

2011

My Floating World

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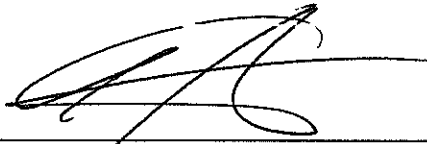
My Floating World

By

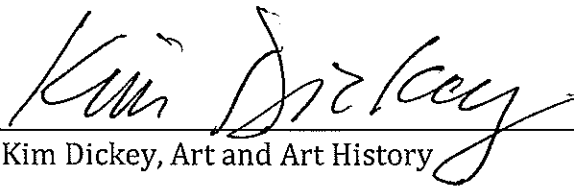
Thomas Spradling

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
of the University of Colorado at Boulder
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
Department of Art and Art History
2011

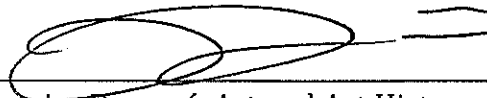
This thesis entitled:
My Floating World
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has been approved for the Department of Art and Art History



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ABSTRACT

As access to the Internet has increased globally the size of our world has dramatically decreased. At this time in history, global access to information is unparalleled. Experiences of other cultures and traditions are easily attained through extensive Wikipedia entries. As a result of this globalization, certain aspects of our own worldviews break down to allow others in. Younger generations in particular have grown up with this instant access to information so they are free to explore any interest over the Internet. Prior to the Internet, emphasis was placed on stability and adherence to a particular group or cultural identity as traditional media limited access to others. However in our current world, emphasis and importance is now placed on the ability to mold, shift and alter identities (Hall and du Gay 2008, 18-19).

In *My Floating World*, a two-component artwork, I created personas for myself that are reflective of my interest and affinity for Japanese culture. I created a large triptych containing 23 childish and *kawaii* versions of myself as varying iconic aspects of Japanese culture. The created characters reflect my desire to be Japanese but my experience and knowledge of the culture I wish to join is limited. My identity shifts to each character, as I attempt to but am unable to fully grasp what it means to be "Japanese." In many ways, I am like a child assuming the roles, identities, and more literally costumes of Japanese cultural icons. The work is my attempt to locate myself in a culture that I do not fully understand and perhaps cannot ever fully understand, yet I feel a special connection to that is no doubt caused by increased exposure to Japanese culture over the Internet and through popular culture.

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CHAPTER I

Globalization and the Internet

As access to the Internet has increased globally the size of our world has dramatically decreased. News events and stories are instantly accessible over RSS feeds, twitter, and Facebook. By using Facebook, people have discovered long lost relatives, re-connected with childhood friends and propelled social interactions to a new level. At this time in history, global access to information is unparalleled. Experiences of other cultures and traditions are easily attained through extensive Wikipedia entries. As a result of this globalization, certain aspects of our own worldviews break down to allow others in. Younger generations in particular have grown up with this instant access to information so they are free to explore any interest over the Internet. Prior to the Internet, emphasis was placed on stability and adherence to a particular group or cultural identity as traditional media limited access to others. However in our current world, emphasis and importance is now placed on the ability to mold, shift and alter identities (Hall and du Gay 2008, 18-19).

As Zygmunt Bauman writes in Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay's edited book *Questions of Cultural Identity*, tourists populate our post-modern world. This is not a tourist in the traditional sense, but instead an identity tourist. These tourists relish the ability to alter their worldviews to reflect what is most important to them at the time (Hall and du Gay 2008, 29-30). A common occurrence on the Internet, particularly in online video game spaces as well as on some social networks, is to

create a new persona that is not reflective of that person's actual identity. Yet this identity is in fact real and a part of the person. It is indicative of their dreams and desires to be someone else so is therefore rooted in their own identity. This new identity can reflect all the things that the person wishes they could be and allows them to vicariously live through someone with a different identity that is no longer bound by actual physical and cultural constraints.

As a result of people having the ability to shift their identity and with the breakdown of national and cultural boundaries, new questions remain unanswered or perhaps unanswerable. Where are we? How do we locate the self in such a globalized culture? My thesis, *My Floating World*, does not attempt to answer these questions, but instead seeks to propose those questions to others and myself.

CHAPTER II

Cultural Identity

Identity no longer holds the same connotations it once did only a few short years ago prior to the children of the 'baby boom' generation. As mentioned in Chapter I, identity in our current time is largely changeable and amorphous due to contemporary technologies, but it also goes beyond the technologies towards a deeper social issue that affects many first-world nations. After the economic boom following World War II and even today, many Americans retain class identification with the affluent middle-class. Young people of the middle-class are able to enjoy relatively easy lifestyles without much financial woe. This is not a phenomenon specific to America as Japan is currently experiencing similar issues. Japan's economic rise from the post-war period is nothing short of remarkable as they are now the number three economy in the world, having only recently fallen behind China. Following the American occupation, Japan's economic bubble reached its peak in the 1980's before collapsing at the onset of the 1990s due to increased deflation. Japan's economic situation, while similar to America, is different based on centuries of social expectations.

