

Below:
Night and Day
Acrylic gouache on linen
162 x 162 cm
2009



TOMOO GOKITA *Visual Adrenaline Rush*

—by Katya Tylevich

Tomoo Gokita's reputation precedes him. It's a good reputation (spoiler alert), but a condensed one. Limited to two sources, mostly: the art critics, who generally rave, and the art itself, which offers far more seductive gossip.

I refer more specifically to Gokita's figurative ink and charcoal drawings and sketches (collected in books like the limited edition *Lingerie Wrestling*, 2000), and to his later black & white — and sometimes blue and abstract — acrylic and gouache paintings (displayed in solo shows at ATM Gallery in New York, Taka Ishii Gallery

in Tokyo, Honor Fraser in Los Angeles, among others).

Though different in medium, there's a similar tone that runs through Gokita's works, many of them charismatic exquisite corpses that weld, say, a medusa head of could-be intestines to the healthy vavoom legs of a cartoon femme (*Merengue*, 2007); or the smudged aftermath of an eraser to the round face of a squat man — his left leg up on a chair, his shirtless body slouched in casual 'here's your ticket to the gun show' pose.

The latter is the cover of *Offend Maggie*, an album by avant-art band Deerhoof — yet more evidence of Gokita's desirable and widely agreed-upon 'cool' standing, which seems to come effortlessly to this self-effacing and funny artist. Gokita keeps a studio in Tokyo, but travels often in search of a change of scenery, be it via gallery openings or, you know, violent knife attacks. The artist seems to find both kinds of episodes exhilarating.

Accordingly, many of his works are a visual adrenaline rush, with all the nod-nod-wink-wink humor of 70s pro-wrestling, or bad retro-porn: improvisations of staged events (modeling, wrestling, posing for the camera), images that delight in their characters with no aftertaste of self-indulgence. Tomoo Gokita is an artist who produces serious artworks without taking himself too seriously.

The artist is regularly described as tight-lipped, terse on the subject of his life and his works. With a laugh, Gokita denies the rumours. Then it's my turn to laugh. Quite spontaneously, he e-mails me a black and white drawing. A face, thick neck, voluminous shoulder-length locks, and a hilarious expression that sits somewhere between 'would you like to touch my wavy "do?"' and, 'don't judge the brains by the bronze'. The title of this mesmerizing file? It roughly translates to: 'The Face of Gokita (A Lie).' That's right. I can't beat that. No further questions.

Below:
*Communication
Breakdown*
Acrylic gouache on linen
227 x 181.6 cm
2009

Right:
Solid state survivor
Acrylic gouache on linen
194 x 162 cm
2009



Did you know that you're widely thought of as 'mysterious'? And so are your works. Is it purposeful?

Mysterious? My works are described as mysterious? Just heard that for the first time [laughs]. Well, I'm fine with whichever way my art is described. But as a person, I am definitely not mysterious [laughs]. Just a normal guy. I wouldn't really consider my work to be mysterious, either.

Your pieces seem to have some element of an inside joke. Are they at all autobiographical?

There is no autobiographical intention in my work, but some pieces do result in having autobiographical elements, though that is really a coincidence.

I imagine that some of those autobiographical elements must come from your travels. You are known to voyage the world. Does that materialize in your work? Are your works different depending where you are when you create them?



In the past, I longed for dramatic new experiences. I was looking for a feeling that could compare to the way exhibitions in a gallery change so dramatically. So I traveled a lot. And there have hardly been more horrifying experiences. Oh! I was attacked with knives and a gun by a gang in Mexico, and I really thought, 'they're going to kill me.' [laughs]. These experiences do not influence my actual work, though. Recently, I have been trying not to work in the places I travel to. In some cases, I don't even make a single sketch. It's best to enjoy the journey itself. After all, when it comes to really focusing on the art, I work best in my studio.

What is your studio like?

My studio is in a suburb of Tokyo, in a boring town called Chofu. Right next to the studio is a factory where they make paper tubes that are used for such things as toilet paper and plastic wrap. The sound of machines in the factory working in this monotonous rhythm feels awfully good to

me. It always sounds like music.

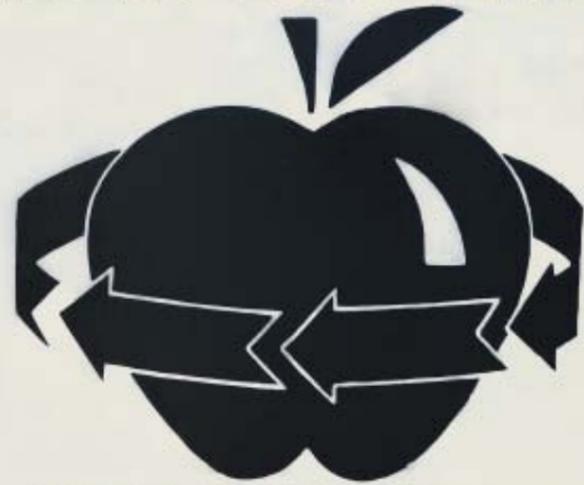
Well, if you are not directly influenced by your travels, what about your home? Are you influenced by Tokyo??

I am strongly influenced by Tokyo. I don't think that there is another city in the world so huge and chaotic, with both good and bad in such disorder.

Does the medium of your work effect the final product? When you are working in charcoal, for example, is it a different artistic process than when you are working in acrylic?

The difference between charcoal and pencil is similar to — if comparing instruments — the difference between an upright bass and an electric bass, which is to say, I feel they're similar, but very different; whereas the difference between charcoal and acrylic might be similar to the difference between electric bass and synthesizers. Anyway, different mediums definitely change the mood you are in.

