory, he's married each pop or 'lowbrow' sensibility to its ancient 'highbrow' counterpart while trying to push ahead on behalf, or with, an art scene he's had a large hand in creating. Outside the Factory, Japanese culture mirrors his concerns: fashion boutiques and department stores have curated spaces; often, these are where the group hold their shows. Since the late '60s and early '70s, where artists like Yoyoi Kusama or Fluxus bods like Yoko Ono and Tatsumi Orimoto seemed interchangeable with demanding art-theorist fashion designers like Rei Kawakubo or Yohji Yamamoto, pop culture has benefited from this seamless aesthetic which Murakami chooses to highlight in a very hip way. There is room for everyone: female artists get exposure in shows like *Tokyo Girls Bravo* to make gains in spite of the hidebound office politics, corporatism and sexism which still runs amok in the parent culture. Murakami demonstrates the utopian possibilities of a collectivism which mirrors a corporate culture in all but the bottom line. Ideas and play, rather than money and work, do the talking here. Ironically, with the snowballing of Murakami's profile at home and abroad, the investment in the power of ideas and images is reaping significant rewards, which might offer some badly-needed lessons to our cash-fixated, nouveau-yuppie culture which sprang from the belly of mid '90s creative impulses like the evil bitch monster in *Alien*. It's subversion, but not as we here know it - yet.

For a glimpse of what might be happening under this shiny surface, the work of Yoshitomo Nara offers clues to a restless, hormonal psychology at play in the minds of younger Japanese. One of the most widely recognised artists to appear in the *JAM: Tokyo London* show (and LA's *Superflat*), his rough drawings of angry little animalistic girls look as if they could emit playful growls at any moment, at large in a playground from Hell. Nara - who became a wilful exile from his native land in 1988, decamping to Dusseldorf to draw out a "student lifestyle" he didn't want to abandon – has seen his girls, who look like devilish versions of the drawings covering the notebooks of Japanese teens, achieve icon status outside his homeland, where he is only now getting the 'official' recognition he deserves with a solo show at Yokohama's Museum Of Art later this year.

Although these acrylic works appear aggressive, Nara insists he was never a rebel. "My images of animals and children may be misconstrued as illustrative, naive, decorative or Japanese-style, but this is not the case. These images stand for another possible way of living in society; one that opposes and seeks to remove the many barriers between us," he insists. In any case, to Nara it seems much more difficult to move within Japan than without. "Since I was born in the countryside of northern Japan, coming to Tokyo for the first time was like coming inside from the outside. For me, there are insides and outsides even within countries and these distinctions become meaningless after a while."

For *JAM: Tokyo London*, Nara is collaborating with photographer Takashi Homma, an i-D contributor who emerged from fashion to document the vistas offered by Tokyo suburbia. Their affinity is natural. "It doesn't matter that I'm a painter and he's a photographer," Nara explains. "We met and became friends naturally; we are part of the same generation and make sense together." Yet, despite the stamp that origins inevitably brand on artists, Nara's aiming for links he sees as universal, not subject to the arbitrary borders nationhood might instil in others. "I would prefer not to limit myself and my peers, wherever they may live, to such arbitrary divisions of in and out, East and West. After all, any artwork should be appreciated for what it is, independent of the artist's nationality. So I would hope that people coming to see the exhibition in London look not for Japan in our works, but at the works themselves, because the stories they tell are not from any one place but the earth itself."

However, for Western critics and art-lovers, the Japanese hook is irresistible. It opens the doors of galleries and, at least initially, provides a hook to the wider public looking for an entry point into new identities or new takes on familiar subjects. This year's Venice Biennale will showcase the work of Masato Nakamura, a shy-but-cool thirtysomething whose work - a reappropriation of corporate logos - says a lot about the proliferation of billboard symbolism in the wider world. In a city like Tokyo, the neon and wattage powering these icons lights up the sky at night to a degree that looks exaggerated and suggests that the edgier residents of the city are just as troubled by the pervasiveness of the corporate world ▶

From left: *Tokyo Rabbit Paradise* by Command+N; *Merry* by Koji Mizutani; *Tokyo Life* posters; *The Company* by Maywa Denki; *Bread-Man* by Tatsumi Orimoto; *Merry* by Koji Mizutani; *Family Mart* by Masato Nakamura; *Dog From Screen Memory* by Yoshitomo Nara

▶ as the rest of us. Nakamura deconstructs these logos to make them appear awesome and majestic; an earlier work, Akihabara TV, utilised the monitors of banks of televisions in the Tokyo district known for its electronics shops - there, the consumer can buy things they can't even dream about yet on the Tottenham Court Road.