The "American Dream" of leaving home to seek financial independence still encourages many of the American middle-class to continue to leave home and seek financial gain. In Japan, and Asia in general, there is an important emphasis on the family. It is expected upon graduation from a Japanese university, that the student immediately seek employment at a large company to help the family. Due to the

high average income of the Japanese family and the high cost of living, there is little incentive for the child to want to leave the home and seek financial independence. This financial stability and emphasis on the family has led to an increase of soft-parenting that does not emphasize the importance of the child leaving the house. Now, with a globally failing economy, Japanese youth are even less likely to find a job which continues to create issues among the Japanese society's emphasis on the importance of establishing a solid financial career. Recent university graduates who are now unable to find jobs have become entrenched in the home, bored and having an excess of free time. With the prevalence of modern entertainment such as video games and the Internet becoming common in the majority of first-world nations, it's unsurprising that these would dominate youth attentions (Zielenziger 2006, 18-30). Luckily, the Internet has enabled both Japanese and American youth to achieve their social needs without the necessity of leaving the home. In America, these are more commonly referred to as 'nerds' or 'geeks.' In Japan they are known as *otaku*, which is a term popularized by the Japanese writer, Akio Nakamori through a collection of essays in 1983. *Otaku*, when translated into English simply means "you" and is used to describe someone who is obsessively engrossed in but not exclusively *anime*, *manga*, computers, figurines, video games, and robots. *Otaku* are differentiated from nerds in the sense that it is an extreme obsession instead of a hobby or interest. While *otaku* culture was once viewed negatively in Japanese culture due largely in part to the 1989 kidnapping, raping, and murdering of several young girls by Miyazaki Tsutomu, it has now become more mainstream and has even gained ground in America. The term is frequently used as an endearing term to address

friends at American *anime* conventions. The increase in popularity and decrease in the negativity of the term can largely be attributed to contemporary Japanese artists particularly Takashi Murakami and his artist collective, *KaiKai KiKi*, whose work often directly references these *otaku* and their relationship with the notion of cuteness or *kawaii*.

A new term has only recently arisen in Japan that has replaced *otaku*, in terms of negativity, as a major social issue known as *hikikomori* or 'shut-in.' To be classified as a *hikikomori* by the Japanese government, one must have not left the house in over six months. These *hikikomori* could be considered the most prominent identity tourist as the majority of their time is spent traversing the Internet through online video games, chat programs, and social networking. These tourists are able to morph and manipulate their projection of self unto the rest of the Internet world. This is the hallmark feature of an identity tourist, which is caused by and enabled by contemporary technology. Online video games, the Internet, and social networking have allowed people across the globe to interact at an unprecedented level. As the world connects to each other, culture is exchanged and global awareness is increased. Physical and national boundaries begin to disappear in the Internet environment, which leads to identity crises. The modern concept of identity is solidified by financial independence as well as national and regional boundaries. In America, regional and state loyalty, are still important but not as important as it once was in Japan. Historically, while Euro-American surnames were based on profession, Japanese surnames were based on region. This type of naming convention emphasizes the importance of a stable and grounded

identity in both countries. In addition, Japan has a strong history of nationalism and prevention of outside influence. Having previously traded limitedly with European merchants from the early 1700s, it was not until 1854 that Japan finally opened its borders completely to trade with the West. Japanese people have large amounts of pride in their cultural heritage and many things are referred to as distinctly “Japanese.” Woodblock prints, fans, kimonos, geisha, samurai, *sumo* are all considered quite “Japanese.” In his edited book, Stephen Vlastos argues that tradition is “discontinuous with, and stands in opposition to, modernity.” In other words, when the Japanese borders were opened to the West, all previous aspects of Japanese culture became tradition and thus “Japanese” (Vlastos 1998, 2). Post-war Japan struggled to retain its national identity with the onset of modern technologies and interactions with other nations. America and Japan are constantly involved in this cultural soft power exchange, which is rapidly altering the identities and the concept of identity of its respective citizens.

For example, the early 1990s saw several court cases in the UK where children were able to take their parents to court to remove them as their legal guardians. In a sense, the children were making a conscious choice to reject their own biological nature (Hall and du Gay 2008, 37-38). This choice is an important aspect of contemporary identity politics. When a child has the idea of a choice about who their parents are, it speaks to the openness of identity possibilities. It could be said that a child rejecting their parents is no different than a person of a specific nation rejecting their own nationality in favor of another; it is a biological, traditional, and regional rejection. The simple fact that identity ‘choice’ exists

speaks to the openness of contemporary society, but in order for one to choose a different identity means that what was not chosen becomes lost or is excluded. Identity is formed internally in order to define a person's self in the context of the 'other.' To establish identity, certain things have to be rejected in order to accept something else. For example, if a man defines himself as an American, he is not Japanese, Chinese, English, Russian, etc. His relationship to the other nationalities is 'not' of their nationality but instead 'of' American nationality. While the previous example may be factual based on location of birth, it becomes a more conscious choice by the individual in contemporary society as nations and nationalities are merely constructs and anyone can claim to be any nationality at any time and can be legally changed by petitioning governmental bodies.

This type of identity shifting is highly related to that of a child. A child has not yet experienced enough of the world to establish a solid identity and instead adopts identities through play such as cops and robbers or cowboys and Indians. The contemporary artist Takashi Murakami believes that the occupation of Japan by America after WWII has created a "culture frozen in its infancy." He contests that this has created a cute or in Japanese, *kawaii*, culture that is used to mask post-war anxiety caused by atomic and fire bombings as well as American occupation (Murakami 2005, 138).

CHAPTER III

Kawaii

Cute characters are used in advertisements, video games, books, television shows, company logos, signage, and even to represent particular prefectures in Japan. *Kawaii* or cuteness is an integral part of Japanese contemporary society through the form of cute and adorable characters (Murakami 2005, 136-138). While it is not immediately clear why cute characters are so prominent in Japan, Takashi Murakami posits that it is a response to post-war trauma. Not long after the devastation of Japan by Allied forces in WWII, did the first examples of contemporary *manga* comics arise. These comics combined heroic and memorable characters in war situations that would struggle to overcome challenges and defend Japan on an episodic basis. Cheap and easy to produce in the struggling occupied Japan, *manga* has maintained its popularity and is still commonplace today. Unlike American comics that were created around the same time to ingrain the idea of patriotism while being obviously propagandist, the Japanese comic was meant to take Japan away from the troubles of the war into a new realm of escapist literature featuring cute characters. Generally small, babyish, innocent, young, and naïve, these characters feature oversized eyes and exaggerated features. The viewer is meant to empathize with the character through what Anne Allison writes is “an emotional attachment to imaginary creations/creatures with resonances to childhood and also Japanese traditional culture” (Allison 2004, 34-35).

