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## The Shojo Within the Work of Aida Makoto: Japanese Identity Since the 1980s

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THE *SHOJO* WITHIN THE WORK OF AIDA MAKOTO:  
JAPANESE IDENTITY SINCE THE 1980s

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Art History

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Laurel Hartman

August 2016

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

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JAPANESE IDENTITY SINCE THE 1980s

by

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY

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## ABSTRACT

### THE *SHOJO* WITHIN THE WORK OF AIDA MAKOTO: JAPANESE IDENTITY SINCE THE 1980s

by Laurel Hartman

The work of Japanese contemporary artist Aida Makoto (1965-) has been shown internationally in major art institutions, yet there is little English-language art historical scholarship on him. While a contemporary of internationally-acclaimed Japanese artists Murakami Takashi and Nara Yoshitomo, Aida has neither gained their level of international recognition or respect. To date, Aida's work has been consistently labeled as *otaku* or subcultural art, and this label fosters exotic and juvenile notions about the artist's heavy engagement with Japanese animation, film and *manga* (Japanese comic book) culture. In addition to this critical devaluation, Aida's explicit and deliberately shocking compositions seemingly serve to further disqualify him from scholarly consideration. This thesis will argue that Aida Makoto is instead a serious and socially responsible artist. Aida graduated with a Masters of Fine Arts from Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music in 1991 and came of age as an artist in the late 1980s during the start of Japan's economic recession. Since then Aida has tirelessly created artwork embodying an ever-changing contemporary Japanese identity. Much of his twenty-three-year oeuvre explores the culturally significant social sign of the *shojo* or pre-pubescent Japanese schoolgirl. This thesis will discuss these compositions as Aida's deliberate and exacting social critiques of Japan's first and second "lost decades," which began in 1991 and continue into the present.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	X
INTRODUCTION .....	1
Defining the <i>Shojo</i> .....	2
The Dilemma of Modern/Contemporary Japanese Art in the Western Art Tradition .....	11
Literature Review.....	13
The “Intertextuality” of the <i>Shojo</i> .....	20
Chapter Previews .....	23
CHAPTER ONE.....	25
Japan’s Economic Recession: the Hope and Despair of the <i>Shojo</i> Image.....	25
A Generation of Consumption: The Rise of the <i>Shinjinrui</i> .....	25
Female Consumption in the 1980s.....	28
Society as <i>Shojo</i> : Social Criticism by Male Conservative Critics .....	30
<i>Azemichi</i> (1991) and Higashiyama Kaiti’s <i>Road</i> (1950) .....	32
Japan as an “Economic Menace”: Trade Tensions in the 1990s .....	37
The Theory of <i>Nihonjinron</i> and U.S./Japan Trade Relations .....	38
<i>Godzilla vs. King Ghidorah</i> (1991) .....	43
The Giant Member Fuji as <i>Shojo</i> .....	45
Challenging of Postwar Social Taboos: 1990s Japanese Political Art Production.....	47
<i>A War Picture Returns: Beautiful Flag</i> (1995).....	49
The Death of the Showa Emperor and the Rise of Korean Minority Voices .....	52
Korean Identity in Postwar Japan: Legacy of the <i>Zainichi</i> .....	54
The Search for a Hybrid Identity: Japanese-Korean Identity .....	55



CHAPTER TWO .....	57
Japan's 'lost decade' and the Role of the <i>Shojo</i> .....	57
The "Employment Ice Age": Japanese Male Workers' Struggle .....	57
The <i>Shojo</i> and the <i>Kawaii</i> Movement.....	63
<i>Kawaii</i> as Social Critique: <i>Gunjyo-zu '97</i> (1997).....	65
View from the Train: The Image of the <i>Shojo</i> in Tayama Katai's "The Girl Fetish" .....	68
The <i>Shojo</i> 's Dark Side: <i>Kogyaru</i> .....	69
The Image of the <i>Kogyaru</i> vs. The Image of the <i>Kawaii</i> Schoolgirl.....	72
Japanese Cultural Travesties: <i>Kogyaru</i> and <i>Ganguro</i> Subcultures.....	76
<i>Harakiri Schoolgirls</i> (1999): The Demise of the Submissive Schoolgirl Image.....	80
CHAPTER THREE .....	83
Japan's Idol Industry and the Contemporary <i>Shojo</i> .....	83
The White Beauty Boom .....	83
The Revival of the Female Idol Industry .....	85
Japanese <i>Jimsho</i> .....	88
The Female Japanese and the <i>Ren'ai Doramu</i> .....	90
The Japanese "Idolization" Process .....	92
Consumption of the Female Idol Image.....	93
The "Post Idol" of the 1990s.....	95
<i>Edible Artificial Girls, Mi-Mi Chan</i> (2001).....	96
Female Japanese Idols as Quasi-Companions .....	99
<i>Picture of Waterfall</i> (2007-2010).....	102
The Female Japanese Idol as a Construction of Information.....	110

Debut of the Japanese Virtual Idol.....	111
<i>Jumble of 100 Flowers</i> (2012).....	113
CONCLUSION.....	115
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	121

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	Aida Makoto, <i>Azemichi (A Path Between Rice Fields)</i> , 1991, panel, Japanese paper, Japanese mineral pigment, acrylic, 73 X 52 cm.....	33
Figure 2	Aida Makoto, <i>The Giant Member Fuji versus King Ghidorah</i> , 1993, acetate film, acrylic, eyelets, 310 X 410 cm.....	40
Figure 3	Aida Makoto, <i>Beautiful Flag</i> from a <i>War Picture Returns</i> series, 1995, pair of two-panel sliding screens, hinges, charcoal, self-made paint with a medium made from Japanese glue, acrylic, each 169 X 169 cm.....	50
Figure 4	Aida Makoto, <i>Gunjyo-zu '97 (The Girls or Young Girls '97)</i> , 1997, panel, wrapping paper of characters “Hello Kitty” and “Kerokero Keroppi” made by Sanrio Co., Ltd., acrylic, marker, 116.5 X 91 cm.....	67
Figure 5	Aida Makoto, <i>Harakiri Schoolgirls (Suicide Schoolgirls)</i> , 1999, acrylic, print on transparency film, 119 X 84.7 cm.....	79
Figure 6	Aida Makoto, <i>Mi-Mi on the Chopping Board, Roast Mi-Mi, Mi-Mi Roll, Chilled Mi-Mi, Bowl of Rice with Fresh Salmon Roe</i> from <i>Edible Artificial Girls, Mi-Mi Chan</i> series, 2001, digital prints (a set of eight works), each 29.7 X 42 cm.....	97
Figure 7	Aida Makoto, <i>Picture of Waterfall</i> , 2007-2010, acrylic on canvas, 439 X 272 cm.....	103
Figure 8	Aida Makoto, <i>Jumble of 100 Flowers</i> , 2012-2014, acrylic on canvas, 200 X 1750 cm.....	114

## INTRODUCTION

Japanese identity has been a constant factor within scholarly discourse and contemporary Japanese art exhibitions in the United States since the late 1980s. While Japanese and Western scholars alike have engaged various and often conflicting interpretations of the subject of Japanese identity, most exclude the work of the significant contemporary Japanese artist, Aida Makoto. Aida was born in 1965 in the suburbs of Niigata prefecture in northeast Japan. Born to two left-leaning educational professionals, his mother a high school science teacher, and his father a sociology professor at Niigata University, Aida recognizes himself as a product of his parents' attention to the natural and social sciences. It is no surprise that Aida's upbringing within a household that cultivated an "odor of hypocrisy" would ultimately lead him down a path of liberal art production.<sup>1</sup> Chief of these is Aida's preoccupation with the *shojo*, or young Japanese girl whose image symbolizes and perpetuates longstanding social and cultural ideals. This study will focus on Japanese contemporary artist Aida Makoto and his engagement with the image of the *shojo*.