Nakamura isn't the only artist working with the ideas thrown up by machines and the corporation. In the hands of the comedic artists Masamichi and Nobuumichi Tosa, their nonsense-machine company Maywa Denki creates silly tech just one step removed from some of the wilder products on offer in Akihabara; a microworld where the rush towards new tech-toys completely obscures any economic turmoil impacting on the rest of the country (and, of course, young people buy the nonsense machines in their droves). Making art a part of the barrage of everyday sound and light is part of removing the barriers inherent in life inside the White Cube; one senses the quiet chuckle to be had when the distinctions become so blurred they cease to have any modern relevance.

Like Takashi Murakami, he's given something back to Japanese artists at a local level, founding the Command+N gallery amidst the bleep and blink of Akhabara's shops. Named after the Apple Mac function that gives users a new page, Command+N was established by Nakamura in 1998; today its 11-strong group of artists and curators are mounting *Tokyo Rabbit Paradise* for *Tokyo Life*, showing how Japanese looking for a new home buy a plot of land, tearing down the house on it in favour of one designed specifically for their own use. In this way, regeneration and commerce are ensured. A new build on old ground is, quite simply, part of everyday living on a basic level. Concerned more with establishing himself in Asian circles than in Europe, Nakamura explains that the current fascination with Japan isn't limited to the West. "As I studied in Hong Kong and Korea, I witnessed that information on Japan, for example on new products sold in Shibuya, was immediately introduced into these countries. Cultural current follows the current of products."

Recession may have put the dampeners on Japan's economy, but it's

Japanese pop culture makes the viewer want to see the world with a thousand eyes and ears, on an economy-class ticket

But there's also a challenge: the viewer is forced to consider whether everything is art, or nothing is.

Down at Selfridges – though not, one presumes, in the electronics department - Masato Nakamura makes his British debut with large-scale abstractions of convenience-store logos in a space designed in collaboration with the architect David Adjaye. They're soothing and oddly majestic, more 'flat' than work like *QSC+mV*, the appropriation of McDonalds' arches that he's taking to Venice which, miraculously, did not disturb the sensibilities of the fast food giant's legal department. Maybe this is because Nakamura doesn't have a problem with the corporate world. "First of all, I see convenience stores signs from the aesthetic point of view. It is possible to approach them to judge if they are beautiful or not, both in the context of art and in the context of daily life. I wanted to unite these two different worlds. I don't intend to make critical comments on the status of convenience stores within the consumer society. I leave it to economists," he explains. "What was the most important to me was the process itself of establishing these signs as works of art."

a situation creative people have been grappling with ever since the popping of the late '80s bubble. Back then, when rich corporations paid record prices for Van Gogh signature works to grace boardrooms and offices, an army of art students - most of the current generation of subculture leaders included - busily prepared for a future where their work would reward them handsomely in the domestic market. When reality bit, commissions were scarce - and innate Japanese skills like synergy and teamwork took over. "I think there will be no direct influence of recession on Japanese art. However the art world is being affected by it just like other commercial fields," Nakamura reasons. "I mean, consumers now judge values of products with very severe criteria. The art world and its institutions have become objects of strict evaluation. I think it is a very good occasion for us to reflect seriously on what museums, curators and other art people have been doing so far."