Having been occupied by American armed forces after WWII, Japan had to re-invent their culture and traditions and locate them in the context of Americanization. The widely popular *manga*, Astroboy is the robotic version of a scientist's dead child. While Astroboy most certainly fits into the previously discussed aspects of *kawaii*, the idea behind the storyline is intriguing and highly reflective of Japanese post-war culture. It is a "rising from the ashes" story that reflects the positive outlook of Japanese culture after the war. This was not the only medium that exhibited the idea of the Japanese people overcoming the obstacles created by WWII. The famous filmmakers of the era, such as Kurosawa and Ozu, created films that included undertones of acceptance of the Japanese fate and then overcoming it while placing an emphasis on the family and tradition. It is clear however that the *manga* comics become the forefront of the cute or *kawaii* movement, which eventually led to the other popular mediums of *anime* and video games, while responding to the already recognized Japanese aesthetic tradition of woodblock prints. This aesthetic is highlighted by sharp and precise black outlines combined with flat colors and no distinct shadows or highlights.

Post-war *manga* were in no doubt reflective of this aesthetic style. The famous woodblock artist Hokusai, in order to describe his whimsical human sketches, first coined the term *manga*. Containing the same black lines and no depth, this style has continued to develop through animation and even in video games. The early video game technology allowed Japanese game developers to use their flat art aesthetic to create memorable characters that are still popular today, such as Mario, Luigi and Donkey Kong. While these are not the only memorable

characters from Japanese popular culture, these characters have managed to penetrate the lives of people internationally and for many people these characters speak heavily to nostalgia and childhood. Although arriving decades before the Internet, these characters continue to maintain ground as avatars used in online spaces to represent alternate identities. A recent animation film, *Summer Wars*, depicts a futuristic Japan where everyone interacts in a large and open online space by creating an avatar to represent themselves, a large majority of the avatars are incredibly cute. Cute or *kawaii* culture is undoubtedly a key aspect of Japanese society and continues today in all aspects of Japanese visual culture.

In *My Floating World*, I have utilized this notion of *kawaii* in the characters I have created for both the wall piece and the capsule machine (fig. 1). When first approaching the wall work I want the audience to empathize and feel a sense of nostalgia to childhood through the use of adorable characters (fig. 2). Once the audience is, in a sense, seduced by the cuteness, they realize that, while the surface of the work relates to or imitates a children's comic, that the content of the work is most certainly not. In particular, the sexually charged imagery of some of the characters is intended to repulse the viewer and ask them to consider this combination of cute, child-like appearance with the sexual. Upon realizing that these characters are self-portraits through the possessive nature of the title, the work becomes voyeuristic. The self-portraits of masturbation and even fetishistic imagery of the schoolgirl and salaryman enables the audience to engage with the work in an uncomfortable manner knowing that they are viewing sexual images of the artist. Even the non-sexual images remain voyeuristic with the knowledge that

they are all self-portraits. These compartmentalized versions of myself through the veil of Japanese cultural context enables to the viewer to question the connection between the cuteness and the content.

With the knowledge that the artist is not Japanese yet is depicting himself as Japanese characters begs the question of whether the compartmentalized versions of Japanese characters are in fact cultural critiques. As stated previously, the soft power of Japanese culture through the strategic global deployment of its popular culture has created a compartmentalized depiction of Japan. While *manga* and *anime* depict a wide variety of Japanese character archetypes and settings, these have become the backgrounds and subject matter through which other nations understand and come to know Japan. Through the Japanese obsession with nationalism and tradition, it limits the totality of knowledge about Japanese culture and prevents outsiders from knowing realities of contemporary Japanese life. Through my work I have utilized this knowledge of compartmentalized knowledge of Japan as an outsider to compartmentalize the culture on the flat surface of an image. The work also becomes like a comic book, both Japanese and American, where each scene is compartmentalized and sectioned off. The *gashapon* or capsule prints in my piece are also indicative of this compartmentalization as the prints are contained inside a plastic machine and individually contained within a plastic capsule (fig. 3). I have utilized a traditional Japanese artistic medium such as the woodblock print as well as the contemporary focus on *kawaii* and outside misunderstood notions of Japanese culture to purposefully create a compartmentalized false understanding and interest in Japan. This

compartmentalization is also representative of contemporary life were websites such as Wikipedia compartmentalize knowledge into specific pages complete with categories and links to other pieces of information that is similarly compartmentalized. Contemporary life is largely compartmentalized, perhaps as a way to better come to terms with the breadth of information that is accessible to an increasingly globalized world. This combination of multiple layers of understanding and content speaks and responds to Takashi Murakami's *Superflat Manifesto*.

CHAPTER IV

Superflat

The contemporary Japanese artist Takashi Murakami created short manifesto to describe contemporary life in Japan. He also believes that the contemporary issues Japan is facing, eventually the world will experience. Murakami's *Superflat Manifesto* reads:

The world of the future might be like Japan is today -- super flat.

Society, customs, art, culture: all are extremely two-dimensional. It is particularly apparent in the arts that this sensibility has been flowing steadily beneath the surface of Japanese history. Today, the sensibility is most present in Japanese games and anime, which have become powerful parts of world culture. One way to imagine super flatness is to think of the moment when, in creating a desktop graphic for your computer, you merge a number of distinct layers into one. Though it is not a terribly clear example, the feeling I get is a sense of reality that is very nearly a physical sensation. The reason that I have lined up both the high and the low of Japanese art in this book is to convey this feeling. I would like you, the reader, to experience the moment when the layers of Japanese culture, such as pop, erotic pop, otaku, and H.I.S.ism,

fuse into one. [H.I.S. is a discount ticket agency in Japan. By lowering the price of travel abroad, the company is having a profound effect on the relationship between Japan and the West.]