As a part of Japan's economic miracle generation that witnessed the postwar economic surge of the 1960s through 1980s, Aida had grown up force-fed the promises of a Japan as superior to all other nations. As fate would have it, the economic downturn of 1989 would coincide with the early years of Aida's own professional career, and ultimately foster his liberal upbringing as a method in creating his artwork. Adopting and

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Maerkele, "Makoto Aida: No More Water; Save Water; Don't Pollute the Sea," *Art AsiaPacific* 59 (2008): 135.

incorporating both traditional Japanese artistic techniques such as *nihonga*, or Japanese ink painting and the more garish pop cultural images of his youth, Aida creates complex compositions that investigate the political, social and historical underside of Japanese society.

### Defining the *Shojo*

Aida Makoto's key artistic engagement is with the image of the *shojo*. The *shojo* is commonly defined as a female individual at the developmental and social crossroads between adolescence and adulthood. According to Japanese art historian and curator Mizuki Takahashi, a *shojo* is "a young woman who is not allowed to express her sexuality," and while the *shojo* may be "sexually mature physically, she is socially considered sexually immature."<sup>2</sup> In the late nineteenth century, the term *shojo* first appeared in conjunction with the Japanese national movement toward modernization and implementation of a new education system. In 1899, the *kotogakko rei* (national high school law) allowed girls from urban middle and upper-class families to pursue higher education for the first time.<sup>3</sup> These institutions presented girls of privileged backgrounds with courses that prepared them to be future brides and homemakers, and instilled within them social values expressed in conservative social adages such as *ryosai kenbo*

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<sup>2</sup> Mizuki Takahashi, "Opening the Closed World of *Shojo Manga*," in *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime*, eds. Mark W. MacWilliams (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2008), 115.

<sup>3</sup> Takahashi, 116.

(good wife, wise mother). These girls served as the “*shojo* ideal” that eventually encouraged young girls of the middle classes to abstain from sexual activity and physical labor, while embracing their social obligations.

As demonstrated by the works presented in this study, the *shojo* is often depicted synonymously with the image of the Japanese schoolgirl, reflective of the origin of the *shojo* to the formative phase of the modern Japanese education system. In her most essential state, the *shojo* serves as an idealized and nostalgic cultural signifier of youth through the collective mindset of the greater Japanese society. Modern literary scholar Ariko Kurosawa asserts that these early schools functioned as a form of isolation for these young girls, “in order to enforce their purity as virgins.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore the *shojo* came to be socially defined as removed from all public or private roles and responsibilities in society, either in the workforce or as wives.<sup>5</sup>

Prior to the debut of the *shojo* term in the late nineteenth century, the term *shonen*, now solely used to delineate young boys in contemporary Japan, was used to define both male and female children. Whereas a young Japanese boy follows a strict, age-dependent timeline of transitioning from a *shonen* (young boy), to *seinen* (young man), to *otoko* (man), a girl’s transition from *shojo* (young girl) to an *onna* (woman) only occurs when she is married.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the societal freedom allotted to the young Japanese female individual presents an idealized embodiment of youth and

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<sup>4</sup> Takahashi, 116.

<sup>5</sup> Takahashi, 116.

<sup>6</sup> Sharalyn Orbaugh. “Busty Battin’ Babes: The Evolution of the *Shojo* in 1990’s Visual Culture.” in *Gender and Power in the Japanese Visual Field*, eds. Joshua S. Mostow, Norman Bryson and Maribeth Graybill (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 207.

separation from social responsibility. For Commentator Honda Masuko, the *shojo* is, “neither adult woman nor girl child, neither man nor woman,” and as such represents the “freest, most unhampered elements of society.”<sup>7</sup>

By the 1980s, *shojo* had become a derogatory label designating the conspicuous consumption of the decade and the corresponding gender roles adopted by the nation’s young adults. Cultural critic Otsuka Eiji’s exclaimed, “what name are we to give this life of ours today? The name is *shojo*.”<sup>8</sup> Other social critics included men within this *shojo* title, arguing that men were consumers as much as women. Critic Horikiri Naoto defined the culture as a whole, writing “we have become the forever Lolita herself.”<sup>9</sup> Thus the originally revered social status of *shojo* as removed from all possible corruptive social obligations in the early twentieth century had by the 1980s become male conservative critics’ strongest source of ammunition when evaluating the rising independence of young, single women in Japan. Since then the *shojo* has steadily gained more and more complex connotations, and as such has simultaneously evolved and appeared continuously throughout Aida’s twenty-three-year artistic career. This study’s goal is to unpack the significance of the *shojo* motif throughout Aida’s oeuvre, and reveal this motif as a symbol of the deep conversation on the evolution of Japanese national identity since the late 1980s. Through this discussion it is hoped that an important gap in Western scholarship on contemporary Japanese art will be filled.

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<sup>7</sup> Orbaugh, 205.

<sup>8</sup> Orbaugh, 204.

<sup>9</sup> Horikiri refers to the novel *Lolita* published in 1955 by Vladimir Nabokov that centers on the protagonist’s sexual fantasies and obsession with young girls. Orbaugh, 203.

## When Will Aida Be Famous? MURAKAMI vs. AIDA

One of the questions surrounding Aida Makoto is when will he receive recognition on the international art stage commensurate with that of his contemporaries, Murakami Takashi and Nara Yoshitomo? Sociologist Adrian Favell, who in his recent book on contemporary Japanese Art, *Before and After Superflat: A Short History of Japanese Contemporary Art 1990-2011* (2011), casts Murakami and Nara not only as artists, but as entrepreneurs in the art business who have secured their places in the Art History canon through the sensationalizing of what he defines as “western friendly” Japanese popular culture.<sup>10</sup>

Favell recognizes Murakami and the international success of his work as grounded within the concept of, “knowing your identity,” which “recognize[s] the Western gaze at Japan and play[s] along with it for all its worth.”<sup>11</sup> Murakami’s highly received exhibition *Superflat* in 2000 strategically connected the spatial qualities of the eighteen and nineteen century ukiyo-e prints to contemporary Japanese animation and *manga* (Japanese comic book) culture. By presenting and focusing on two of the most well-received Japanese art genres in the West, Murakami’s work marketed itself as easily legible for a non-Japanese audience. Specifically, “Takashi Murakami’s blend of deviant otaku style sexuality and warped representations of post-Bubble Japan was certainly a potent cocktail for the international art market.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Adrian Favell, *Before and After Superflat: A Short History of Japanese Contemporary Art 1990-2011* (Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher Pub., 2011), 117.