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Where do the pop culture references in your works come from?

I think they come from pop culture references.

And are all references equal in your artwork? Music, magazines, tv, pornography — does one have a stronger presence in your works than the other?

My strongest influence, besides art in general, is Japanese pro-wrestling of the 1970s and '80s. Pro-wrestling is neither purely sport, nor theater. It is a strange world. I don't think any other genre interweaves truth and falsity in quite the same way. Today's wrestling focuses on the show. It got really boring, so it doesn't interest me anymore.

Compared to, say, your book *Lingerie Wrestling*, your recent Heaven exhibit in L.A. seems to suggest a move from figurative to abstract. Or do you actually make different styles of works simultaneously?

Figurative and abstract are one and the same to me. I think that figurative can

have abstract aspects and vice versa. I am still continuing to make drawings like *Lingerie Wrestling* and will release new work of that style at some point.

Do you become a different person when you paint rather than draw? Or is the sentiment and intention the same?

Drawing and painting are very different. I'm not talking about the content of the picture, here — the way you work is different, and also the feel of the material of paper compared to canvas. It feels different to sit at a table and draw on paper, than it does to stand in front of a large canvas, painting. The mood of the artwork changes. Recently, I find myself getting excited about paintings, as they are full of small 'accidents', things you would not expect to happen.

Taking *Lingerie Wrestling* as example, your works seem to have narratives behind them — they're very alive and in motion. Are you consciously telling a story, or capturing a moment? Or are the drawings meant

Left:
Classic Recycling
Acrylic enamel, spray paint
162 x 129 cm
2010

Below:
Mask
Acrylic enamel, spray paint
162 x 162 cm
2010

Opposite Below:
Hot Dog
Acrylic enamel, spray paint
193 x 162 cm
2010

Opposite far:
Dance
Acrylic enamel, spray paint
260 x 193 cm
2010



to be stills?

Lingerie Wrestling doesn't have any story. It is really like a diary I kept when I was poor. There was no initial plan to make *Lingerie Wrestling* into a book. Every day, I draw things I like to draw, as well as things I care about. This book simply gathers all of these drawings.

In comparison to this kind of drawing for a 'diary', is there a difference when you're creating art for an exhibit? Is there a different human response you're aiming for?

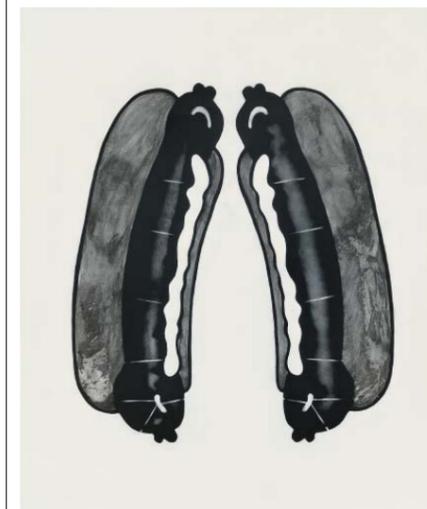
There is no difference. I don't feel a difference in human response either, but that is maybe because I am an idiot [laughs].

Do you ever think in terms of an 'audience', and how you would like them to perceive your works?

That's a difficult question. To be frank, I have never thought about this. Well, I want many people to see my work. But I am not as concerned about what they actually think of it.

The titles to your works make an incred-

Things that inspire me could be the cover of a B-movie porn video (on VHS) that I find at a flea market, or seeing an old lady whose shirt has a pattern on it that is in such bad taste it makes me want to start painting immediately



ible impact on the way one thinks of your work. AKA 'Hemorrhoids', 'Divorce', 'Leggy Blonde'. They're titles with a sense of humour, and perhaps some irony on your part? How important is the title to you?

The titles of my work are complete nonsensical jokes. I use quotes from song names; or, after briefly looking at the work, I often decide on a title in one instant. I probably should not say this to you, but most of the titles are nonsense, there is no deep meaning. Coming up with the title often feels like a compulsory act.

Sometimes you are referred to as a 'self-taught' artist in bios — is this important? Is this accurate? What kind of artistic education do you come from?

Strictly speaking, I am not self-taught. I did not attend a famous art school, but I did go to an art college that anyone — literally, any idiot — can enter. I did learn a lot of things while there, but as it was too boring. I quit the school after two years



[laughs]. There are no artists in my family, but we are all very individualistic and interesting people.

Was art an impulse for you, or a gradual process?

I started gradually, I think. I can't explain it well, but I always liked drawing when I was a young boy, and now at the age of forty, I am still making drawings. That's all.

And how impulsive is your work process? Do you sketch whenever the urge strikes you, or do you have to shut yourself up in a quiet room?

Intuition and inspiration are the important parts of the process. Things that inspire me could be the cover of a B-movie porn video (on VHS) that I find at a flea market, or seeing an old lady whose shirt has a pattern on it that is in such bad taste it makes me want to start painting immediately. I think it is interesting to use these random and nonsensical moments as a starting point. It feels like a

joke, but it is also real and truthful. I hate to be in a quiet room.

What about when you create for a magazine, or for a commission — are you forced to change your approach at all?

Well, in these cases I provide 'art services'. There are restrictions regarding the size and so on, but in the end, I am still creating a work of art.

Do you like to collaborate with others?

No. I don't like collaboration. I like it when I can get everything done myself. On the other hand, with graphic design and music, it is great to work with other people.

Are you creating separate entities, or one large body of 'your work'?

Generally I consider my work to be separate pieces of art, but it depends. When everything is complete, I start to see the consistency and the overall concept, but I never have an 'exhibit concept' from the start. It's always a process begun in haste, in a happy-go-lucky kind of way ●