Where is our reality (Murakami 2005, 153-154)?

Murakami believes that in Japan and eventually everywhere in the world everything, including high and low art, consumerism, tradition, modernity, etc. will become compressed into one all-encompassing understanding of the world; there will be no separation. *My Floating World* extensively responds to this notion through almost all aspects of the work. The most important aspect of this understanding of the Superflat is the fact that I am an American-born Caucasian creating Japanese artwork. Based on Murakami's theories of the Superflat, the east and the west will become one so therefore my thesis work responds to this by utilizing traditional and contemporary Japanese and American visual aesthetics and subject matter. The aforementioned combination of adult subject matter and *kawaii* characters become undifferentiated while the combination of the woodblock and contemporary *manga* and *anime* aesthetic are no longer separate. Wherein all of these characters in my work would never appear next to each other in reality or even in Japanese popular media, under the guise of Superflat, its not only possible, its an inevitable reality. The display of the work combined with the selling of *gashapon* toys alongside the work gives the idea of sign or poster art with roots in consumerism, low art, and distributable but placed in the gallery setting allows the

work to collapse the worlds of high and low art that have permeated Western art understanding. This consumerism aspect is a large component of my work, particularly in the context of the gallery setting.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, identity tourists populate our world and through contemporary mediums and the understanding of Superflat this is a global reality. This tourism can be understood in the context of consumerism in my work, particularly through the use of the *gashapon* machine that distributes versions of my self, an identity tourist, exploring notions of Japanese culture, through a machine which sole purpose is to make money off the purchase of collectible toys. Never satisfied and content with material wealth, the consumer, charged and engaged with the seduction of the advertisement of the next best product, is no different than a tourist. The *gashapon* machine exhibits this consumerist nature best through the use of the collectible, where the advertisement outside of the machine listing the entire set available for purchase, feeds into the desires of the buyer to continue to spend money until they have collected all of the possible toys in each set. This is despite the fact that the machine is rigged because of the limited randomization inherent to the machine. Many purchasers will acquire multiples of each toy or in this case print, before the entire set is obtained. The collectible nature of the machine forces the consumer to continue to purchase, with only a lucky few being completely satisfied. The tourist, like the consumerist who is never satisfied with each purchase, is constantly exploring and experiencing different experiences in the world while never being satisfied and held down to one place for long. The identity tourist is the same as they are exploring various identities without satisfaction. The

consumer and the tourist share the same realities of dissatisfaction of reality in contemporary life. They become one and the same and in my thesis work, where I have employed aspects of the tourist and the consumer to create a piece that seeks to compress the two as one entity that epitomizes life in the contemporary. Through the work I also become both the consumer and the tourist, buying into the globalized obsession with shifting my own identity.

This obsession with identity shifting leads to the element of narcissism in my work. Beyond the background subject matter of my thesis work, all aspects of my work are narcissistic. The characters on the wall, the hundreds of characters in the *gashapon* machine, the advertisement of my name on the work through the seal at the bottom left, the character spray painting my name on the background print, to even including two versions of my name on the artist statement alongside my name on the wall label, the work is undoubtedly about me. The narcissism inherent in the work brings the work back to American ideals of individualism and artist self-marketing. Japan, like most Asian countries, is a nation that is focused primarily on the family. Women marry early and oftentimes the marriage is not out of love, but out of financial necessity and social obligation. It was not until recently that Japanese people have decided to break away from their families to pursue a successful individual career, partially influenced by American ideals. Even verbal compliments in Japan are downplayed by the receiver else they be thought too egotistical. While it is obvious that Takashi Murakami is a leading proponent of individualism in Japanese culture, for many Japanese people it is not as important. With such big names as Calvin Klein and Donald Trump in the business world

placing their names on everything they own or have created along with Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons and their highly publicized art factories, selling yourself and focusing on the individual is inherent to the American upbringing. Therefore, my work speaks volumes to my American background, exploring my idea of self through my work as well as advertising myself in my own work.

Appropriation is another key element to Murakami's art and theories on Japanese visual culture. Superflat combines the elements of old and new, whereby Japanese contemporary artists utilize traditional mediums of *nihonga*, which is a Japanese painting style that developed in response to Western painting, and *ukiyo-e*. Murakami is a trained *nihonga* painter so his work heavily appropriates the style of *nihonga* painting. Murakami is not the only Japanese artist to appropriate traditional visual aesthetics. Yoshitomo Nara and Hisashi Tenmyouya are both contemporary artists who utilize both *nihonga* and *ukiyo-e* styles in their work. While these artistic mediums are inherent to Japan and being utilized by Japanese artists, my thesis work appropriates from these styles. Appropriation, being a hallmark of the postmodern art movement, is further enabled under the veil of the Superflat. When all aspects of culture are compressed into one, it indicates that all cultures will be compressed into one. Much like the ability the Internet has to break down cultural and national boundaries, the idea of Superflat suggests the same. Therefore, I make heavy use of Japanese visual appropriation in my work to convey both the desire and ability to transform my identity into a Japanese person as well the acceptability of the appropriation of another culture. Nicholas Bourriaud writes in his summary of the exhibition he curated, *Altermodern*, that current, young

artists become 'cultural nomads,' navigating all cultures and time periods in their work (Bourriaud 2009, 3). Through my work, I am a cultural nomad, identity tourist, and consumer, obsessed with my notion of self while navigating, exploring and appropriating from all time periods and cultures.

CHAPTER V

My Floating World

In *My Floating World*, a two-component artwork, I created personas for myself that are reflective of my interest and affinity for Japanese culture. I created a large triptych containing 23 childish and *kawaii* versions of myself as varying iconic aspects of Japanese culture. The created characters reflect my desire to be Japanese but my experience and knowledge of the culture I wish to join is limited. My identity shifts to each character, as I attempt to but am unable to fully grasp what it means to be “Japanese.” In many ways, I am like a child, as previously discussed in Chapter 1, assuming the roles, identities, and more literally costumes of Japanese cultural icons. Many of these characters reflect Japanese contemporary and historical figures. The work is my attempt to locate myself in a culture that I do not fully understand and perhaps cannot ever fully understand, yet I feel a special connection to that is no doubt caused by increased exposure to Japanese culture over the Internet and through popular culture.