<sup>11</sup> Favell, 51.

<sup>12</sup> Favell, 49.



Editor and writer of contemporary Japanese art Andrew Maerke echoes Favell, asserting that since the “early 1990s Takashi Murakami and others explored the ramifications of the imperial system, WWII and consumer culture, but have since lightened their loads.”<sup>13</sup> In comparison, Aida has been continuously described as the artist who “takes on subjects that others veer around,” refusing to conform artistic vision to accepted artistic and social conventions in Japan and abroad.<sup>14</sup> This has gained Aida a diverse, if limited following grounded on respect and controversy. Even though Favell and Maerke present Aida as one of the most important artists of his generation and recognizes him as such amongst the greater Japanese public, Aida’s refusal to cater to the demands and expectations of a international art market has left his name and work obscure in comparison to his contemporary art peers.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from Aida Makoto’s reluctance to “denature [his work] from its local origins,” his work’s misrepresentation and often categorization within the genre of the “peculiar Japanese erotic” has caused this artist to continue to remain obscure in the United States.<sup>16</sup> In particular, Aida’s more violent and graphically presented pieces such as, *The Giant Member Fuji versus King Ghidorah* (1993) and *Harakiri Schoolgirls* (1999) have gained the artist a reputation of promoting a perverse sexuality, even sadism towards young girls. The apparent objectification of the female figure by Aida in such series like *Dog* (1989-2008), which presents the nude and amputated silhouettes of young

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<sup>13</sup> Maerke, 138.

<sup>14</sup> Maerke, 138.

<sup>15</sup> Favell, 208.

<sup>16</sup> Favell, 208.

girls crawling around on all fours within a traditional Japanese landscape, has been explained by the artist to function as a form of “shock therapy.” In an interview conducted with cultural anthropologist Sharon Kinsella regarding the series, Aida explained the series as an exercise to first shock the viewer, then motivate them to investigate the image more deeply. He explained that “when I draw an amputated dog, its not only a male viewer looking at that dog. But there is also a part of me that looks from the girls’ side...it is not the same as the line of vision as a man wanting to possess a girl.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, this explicit series presenting the female figure is grounded not only in the male gaze, but also with an awareness and compassion for the female individual presented. Aida has admitted that the purpose of many of his objectifying and disturbing images of women depict “something that [is] completely deviating from ethics,” and that as such are not, “trying to make people understand [them].”<sup>18</sup> Rather, Aida describes his compositions as engaging the viewer’s reaction and coming to terms with the image, therefore “subconsciously channeling [the] material...like using poison to draw out poison, or producing a kind of shock therapy.”<sup>19</sup>

Due in part to the shocking and objectifying nature of Aida’s artwork, Western scholars have consistently pigeonholed Aida’s work within the stereotypical category known as the “*otaku* aesthetic.”<sup>20</sup> An *otaku* is defined as an obsessive subcultural fanatic

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<sup>17</sup> Sharon Kinsella, *Schoolgirls, Money and Rebellion in Japan*, (London: Routledge, 2013), 165-6.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Philips and Noriko Fuku, *Heavy Light: Recent Photography and Video in Japan*, (New York: International Center of Photography, 2008), 17.

<sup>19</sup> Maerkle, 138.

<sup>20</sup> Ivan Vartanian, *Drop Dead Cute: The New Generation of Women Artists in Japan* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005), 8. In *Drop Dead Cute*, Ivan Vartanian, defines the *otaku* as “an epithet for socially inept and hobby-obsessed young men with only a tenuous grasp of reality.” Vartanian references

drawn to Japanese animation, comic books, character goods and the virtual world.

Coinciding with what American journalist Douglas McGray coined as Japan's "gross national cool," or the [importation of Japanese pop cultural outlets] of comics, animation and other elements of youth culture in the early 2000s, the interpretation of Aida's work within Western art historical discourse has largely focused on and become limited to its incorporation of pop cultural motifs heavily endorsed by artists like Murakami.<sup>21</sup>

The otaku subcultures of Japanese animation and *manga*, or Japanese comic books, with their frequent presentation of objectified images of girls and women, propel even stronger misinterpretations of Aida's artwork. For example, art editor Ivan Vartanian's contemporary art survey dedicated to Japanese female artists entitled *Drop Dead Cute: The New Generation of Women Artists in Japan* (2005) introduces various Japanese female artists' work and artistic agenda as in sharp contrast with Aida's. Vartanian categorizes Aida's work within the aesthetic of the *otaku*, and emphasizes its fetishistic imagery. Vartanian insists that the female artists' work collected for *Drop Dead Cute* presents "approaches to female gender and identity that have little in common with such objectifying and otherwise predominant tropes" present in Aida's work.<sup>22</sup> It is important to keep in mind that the publication of Vartanian's survey conveniently coincided with Murakami's celebrated and final installment of his *Superflat* trilogy, and

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Aida Makoto's work within this social phenomena of the *otaku* aesthetic, and in contrast to the female women artists discussed in his book.

<sup>21</sup> Christine Yano, "Wink on Pink: Interpreting Japanese Cute as It Grabs the Global Headlines," *Journal of Asian Studies* 68 (2009): 683.

<sup>22</sup> Vartanian, 8.

featured many female artist's working within Murakami's art production and artist management company known Kaikai Kiki Co. Ltd.

The work of Aida Makoto has been valued and considered on its surface. Misuma Sueo, the artist's longtime dealer and owner of the Mizuma Gallery located in Shinjuku, Tokyo explains that "the themes that Aida is interested in are rooted in Japan. And because he digs into particularly deep social problems, its difficult for American and European people to understand what he is doing."<sup>23</sup> Aida has expressed that he is not afraid of having his works misunderstood but he does "desire for them to be explained."<sup>24</sup> Aida has stated, "I am not making art for "art's sake", or for my own satisfaction. I am creating it for an audience."<sup>25</sup> Therefore, Aida regards the viewer's consideration and interpretation of his work as integral to its purpose.