The recession also focussed those with healthy '80s careers who longed for a break from the stress and dissatisfaction of working for others. Koji Mizutani, a design whizz active in graphics and art since his student days ▶

From left: *Bread-Man* by Tatsumi Orimoto; *Merry* by Koji Mizutani; *The Company* by Maywa Denki

▶ in the early '70s, had such an epiphany. Now the project head of *Merry*, a collection of portraits of trendy, forward-looking Harajuku girls which debuts in London as part of *Tokyo Life*, Selfridges' Japan 2001 showcase (for which he also designed the logo), Koji, although handsomely paid for designing corporate identities and the like for clients like Virgin, felt something in his life was missing even as his skills paid the bills. "I've been doing art direction for 30 years in Tokyo and was really busy, but I started to question the meaning of life and found myself almost hurting inside," he confesses. "When I was a student, there were massive social upheavals and revolutions - things which are missing from Japanese society today. And really, I'd become a graphic designer so I could use the work to send a message."

These feelings reached critical mass in 1995, when the Kobe earthquake shook Japan to its foundations and gave Mizutani the virtual kick up the backside he needed to begin more personal projects. Attracted by the purity of three American girls he'd snapped on a bus journey, he turned,

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like so many, to the optimism of youth who don't realise the economy is making adults miserable. Thus *Merry* was born. "Japanese people were unhappy because of the recession and I wanted to do a project which could change that through a more positive way of thinking. And working with culture and commenting on society through my work was more like art to me." The shopping girl maniacs of Harajuku were a ready-made subject, not to mention the ideal audience for this new approach, so he photographed individuals in their thousands. Brightly dressed in a mish-mash of vintage clothes outshone only by their smiles, Harajuku girls seemed to embody that half-canvas, half-billboard mix which is a trademark of all current Japanese artistic expression. "Harajuku is a 'creative city' - it's very easy to find flamboyant style there and the girls don't spend that much money, in relative terms, on their clothes. These days, Japanese girls have much more freedom than previous generations and I wanted to show that, in addition to giving the girls a chance to tell us what *Merry* meant to them."

The results went on show at Laforet in Harajuku's most fashion-forward department store; like many other commercial enterprises, it has gallery facilities which are integral to its success and most young Japanese do not question the join between the commercial and the artistic which often vexes their Western counterparts. After a smaller show at designer Hanae Mori's space in 1999, the Laforet exhibition in early winter 2000 was a grand-scale demonstration of the optimism Mizutani feels Japan needs to pull itself back from the brink of economic doom. *Merry*'s Selfridges incarnation promises even more interactivity, allowing Tokyoites the opportunity to text-message their London peers; meanwhile, *Merry London* - straight-ups of London girls of a similar age and fashionability - will be running concurrently back at Laforet. Mizutani's happy, smiling subjects are representative of a new truth; he believes the future, for Japan at least, is probably female. "For once, the younger generation has more power - something they are easily able to use outside Japan."

The idealism that's part and parcel of Japanese art, wherever the join is placed between the commercial and the fine, ought to be infectious.

But could we do it here? The quiet revolution at the heart of Japanese youth culture - the futuristic married to the traditional, individual needs supported by a collective interest – seems at once light years ahead of what's happening in other cities where the synergy impulse is prized, yet so obvious a solution it's no surprise we haven't considered its possibilities in the face of our own divide-and-rule rat race. At the dawn of this new century, it looks like aesthetics are giving the young a choice as opposed to another pigeonhole, and this ethos can be grasped in all sorts of ways, from all sorts of angles. Just for once, the impulse behind doing what pleases looks like a strength, not weakness. This is smart art heading towards tomorrow with a smile on its face, and just a hint of a knowing wink. Like Takashi Murakami says, this is a glimpse of a future people might not understand right now, but the curiosity it stimulates can only be positive. Tomorrow never knows, so why not live in the future today?

***JAM: Tokyo London* is at the Barbican Centre, London EC1 from May 10-July 8.**
***TOKYO LIFE* is at Selfridges, Manchester and London, from May 1-31.**
***Superflat* is at MOCA, Los Angeles, until May 27.**

From left: *The Company* by Maywa Denki; *Merry* by Koji Mizutani; *Tokyo Life* poster