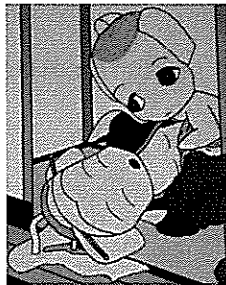
The title of the work, *My Floating World*, references the term for the Japanese woodblock print genre of *ukiyo-e* or “pictures of the floating world.” This term references an impermanent world that reflects a fleeting beauty of everyday commoner life in Japan through beauties, famous actors, landscapes, and traditional stories. The varieties of myself within the work reflect fleeting moments of understanding and another culture that is not my own as well as the ability to alter my identity to reflect my experience and interest in that culture. Also, the title

references the general style of the work which borrows from these woodblock prints as well as current Japanese popular culture which retains and pays homage to the aesthetics of Japanese visual culture with solid black outlines and vibrant colors. The triptych format also references the traditional Japanese woodblock print since a large percentage of them were done in a similar format but at considerably smaller size. The background of the work was drawn on the computer using Photoshop and printed on an inkjet printer. However, the characters are hand-drawn with markers. By incorporating a print into the piece, I am attempting to reference the nature of the Japanese woodblock print as printed. The characters being drawn on the other hand allows me to bring the artist's hand into the piece and create an interesting moment of asking what is printed and what is drawn. In addition to the surface reasons for choosing these mediums, the markers represent a childish tool that represent the empathizing and nostalgia inherent to the idea of *kawaii* to the viewer and I feel as if my interest and experience of Japanese culture will be and always remain childish at best as I will never be able to full understand the culture.

The characters in the piece are all reflective of my identity navigation. While they represent historical and modern figures in Japanese culture, they are still a real part of my true identity. Below will be a discussion on the particular characters featured in the piece and their importance:

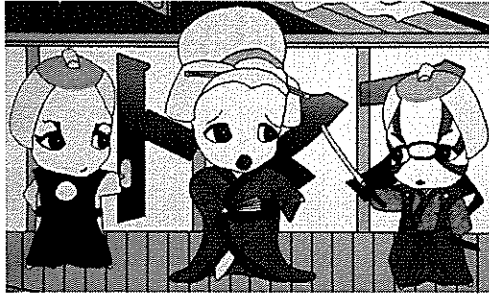


- **Peeping Tom:** This character, located in the upper left of the left panel, is in essence a “peeping Tom” which is not only a humorous reference to myself but also references the Internet pornography phenomenon as well as maintaining an aesthetic similar to and indicating the purpose of *shunga* woodblock prints. These prints were exclusively pornographic and Timon Screech argues that they were used entirely for masturbation (Screech 2009, 7-8). In addition, there is a rise in Japan of the “herbivore” men who do not seek actual relationships with women but instead prefer to be alone and with the Internet and other popular media, cultivating relationships with the fictional women on the screen.



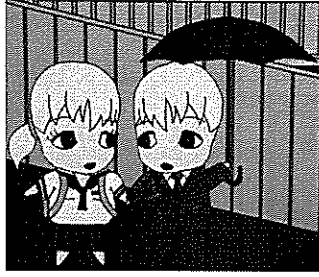
- ***Shunga* couple:** This couple reflects the aforementioned *shunga* woodblock prints that arguably fall into the category of *ukiyo-e*. These images can be equated with contemporary pornography since it features beautiful courtesans that the viewer would never be able to engage in sexual intercourse, as they were too famous. Essentially I am having sex with myself with these characters to represent further this idea of

relationships that no longer need real accompaniment and to reinforce the idea of masturbation.



• ***Kabuki-mono* and *geisha*:** The

characters in the middle of the left panel are representative of *kabuki* theatre, classical Japanese dance-drama, as well as *kabuki-mono*, which were essentially street gangs that dressed in wild clothing and terrorized villages. These were the historical predecessors to the *kabuki* theatre and possibly the *yakuza* and they are seen here toying with a *geisha* and spray-painting my name on a wall that mimics a small theatre with stage. The previously mentioned contemporary artist Hisashi Tenmyouya also plays a part in influencing these characters. Some of his works prominently feature contemporary street culture portrayed as contemporary versions of *kabuki-mono* figures while retaining artist styles and subject matter similar to that of traditional Japanese *nihonga* paintings, which are brush paintings created to retain Japanese culture in the face of western painting tradition. This combination of old and new is something that Japan is not unfamiliar with and I am paying homage to this Japanese tradition.

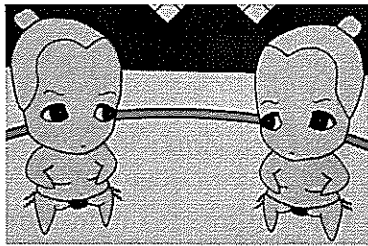


- **Salaryman and schoolgirl:** The salaryman and the schoolgirl, located at the bottom of the left panel, are perhaps the most ubiquitous groups of individuals in Japanese popular culture. A salaryman is a university graduate who seeks lifetime employment with one large company, which dominates their life both during work hours and after hours. They are arguably the backbone of the modern Japanese society and Japan's quick rise to an economic superpower following WWII (Japan Travel Bureau 1990). The schoolgirl represents both the free spirit of adolescence and the infatuation felt by young boys. Schoolgirls are also now being used in popular culture to sell and advertise as they have become appealing to a global audience as an important aspect of Japanese culture. However in *otaku* culture, the Japanese schoolgirl more commonly carries the stigma of a fetish. Pornographic material, both on the Internet and in publications featuring the schoolgirl are incredibly pervasive (Ashcraft and Ueda 2010, 7-8).