International art curator and critic David Elliott has curated many prominent contemporary Japanese Art exhibitions in the United States such as, *Bye bye Kitty!!!: Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art* (New York 2011). Elliott presents Aida as an artist as social critic in his retrospective exhibition *Aida Makoto: Monument for Nothing (Tensai de Gomenasai)* (Tokyo 2012). Rather than analyzing Aida's work on its surface, Elliott illuminates Aida's work dedicated to the *shojo* as "parodies of the kind of pornography [Japanese men] consume, and see[s] them as a homeopathic provocation against the cult of *kawaii*, the kitsch, child-like sexualization of

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<sup>23</sup> Maerke, 140.

<sup>24</sup> Maerke, 140.

<sup>25</sup> Anna Dickie and Catherine Shaw, "A conversation with Makoto Aida," *OCULA* (January 9, 2015): <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/makoto-aida/>.

young women.”<sup>26</sup> In the vein of Favell, Maerkle, and Elliott’s arguments, this study intends to regard the works discussed by Aida Makoto as socially critical and deliberately complex.

Since the 1990s, cultural anthropologists and literary scholars have most closely analyzed the culturally and historically saturated image of the *shojo* in the West; however, the contemporary image of this cultural icon has not received significant recognition within the West’s art historical profession. While comparable to the feudal *geisha* and early twentieth century *moga*, or modern girl, that have served as societal spectacles, the *shojo* is yet to be recognized through what theorist Guy Debord defines as the, “social relationship between people that is mediated by [her] image.”<sup>27</sup> The *shojo*, “in all its specific manifestations-news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment-...epitomizes the prevailing model of social life.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore “in form as in content,” the *shojo* as, “spectacle serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system,” that is modern Japanese society today.<sup>29</sup> In Aida Makoto’s personal oeuvre, the critical importance of the *shojo* is demonstrated by her appearance on every exhibition catalog cover dedicated to the artist.

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<sup>26</sup> David Elliott, interview with Aida Makoto, “Being hated in one of my jobs,” *Flash Art International* 291 (2013): 106.

<sup>27</sup> Guy Debord, “The Society of the Spectacle,” In *The visual culture reader*, eds. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 2002), 142.

<sup>28</sup> Debord, 143.

<sup>29</sup> Debord, 143.

## The Dilemma of Modern/Contemporary Japanese Art in the Western Art Tradition

In 1994, Asian art historian Alexandra Munroe curated *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky*, an exhibition dedicated to presenting Japanese artistic production from the end of World War II and extending up until the present moment. The exhibition opened in the Yokohama Museum of Art February 5, 1995, and traveled to the Guggenheim Museum in New York before ending at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on August 27, 1995. Hers was recognized as the first all-encompassing exhibition on Japanese postwar art to visit the West, and Munroe's accompanying diagnoses of the issues pertaining to postwar and contemporary Japanese arts with an emphasis on identity continue to affect the acceptance of artists like Aida Makoto in the Western art market. In *Scream Against the Sky*, Munroe confronts Western scholarly prejudices that have either categorized modern Japanese Art as derivative due to a work's incorporation of traditionally Western art techniques, or lacking in a modern consciousness due to reliance on traditional Japanese techniques.<sup>30</sup>

Munroe attributes this complex system of prejudices against Japanese art to the value system of Western art historians and the ambiguous role of the term "modern" in the Japanese cultural mindset that has existed since the Meiji era (1868-1912). First, Japanese art historians abroad have discounted late-nineteenth and twentieth century art, "as if modern Japan, corrupted by Westernization and industrialization, were incapable of creating a significant culture of visual arts that could equal the achievements of the

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<sup>30</sup> Alexandra Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994), 20.

classical past.”<sup>31</sup> In contrast from a Japanese point of view “the problematic issue is the ambiguity of the term (modern) in a non-western context.”<sup>32</sup> Since the Meiji era, the term “modern” has been intimately tied to the idea of the Western world, specifically in the areas of technology and its social systems based on education instead of a feudal cast system. The Western world served as a model for Japan to compare itself to as it transitioned from a feudalistic state to a contemporary democracy. Postwar literary critic Karatani Kojin identifies the two concepts of the “modern” and the “Western” to have led Japan to its current crisis of interpretation, and ultimately its perception of itself since the late nineteenth century.<sup>33</sup>

This debate on the identity and authenticity of Japanese art presented by Munroe is significant to this study as it illuminates Aida’s working method in pieces that marry traditional Japanese compositions with contemporary social issues. Japanese art historian Yamashita Yuji recognizes Aida’s work as an intricate art historical parody that resuscitates the Japanese art historical narrative within contemporary demands for more universal discussions. As stated in contemporary Japanese artist and critic Nakazawa Hideki’s recent survey on postwar Japanese Art History published as “*Art History: Japan 1945-2014*,” Japan’s relative “localism” to the United States as international art world’s center is undeniable and should be treated in relation to it.<sup>34</sup> As if in direct response to Munroe’s proposed dilemma in *Scream Against the Sky*, many of Aida’s works presented

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<sup>31</sup> Munroe, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Munroe, 20.

<sup>33</sup> Munroe, 21.

<sup>34</sup> Hideki Nakazawa, *Art History: Japan 1945-2014* (Tokyo: Art Diver, 2014), 3.

in this study such as, *Azemichi* (1991) and *Gunjyo-zu '97* (1997), present an awareness of Japanese artistic identity as grounded within both Western and Japanese-derived artistic techniques and ways of seeing.

#### Literature Review

American monumental exhibitions dedicated to contemporary Japanese art over the past thirty years have constantly contemplated the theme of identity. Munroe has attributed the West's growing interest in contemporary Japanese art since the 1980s as part of a larger postmodern movement to critique modernist tendencies such as Eurocentrism and the discourse of the "Other."<sup>35</sup> Munroe also emphasizes the breaking down of international borders by way of the information age, and Japan as embodying the ideal of "transculturism" through its hybrid incorporation of both Eastern and Western cultural attributes. An integral part of this is Japan's status as an economic superpower within the global economy of the 1980s.

One of the first exhibitions to come to the United States addressing these issues was *Against Nature: Japanese Art in the Eighties* (1989), curated by Kathy Halbreich and Thomas Sokolowski and funded by the Japan Foundation. The exhibition opened on June 5, 1989 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and upon closing in the Contemporary Museum of Art in Houston in February, 1991 it traveled to venues in Akron Art Museum, Bank of Boston Art Gallery, MIT List Visual Arts Center, the Seattle Art Museum, the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, and the Grey Art Gallery in New York. This exhibition presented a selection of Japanese contemporary

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<sup>35</sup> Munroe, 19.



artists who challenged oriental or occidental views of Japanese art and identity deriving from an indigenous relationship with nature. *Against Nature* emphasized contemporary Japanese artists' resistance to the natural landscape, one's human nature and one's nationality.<sup>36</sup> Rather than presenting idealized paintings and prints of glorified Japanese seasonal landscapes, the artists in *Against Nature* purposely explored and presented Japan's long history of preference for a kind of controlled, artificial nature.

As noted in the catalog, "artists included in *Against Nature* gnaw at dated colonialist views, both foreign and domestic, of a Japan and an indigenous Japanese art form that is rooted to a traditional agrarian view of the land and man's responsibility to it."<sup>37</sup> While claiming the concept of "Japanese-ness" derived from Japan's agrarian historical roots as anti-natural, this exhibition defined Japanese contemporary art as unconcerned with originality, but also striving to create a particular space through entirely different aesthetics from those practiced in the West. For example, the hybrid painting and textile works of Shoko Maemoto, such as *Bloody Bride II* (1984) discuss the evolving, yet still difficult role of Japanese women, while Tatsuo Miyajima's *It Fucks Everything (Nachi Falls)* (1987), a technology-based composition, strives to invoke an ancient Japanese landscape. Both of these artists' work reflect the complex status of contemporary Japanese society and can also relate similar issues experienced throughout the international world. Ultimately, the social reality of Japan presented in *Against*

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<sup>36</sup> Kathy Halbreich and Thomas Sokolowski, *Against nature: Japanese Art in the Eighties* (New York: The Gallery, 1989), 9.

<sup>37</sup> Halbreich and Sokolowski, 8.

*Nature* exemplified the identity crises felt by Japanese contemporary artists within the international art scene.

In 1994 and shortly following *Against Nature*, Alexandra Munroe's *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky* continued the discussion of independent Japanese artistic identity. The goal of her *Scream Against the Sky* was to offer a historical, cultural and intellectual background to the legacy of Japanese postwar art in order to combat Western art historical notions of Japanese modern art as either unoriginal or ahistorical.<sup>38</sup> Where Western scholarship has long discounted Japanese art for being derivative when appearing Westernized, or "un-Japanese" when it fails to engage traditional Japanese artistic techniques, Munroe argues for a deeper cultural understanding of imperialism, colonialism and modernism that have functioned to keep the East separate.

Japan's historical strategy of incomplete assimilation to the West since the Meiji restoration of 1868, has ultimately barred the country from being accepted as a modern nation. Munroe emphasizes that in order to construct a history of twentieth-century Japan, the term "modern" must be considered through Japanese terms. The Japanese cultural mindset regards the concept of the "modern" as closely connected to the values of the "western" world. This relationship reflects the ongoing impact of the Meiji Restoration of 1868, and its national adoption of Western technology and social systems as a means to modernize the current feudalistic political structure. Specifically, this historical transition has created an ambiguous relationship between the terms "modern" and "western," within the Japanese national mindset, and has since served as a source of

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<sup>38</sup> Munroe, 20.

Japan's contemporary identity struggles. Munroe's exhibition is determined to present the history of postwar Japanese avant garde art as a continuation rather than a break from the larger Japanese art historical timeline.

The passing of the emperor in 1989 and the resulting disarray of national identity that soon followed led many young artists of the early 1990s to reconsider Japan's historical and cultural truths. Munroe's final chapter is dedicated to contemporary artists coming of age in the early 1990s. It emphasizes their tendency toward leftist opposition against authoritarian systems, such as the *tenno-sei*, or emperor system. Many began to produce works of art that broke down nationalistic systems. Munroe stresses the strong political commentary of these works as they fight against ancient political bureaucracy and contest Western modernist expectations. While Munroe included the early works of Murakami Takashi in her last section dedicated to the contemporary Japanese art scene, there is no mention of Aida Makoto.

The next seminal exhibition dedicated to contemporary Japanese art that generated a stirring in the international art world was Murakami's debut exhibition *Superflat*, held at the Parco Gallery, Tokyo from April 28 through May 29, 2000. The exhibition later traveled throughout the United States stopping at the MOCA Gallery in Los Angeles, Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle in 2001. In *Superflat*, the works of contemporary Japanese artists, like Nara Yoshitomo and Aoshima Chiho are "juxtaposed against the works of manga and anime

(Japanese animation) design icons like Yoshinori Kanada and Shigeru Mizuki.”<sup>39</sup>

Murakami’s *Superflat* thesis argues that the “planar spaces, stylized features and absence of illusionistic space define a lineage in Japanese art that links... woodblock prints to early modern *Nihonga* painting, and ultimately to postwar manga and anime.”<sup>40</sup>

*Superflat* debuted at a significant time in Japanese contemporary art history following an important exhibition in Japan, *Ground Zero Japan*, (1999-2000) that considered the decade’s economic recession, natural disasters and domestic terrorist attacks as responsible for taking the country to an all-time moral low. The exhibition featured various artworks coming to terms with the collapse of the Cold War world structure and Japan’s decade-long recession. Aida Makoto’s *A War Picture Returns* series was featured as well as works by Takashi Murakami, Kenji Yanobe and Tadanori Yokoo. Strategically, *Superflat* was meant to answer Japan’s continuous battle for legitimization within the dominant Western art discourse. Contemporary art critic Sawaragi Noi argued that the purpose of the *Superflat* manifesto was, “to recreate global art by changing the value system.”<sup>41</sup> Japanese cultural critic Azuma Hiroki breaks down the term *Superflat* as “super” referring to a transcendence of zero, while “flat” refers to a leveling of the high and low art hierarchies.<sup>42</sup>

*Superflat* was later followed by two other exhibitions of Murakami’s work.

*Coloriage* (2002) at the Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, Paris from June 26

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<sup>39</sup> Alexandra Munroe, “Introducing Little Boy,” In *Little boy: The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture* ed. Takashi Murakami (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 244.

<sup>40</sup> Munroe, 244.

<sup>41</sup> Alison M. Gingeras, “Lost in Translation: The Politics of Identity in the Work of Takashi Murakami,” in *Pop Life: Art in a Material World*, ed. Jack Bankowsky (London: Tate Pub., 2009), 77.

<sup>42</sup> Takashi Murakami, *Superflat* (Tokyo: MADRA Pub., 2000), 139.

through September 29, 2002, and *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture* (2005) presented by the Japan Society Gallery in New York from April 8 through July 24, 2005. *Little Boy* completed a trilogy of highly advertised exhibitions in the West dedicated to exploring the origins of contemporary Japanese art and its exchanges with *manga* (Japanese comic books) and animation. Murakami presents his theory of *Superflat* as a “merging of multiple visual layers into one,” one featuring *otaku* subculture artists, popular consumer goods and young amateur photography, to name a few.<sup>43</sup> Through *Superflat*'s historical bridge between Japanese Edo period artists and specific contemporary animation producers, Murakami attempted to argue *Superflat* as a modern form and as reflective of indigenous art theory devoid of Western art influences. In *Coloriage* (2002), Murakami's second exhibition to his *Superflat* trilogy, the relationship between consumer goods and current Japanese artistic practice is explored to promote the idea of high and low art in Japan as less opposed to one another than in the West.<sup>44</sup> In *Superflat*, “low art” in the form of contemporary Japanese animation and comic books is recognized as the center of Japanese culture, while stylistic branches lead off into genres based on the grotesque, the erotic, media frenzy and *otaku* subcultures.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, in *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture* (2005) jointly curated with Alexandra Munroe, Murakami focuses predominately on *otaku* culture pertaining to film and animation history in Japan. *Little Boy* identifies Japan as a country

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<sup>43</sup> Murakami, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Tom Eccles “Murakami's Manhattan Project,” In *Little boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture* ed. Takashi Murakami (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 264.