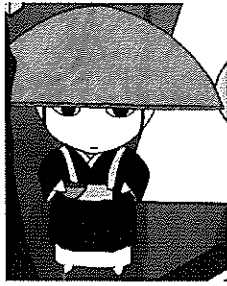


- **Courtiers:** Much of Japanese history is marked by court culture and the role of the emperor. The three courtiers at the top of

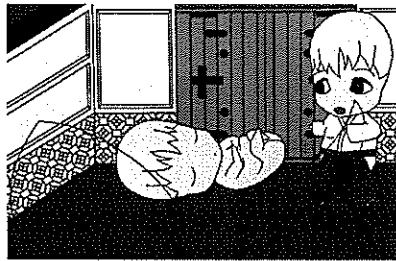
the center panel are eagerly observing a sumo match. Japanese people still hold high esteem for past court culture and still retain much respect for the emperor who is now only a figurehead. The respect for the emperor is further evidenced by the fact that after WWII, the Japanese emperor was never tried in war trials. These courtiers are indicative of longstanding Japanese governmental traditions.



- **Sumo wrestlers:** Two versions of me are depicted squaring off to begin a *sumo* match, which the world acknowledges as a strong icon of Japanese culture. *Sumo* has long been a tradition of Japan and just recently it has been struck by a wave of thrown matches and gambling centered on an increase in exposure to the *yakuza* involvement. This involvement has existed for a long time but has largely been ignored by *sumo* enthusiasts. In this particular match, no one will win because the winner will always be the same person in order to both represent the tainting of Japanese tradition by *yakuza* match fixing and to represent my inner struggle with coming to terms with my identity in the context of Japanese culture.

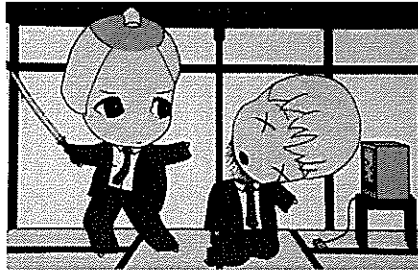


- **Monk:** Certain sects of Buddhist monks are prevalent in Japanese historical cities such as Kyoto. Some of them beg for their next meal because they have relinquished all possessions except for the clothes that they wear. Buddhism has gained a lot of ground in America and Zen in particular has become not only a representation of Asian and Japanese culture but is being practiced more frequently.



- **Samurai and gashapon:** A samurai is depicted at the bottom of the center panel holding a broken and open capsule toy container with an infant/fetus version of myself that has fallen out of the capsule. This interaction represents both the decline in the birth rate of Japan as well as the introduction of contemporary consumer culture that feeds off historical Japanese society. Much like westerns are commoditized history in America used to sell products, samurai culture has become a primary aspect of Japanese soft culture exports to other nations. Japanese soft culture or soft power is ability for Japan to influence and attract others to Japan through the culture. An example besides samurai would be *anime* and

manga. These two popular mediums are widely viewed outside of Japan and further increase interest in Japan simply by being Japanese.



- **Hara-kiri:** At the top of the right panel are two salarymen, one representing historical *samurai* with the topknot hairstyle and the other figure is contemporary example. The salaryman on the right is reaching for a video game controller and the other is beheading him. This act is a *samurai* suicide ritual that is well known outside of Japan. Generally known as *hara-kiri* or *seppuku*, the later version of the ritual involved no actual disemboweling by the *samurai*, it instead involved another *samurai* performing an execution. The ritual began with the *samurai* falling on his own small sword but evolved into a symbolic reaching for the blade and then promptly beheaded. The ritual was advanced further with the blade replaced with a fan to symbolically represent the action. In my piece, the figure is reaching for a video game controller instead of a fan. The video game is arguably a contributive cause for the increased reclusion of Japanese youth leading to the *otaku* and *hikikomori* phenomena. The government is attempting to take steps to curb these issues and many Japanese adults still consider video games childish. *Samurai* share many common characteristics with modern day salarymen. Without *samurai* and salarymen, Japan would not be the modern power it is today. Both of these professions had the job of

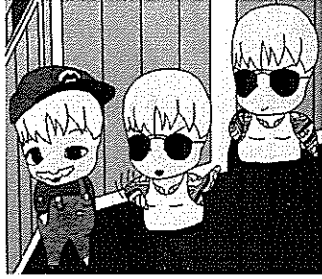
ensuring Japan's future as a nation; the *samurai* later becoming governmental beauracracy, much like the salarymen today who work to maintain Japan's global economic position.



- **Handheld video game player:** Below the *hara-kiri* scene is a boy sitting on a rock in zen garden playing a handheld video game, Nintendo's DS. The *otaku* or *hikikomori* phenomena in Japan represent the isolation as a hardcore video game player, rejecting social interactions in favor of online video game interactions. Long gaming sessions result in a relaxed and detached state of being as the player enters into a type of mediation to play a video game, which is not unlike the meditative raking of a rock garden. It is a medial repetitive task that is played out on technological device. In the Buddhist philosophy, this repetition of the mundane allows enlightenment to be achieved.



- **Ninja:** Next to the video game player is a ninja, which, next to *sumo* and the *samurai*, is the most widely recognized icon of Japanese culture. Highly trained assassins, ninja are still a common Internet reference and remain popular globally.



- **Mario and *yakuza*:** Mario from the popular video game series is drawn below the zen garden. Globally, Mario is one of the most recognized characters and the early video games that featured him are considered the best examples of the beginning of the modern video game. The modern video game is described as having memorable characters in an over-arching storyline. Prior games created in America for the Atari system usually involved simple actions such as shooting or jumping that did not contain original and memorable characters. *Yakuza* are the organized mafia of Japan that came into prominence during the post-war occupation of Japan by America in an effort to traffic hard to locate goods at higher prices. Mario represents the character and story creation escapism such as *manga* that came about during the post-war occupation. *Yakuza* on the other hand, represent the desire to move beyond this occupation by attempting to get Japan back on their feet and out of the hands of a foreign occupier. One represents the Japanese mentality of avoiding the issue while the other confronts the issue.