<sup>45</sup> Murakami, 23.

of impotent and infantile individuals that retreat into *otaku* subcultures, and continuously feel emasculated by the United States' victory in World War II. In comparison to Murakami's first and second exhibitions where Japanese identity was considered a victim of Western standards, *Little Boy* asserts more aggressively the United States' responsibility in Japan's identity crisis. Although Murakami's trilogy of exhibitions spanning from 2000-2005 propelled him into international superstar status and were generally well received by Western audiences, his work did not embody the larger trends of contemporary Japanese art as a whole. Contemporary Japanese artists were concerned that the international art scene viewed contemporary Japanese art largely through the works of Murakami and Nara alone.

Murakami claimed that his work arrived in the United States as "subculture." This was addressed in the 2011 exhibition, *Bye bye Kitty!!!: Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art*, curated by David Elliott and held in the Japan Society Gallery, New York from March 18 through June 12, 2011. *Bye bye Kitty!!!* attempted to showcase a wider perspective of contemporary Japanese art. It focused on two main themes, the rebellion against *kawaii*, or cute culture that Murakami had appropriated to visually convey his diagnosis of Japan as a land of infantilism, and second a rebellion against Japanese conservatism.<sup>46</sup> Through *Bye Bye Kitty's* analysis of social issues related to its featured artwork, Elliott made it a priority to move the show away from foreign critics' tendency to focus on superficiality, infantilism and popular culture in

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<sup>46</sup> David Elliott, *Bye bye Kitty!!!: Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art* (New York: Japan Society, 2011), 1.

contemporary Japanese art. Elliott questions why Murakami emphasizes the soullessness of Japan's current situation yet still willingly participates in it.<sup>47</sup>

In regards to the topic of identity, Elliott believes that Japanese contemporary art continues to face derivative labeling, as well as the more recent stereotype of a kind of "child-like grace." *Bye bye Kitty!!!* presents artists' work that questions expected ways of seeing and thinking. The artists featured in *Bye bye Kitty!!!* were specifically chosen for their challenging of social, political and aesthetic conditions of their times, in addition to being mindful of their historical context.<sup>48</sup> In *Bye bye Kitty!!!*, Aida's work is presented for the first time in the United States within a larger exhibition devoted to contemporary Japanese art. *Bye bye Kitty!!!*'s presented a number of contemporary Japanese artists that challenge the current Western expectation of contemporary Japanese art.

The "Intertextuality" of the *Shojo*

Scholars, as well as the artists themselves, have pointed out that Murakami Takashi and Aida Makoto each engage with a wide variety of pop cultural signifiers. Aida Makoto's decision to ground his artistic narrative dedicated to Japanese identity within the image of the *shojo* is based on the image's "inescapable intertextuality."<sup>49</sup> Aida's continual presentation of the Japanese cultural signifier known as the *shojo* has served to narrate the seminal historical, political and societal changes Japan has undergone over the past two and a half decades. Cultural anthropologists Jan Bardsley

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<sup>47</sup> Elliott, *Bye bye Kitty!!!*, 7.

<sup>48</sup> Elliott, *Bye bye Kitty!!!*, 45.

<sup>49</sup> Patrick W. Galbraith "Idols: The Image of Desire in Japanese Consumer Capitalism," in *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture*, eds. Patrick W. Galbraith and Jason G. Karlin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 186.

and Laura Miller have recognized the cultural entity of the *shojo* as one of many prominent female “social scapegoats” within the Japanese patriarchal timeline, while postmodern Japanese cultural critics like Otsuka Eiji have defined her as an embodiment of Japan’s indulgent past and disintegrating future.<sup>50</sup> In comparison, socio-cultural historian Honda Masako has defined and recognizes the *shojo* as the “freest, most unhampered elements of society,” and identifiable as “neither adult woman nor girl child, neither man nor woman.”<sup>51</sup>

The uncovering of such culturally complex signs such as the *shojo* is made possible through Art History’s interdisciplinary approach to unpacking symbolically embedded images. It is the art historical consideration of multiple areas of study such as world histories, cultural anthropology, gender studies,<sup>50</sup> and mass media studies that allow it to make artworks legible to greater audiences. As will be emphasized in Chapter Three, the *shojo*’s own “inescapable intertextuality” within cultural criticism, historical narratives and the media allow for her image to read “in relation to other images,” with “the real [ultimately] read as an image.”<sup>52</sup> Amidst these art historical backdrops, Aida’s use of the *shojo* as a highly intertextual sign allows for continual reinterpretation of his subject, and brings attention to the inter-workings of that image promoted for consumption.

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<sup>50</sup> Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley, “Introduction,” in *Bad Girls of Japan*, eds. Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1.

<sup>51</sup> Orbaugh, 205.

<sup>52</sup> Patrick W. Galbraith “Idols: The Image of Desire in Japanese Consumer Capitalism,” in *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture*, eds. Patrick W. Galbraith and Jason G. Karlin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 186.



While both Murakami and Aida reflect the dawning of Japan's television era, it is Aida's approach to its cultural signifiers, such as the *shojo*, that elevate its legibility to new heights. Similar to theorist Michel de Certeau's 'way of operating' in his study *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) which examines the ways in which individuals adopt mass culture and make it their own, Aida deliberately layers the mass cultural sign of the *shojo* with a variety of complex images in order to make this intertextual sign serve his own artistic agenda.

As Japanese art historian Yamashita Yuji proclaimed in his essay "Aida Makoto, Pretend Villain-Premeditated Quotations from Japanese Art History" it is Aida's combination of art historical compositions and pop cultural icons like the *shojo* that embodies de Certeau's 'ways of operating.' "Without leaving the place of where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he (Aida) establishes within it a degree of *plurality* and creativity," ultimately reevaluating contemporary Japanese mass culture and identity through the re-appropriation of its pop cultural signifiers in a new way.<sup>53</sup> The *shojo* image is heavily saturated within cultural criticism and popular media that allow her image to read, "in relation to other images," with the real [ultimately] read as an image."<sup>54</sup>

The works by Aida Makoto chosen for this study are all additionally visually engaged with the historically and mass-cultural-indebted image of the *shojo* through what theorist Roland Barthes terms a "code of connotation." A code of connotation is defined

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<sup>53</sup> Michel de Certeau, "The Practice of Everyday Life," In *The visual culture reader*, eds. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 1998), 152.

<sup>54</sup> Galbraith, 186.

as neither natural or artificial, but historically and culturally signified. It allows the viewer to see and more thoroughly understand the culturally and historically codified attributes of a subject. This study presents Aida's works dedicated to the image of the *shojo* as a sign within a system of significations, that functions as an embodiment for the larger Japanese identity. The intertextual image of the *shojo*, or this connotated sign, is constituted of a universal symbolic order and a period rhetoric.<sup>55</sup>

### Chapter Previews

This study's first chapter introduces the image of the *shojo* as an embodiment of Japanese contemporary society. The societal perception of the role of *shojo* is analyzed within 1980s conservative male criticism at an important turning point in Japan's postwar historical narrative. Significant societal events including the fall of Japan's internationally dominant postwar economy, heightened tensions between foreign trade partners and the resurfacing of Pacific War memories following the death of the Showa emperor instigate a re-contemplating of the nation's current identity. Aida's *Azemichi* (1991), *The Giant Member Fuji versus King Ghidorah* (1993) and *Beautiful Flag* (1995) from his series *A War Picture Returns* will be discussed as they engage and present these events.

In Chapter Two, Aida's continual employment of the *shojo* image is presented within the changing social roles of women. As Aida's depiction of the *shojo* transitions from cute and innocent imagery into the more assertive media spectacle referred to as the *kogyaru*, or young, independent "gal" movement, the artist's work embarks on a

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<sup>55</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 18.

discussion of accusatory male media scandals, suffering male job security and the overall health of Japan's youth. Two works dating from the late 1990s *Gunjyo-zu '97* (1997) and *Harakiri Schoolgirls* (2001-2002) will be explored.

Finally, in Chapter Three, the role of the *shojo* is analyzed during the reemergence of conservative femininity at the beginning of the early 2000s. Focusing on the Japanese media revival and consumption of idol imagery, Aida uses the image of the *shojo* to critique contemporary Japanese men and women's identity formation.

Discussion focuses on Aida's most recent works, *Edible Artificial Girls Mi-Mi Chan* series (2001), *Picture of Waterfall* (2007-2010), and *Jumble of 100 Flowers* (2012).

## CHAPTER ONE

### Japan's Economic Recession: The Hope and Despair of the *Shojo* Image

The early career work by Aida Makoto presents the figure of the *shojo* engaged in different social dilemmas from the 1980s to the mid-1990s. The central method of this study will be a close investigation of the *shojo* image as an embodiment of the Japanese nation. In particular, careful analysis of Aida's *Azemichi* (1991), *The Giant Member Fuji versus King Ghidorah* (1993) and *Beautiful Flag* (1995) introduces the artist's critical stance on a variety of social issues in contemporary Japan. This chapter explores Aida's work as it presents a growing social awareness of the nation's youth generations and criticizes their consumption. Analysis of Aida Makoto's work also illuminates the relevance and universal worth within the international contemporary art scene. The theme of Japanese identity itself is developed in the next three chapters of this study.

### A Generation of Consumption: The Rise of the *Shinjinrui*

The affluent 1980s were a glorious decade within the Japanese postwar economic narrative. Following this explosive growth, between 1986 and 1989, the Nikkei stock index tripled. Japanese companies listed on the Tokyo stock exchange were worth more than forty percent of the entire world's stock market. Prices of real estate in Japan doubled at the start of the decade and tripled in some areas by the mid-1980s. By 1989, the value of real estate in Tokyo was estimated to exceed that of the entire United

States.<sup>56</sup> Parallel with Japan's booming economy, radical changes were identified in the greater populace's consumption habits.

This period produced a frenzied spending by young people in Japan. Individuals between the ages of twenty to twenty-five emerged as the dominant consumers, but not necessarily as direct wage earners. They crowded brand name fashion boutiques, partook in gourmet restaurants and invested in the latest electronic gadgets. The travel industry boomed as young Japanese tourists indulged in more leisure vacations than ever before. Where as in 1965, 300,000 overseas trips predominately served business related affairs, 1980 recorded a total of three million trips taken throughout the world. By 1989, ten million leisure vacations had been booked. By 1990, the Japanese foreign travel industry was reporting twenty billion dollar annual revenues.<sup>57</sup> The boom of the Japanese leisure travel industry in the 1980s represented the indulgent atmosphere of the decade.

By the mid-1980s, two dominant consumer generations had emerged and became firmly recognized by consumer demographics. These are the so-called [ants] and [grasshoppers]. The first was composed of the generations born from the 1940s to 1950s, responsible for the rebuilding of Japan following World War II and kick starting the so-called economic miracle of the postwar period. This generation's economic hardships, frugal spending and strong work values led them to be labeled [ants] within the 1980s consumer spectrum. The second segment was composed of individuals born from the 1960s to 1970s, and thus around the ages of twenty to twenty-five at the start of the

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<sup>56</sup> Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*, Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 306.

<sup>57</sup> Gordon, 303.

1980s. This second group contrasted greatly with their ant predecessors' lifestyle preferences and generational values. The term that came into popular use to define these young individuals was [grasshoppers] for their preference to put pleasure and play before anything else.<sup>58</sup> Conservative critics also labeled them *shinjinrui*, or literally “new breed,” which carried a negative connotation stemming from their perceived alienation from postwar social values.

The *shinjinrui* symbolized a hollowing out of the postwar Japanese work ethic. However, Japanese society as a whole was immersed in an age of excess triggered by Japan's newly dominant role within the world's economy. The everyday Japanese lifestyle had become dependent on state-of-the-art home appliances, one of the world's most dependable transportation systems, and a never-ending desire for convenience-driven products. Although Japan's youth generations were singled out for their consumerist driven lifestyles, the successes of Japan's national economy fostered a decade of excess for all generations. The *shinjinrui* also became associated with the social label of “having six pockets,” which accounted for the money they received from their four grandparents and two parents. Parents and grandparents of the *shinjinrui* generation, the [ants] within the consumer demographic, felt uncomfortable spending large amounts of money on themselves; therefore, their children or grandchildren [grasshoppers] were given large amounts of disposable income. In the 1980s, the

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<sup>58</sup> Merry White, “The Marketing of Adolescence in Japan: Buying and Dreaming,” in *Women, Media, and Consumption in Japan* ed. Lise Skov and Brian Moeran (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 259.

materialistic tendencies of the *shinjinrui* led this demographic segment to be regarded by the greater Japanese society as apolitical and self-centered.<sup>59</sup>

#### Female Consumption in the 1980s

The *shinjinrui* generation gave rise to youth trends such as the *furiita* and “OL” professions. For men, the *furiita* phenomenon involved young men rejecting corporate careers for freelance work.<sup>60</sup> The concept of young men passing up steady, full-time positions that had remained the male career standard since the postwar period baffled older generations. The corresponding emergence of young, single women as a significant force in the consumer economy was met with unparalleled scorn from the media. Young women between the ages of eighteen to twenty-five worked modestly paid jobs as “OLs,” or clerical office ladies, and typically avoided paying rent and large bills by still residing with their parents. As a result, these *shinjinrui* were able to amass a significant amount of disposable income, and invested in luxury brands such as American and European designer fashion goods. As early as 1977, luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton had been promoted in new magazines targeting young women.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, by the 1980s, Japanese women’s consumption of foreign luxury brands served as a symbol of personal success within Japan’s equally successful global economy. Popular writer Hayashi Mariko describes the 1980s consumer atmosphere as a “bubbly life” wherein women were seduced by luxury, “brand love” and the frequent promise of these

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<sup>59</sup> Gordon, 305.