The second part of the piece is a capsule toy or *gashapon* machine. These machines are incredibly popular in Japan and they carry toys and collectibles from a range of popular culture interests. The main idea behind the machine is to collect all of the pieces to have the entire set, but the possibility of getting multiples of each toy is

extremely high so the involvement becomes gambling where the “house,” or the company supplying the toys, always wins. There are even stores in Japan devoted to selling individual, already opened, *gashapon* toys to help complete a set, albeit at a higher price. I have signed and editioned my own *gashapon* toys that are 2x2 inch artworks that are representations of the archetypal characters featured in the triptych. These machines initially represent the commodity culture of Japan and American cultures as well as Japan’s attitude towards fine art that consumer products and art are not separate as evidenced by artist Takashi Murakami’s creation of the Superflat, in which all aspects of Japanese culture are compressed into one (Murakami 2005, 153-154). The machine allows my varied identities to be projected out into the world as they are distributed through a machine and purchased by people. The *gashapon* machine, much like the computer and the Internet, create an interface through which I am able to create and project alternate identities. The machine dispenses, at random, a version of myself, reflecting an adopted identity. Although not entirely accurate, these versions of myself somehow remain part of my overall identity as a human in our current time.

Now that the work has been exhibited and I have had time to reflect, there are some other aspects of the piece that I have considered. The choice to display the wall piece was the most difficult choice I made throughout the project. I struggled with finding a way to display such a large work that was professional but would not adversely affect the work, so that it could be showed again. Mounting to foam core was the initial choice but after laboring over the marker drawing, it would permanently affix the work to foam core, which could easily be dropped, dented and

ruined. At the suggestion of a committee member, Plexiglas became the most viable option after coloring the print with the marker since the paper had an overly matte appearance and looked too absorptive. As the work is a triptych, I did not want to frame each section individually and have them separated by a frame. Edge-grip stand-offs became the best option to minimally present the work and to not interfere with the overall cohesion of the triptych. One of the better aspects of the piece arising from the inclusion and use of Plexiglas is how it added to the overall plasticity of the work, including the *gashapon* machine. The prints in the machine are inside plastic capsules inside a plastic machine. Conceptually then, it was logical to put the artwork behind a similar plastic veneer in order to facilitate the idea of consumerism in the work. The metal stand-offs with the Plexiglas tend to blend the concept of framing and corporate signage. Since the piece has an almost 'poster' quality and the *ukiyo-e* prints of Japan were largely a commodity item, I believe the mixed presentation of signage and fine art framing works well to support the aesthetic and the concept of the piece. The piece has a tinge of corporate feel and I believe the connection to the selling and marketing of my work through the capsule machine enables a successful conversation between the two elements.

While the *gashapon* machine was popular at the opening, one of the fallbacks of the machine was that, being next to the wall work and the labels, it had the feeling that it was not to be touched. I had to plant people early on to use the machine so others could see it working. While this was moderately successful the larger issue was the fact that I did not have a money-exchanging machine. In most areas of Japan that include a substantial amount of *gashapon* machines, there are bill

exchangers. Since a bill exchanger is out of the scope of the project, I opted to include my brother as a human bill exchanger during the opening reception. The other issue was that people in America generally do not carry much cash, let alone change, as credit and debit cards have become increasingly prevalent in recent years. Japan on the other hand is still largely a cash society where credit card use is uncommon and instead people carry around a lot of bills and change. The final issue related to Japan's cash society and the *gashapon* machine is that the Japanese machines only require one coin, which is a 100 Yen coin. This one coin has roughly the same value as \$1 and while America has attempted to use \$1 coins before, it has never been largely successful. All of these issues compound into a less than ideal situation for using the *gashapon* machine in America. Some issues however could be alleviated by the cooperation of the gallery or museum having change on-hand to hand out to visitors when they request it. In the university setting however, this becomes more difficult as the museum does not want to be involved in the exchange of money as per university rules. Despite all of these issues that play against the success of my *gashapon* machine, I still consider the machine's inclusion as a huge success. It generated a large amount of conversation and interest, particularly and unsurprisingly, among young people.

I strongly believe *My Floating World* was a successful art piece both in conception and presentation through the utilization of the *kawaii* aesthetic with references to Murakami's *Superflat Manifesto*. The two elements of print and *gashapon* machine created an interesting dynamic that allowed the commodity, identity searching, and childish aesthetic of my work to be fully realized. The use of

the markers allowed the piece to broach the margin between high and low art, which is an aspect that Murakami includes in his *Superflat Manifesto* when describing Japan as two dimensional. This separation of high and low art is another aspect that defined the early Japanese woodblock prints. Created originally for consumption and distribution, they were seen as low art by the aristocracy but through the years as appreciation for them has increased they have changed over to Japanese high art. The content of the work speaks to the contemporary ability and necessity of shifting identities so as to prevent boredom caused by materialism and financial wealth, yet the inability to fully understand and realize another culture apart from the one born into. The work accurately and succinctly culminates my research and continuous study of contemporary identity politics and Japanese popular culture.

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Appendix I

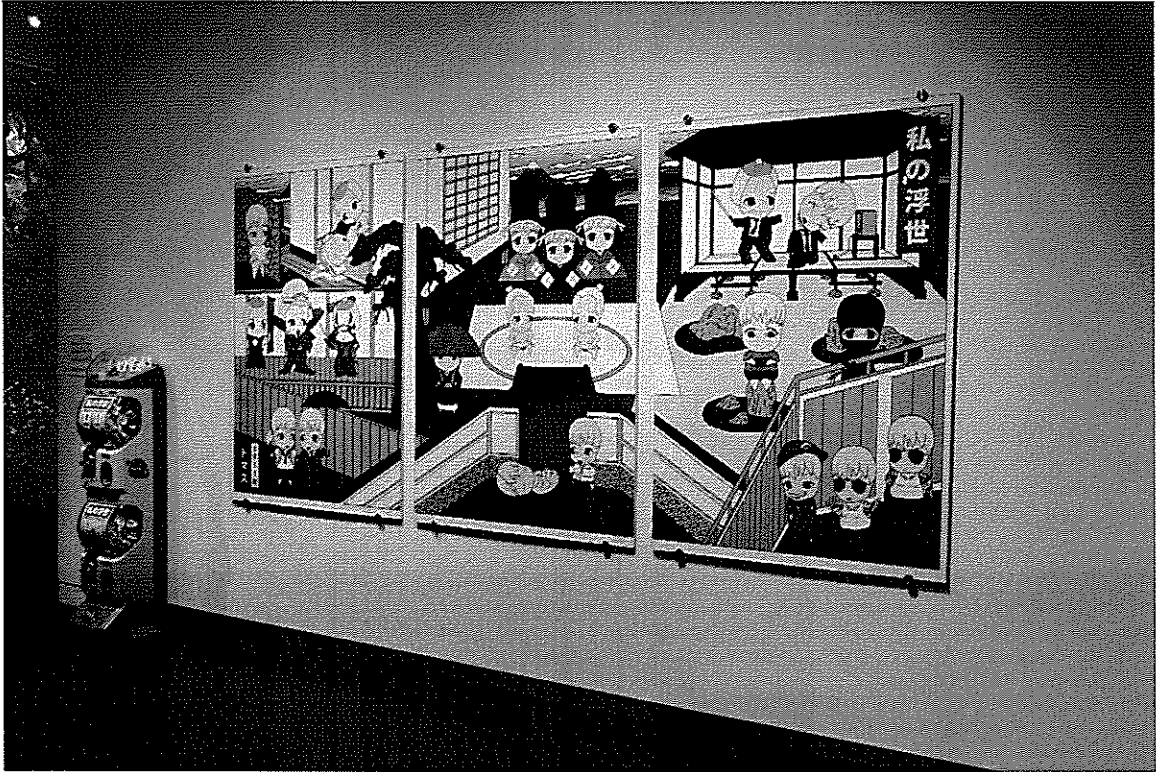


Fig. 1. Thomas Spradling, *My Floating World*, 2011.

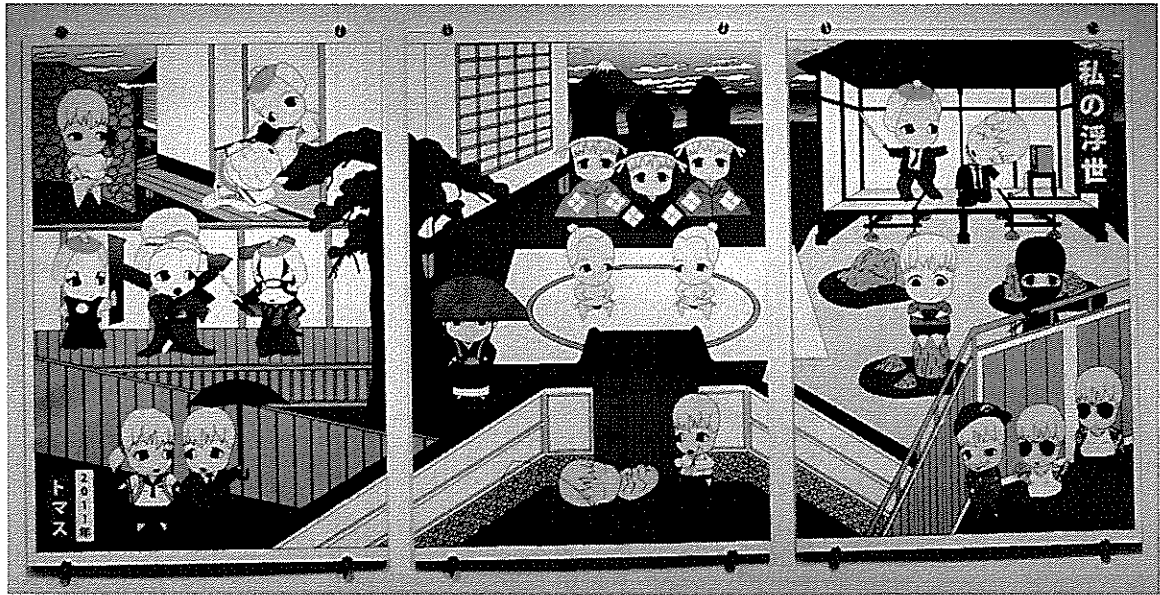


Fig. 2. Thomas Spradling, *My Floating World*, 2011 (triptych).

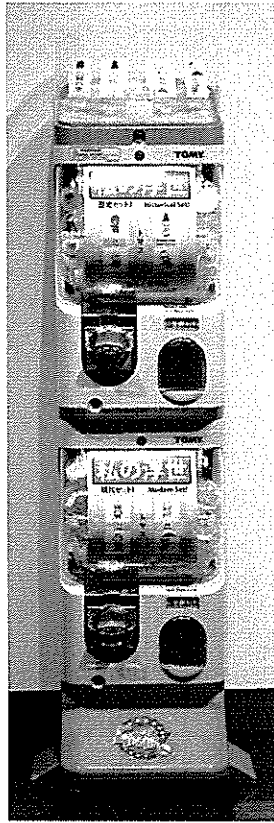


Fig. 3. Thomas Spradling, *My Floating World*, 2011 (*gashapon* machine).