<sup>60</sup> Gordon, 304.

<sup>61</sup> Jan Bardsley and Hiroko Hirakawa, “Branded: Bad Girls Go Shopping,” in *Bad Girls of Japan*, eds. Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 111.

previously unattainable goods fulfilling their dreams. The female *shinjinrui* demographic was interpreted by the media as solely for personal self-satisfaction versus the previous generations' devotion to self-sacrifice. They came to stand for a national unease in regards to issues involving traditionally defined postwar gender roles and values.

Conservative male politicians of the 1980s heavily criticized the consumerist-driven lifestyles of young women, and other predominately male critics blamed these female *shinjinrui* for the nation's declining birth rate. The nascent trend of young women postponing marriage and ultimately having smaller families triggered claims of women being selfish. Japanese women's disregard of traditional female gender roles, which included having children and remaining in the home made them easy targets for conservative male criticisms. Although the "baby bust" of 1990 presented an all-time low in childbirths, averaging 1.6 per woman, feminist observers countered that the postponement of marriage was to avoid the double burden of caring for children and aging parents simultaneously.<sup>62</sup> The approval of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, or EEOL in 1985 demanded employers provide equal hiring, training and career opportunities for women.<sup>63</sup> While the enforcement of EEOL was not highly monitored and violating companies received little if any punishment, the theory of men and women being eligible for equal employment opportunities challenged conservative notions of the Japanese women's role in society. Japanese women's demand for a more equal work

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<sup>62</sup> Gordon, 302.

<sup>63</sup> Gordon, 302.



environment alongside a declining national birthrate made them a negative target for conservative male administrators.

#### Society as *Shojo*: Social Criticism by Male Conservative Critics

The young, single working woman of the booming bubble economy of the 1980s earned many derogatory names, such as “bad brand girls,” but the most prevalent title and one that later came to define the entire consumer capitalist era was *shojo*. The *shojo* is literally defined as a young female individual who is in between the socially recognized phases of childhood and adulthood. *Shojo*, or young Japanese girls became socially and culturally recognized as adults when they marry, at which point they are recognized as *onna*, or women. By contrast, young Japanese males follow a less ambiguous timeline of: *shonen*, *seinen* and *otoko*, which translates to: boy, young man and man.<sup>64</sup> These stages are more or less based on the male individual’s age. Unlike her male counterparts, a *shojo* is not conceptualized by her literal age, but by her socially and culturally defined “progress” in life that culminates in marriage and, by extension, its duty.

The social labeling of young Japanese women in the 1980s as overindulgent, impulsive and lacking a mature sense of self was secured linguistically. This language was institutionalized by cultural critics like Otsuka Eiji who famously asserted,

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<sup>64</sup> Sharalyn Orbaugh, “Busty Battin’ Babes: The Evolution of the *Shojo* in 1990’s Visual Culture” in *Gender and Power in the Japanese Visual Field*, eds. Joshua S. Mostow, Norman Bryson and Maribeth Graybill (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 207.

“What name are we to give this life of ours today? The name is *shojo*.”<sup>65</sup> Otsuka’s labeling of the greater Japanese society as “*shojo*,” openly recognizes both men and women honing similar attributes. The definitive role of the *shojo* concept came to serve as an image of all conspicuous consumption during the 1980s booming Japanese economy. In 1988 social critic, Horikiri Naoto argued that men were consumers as much as women and stated that, “We have become the forever Lolita herself.”<sup>66</sup>

Accordingly, the Japanese male identity has been defined as being composed of both culturally defined male and female components. Japanese art historian Chino Kaori has observed that since the integration of the foreign writing system of Chinese *kanji*, or character system, the *hiragana*, or the native Japanese alphabet has been divided between the traditionally defined male and female gender identities. The historical embrace of foreign technologies and ways of thinking were regarded as the realm of Japanese men, while women were shielded from the knowledge and influences of foreign cultures.<sup>67</sup> Thereafter, native Japanese identity and culture became widely perceived through a lens of femininity. The female gender was understood to identify and express herself through her native language and culture, while the male gender was expected to juggle both foreign importations and native identity. This historically and culturally-derived

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<sup>65</sup> John Whittier Treat, “Yoshitomo Banana Writes Home: *Shojo* Culture and the Nostalgic Subject,” in *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture: Gender, Shifting Boundaries and Global Cultures*, ed. D. P. Martinez (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 301.

<sup>66</sup> Horikiri refers to the novel *Lolita* published in 1955 by Vladimir Nabokov that centers on the protagonist’s sexual fantasies and obsession with young girls. Orbaugh, 203.

<sup>67</sup> Chino Kaori, “Gender in Japanese Art.” in *Gender and Power in the Japanese Visual Field*, eds. Joshua S. Mostow, Norman Byson and Maribeth Graybill (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 22.

Japanese male phenomena allows the image of the *shojo* to be interpreted as standing in for both Japanese male and female genders.

As Japanese women delayed their socially prescribed gender roles, Japanese men were equally derailed from accomplishing their defined social roles of getting married and supporting their families as the breadwinner. The general trend of the youth generation's gravitation towards an adolescent space of pure "play" versus adult production in the mature workforce instilled the ambiguous definition of the *shojo* as an embodiment of the lavish lifestyles of the decade.

*Azemichi* (1991) and Higashiyama Kaito's *Road* (1950)

Aida Makoto's *Azemichi*, or *A Path Between Rice Fields* (1991), presents the image of the *shojo* as the central focus of this 73x32cm Japanese mineral pigment and acrylic painting. *Azemichi* shows the back of a young girl's head and shoulders pushed towards the front of the picture plane as if the viewer is standing right behind her (Figure 1). The girl's blue and white striped collar can be attributed to Japan's traditional sailor suit grade school uniform, therefore establishing her *shojo* status. The most striking visual attribute in this composition is the manner in which the young girl's severely parted hairstyle is continuous with a path that recedes to the far distance between two far-reaching rice fields.



Figure 1

**Aida Makoto (1965-)**

*Azemichi (A Path Between Rice Fields)*, 1991

Panel, Japanese paper, Japanese mineral pigment, acrylic, 73 X 52 cm

(Reprinted with permission from Mizuma Gallery, Shinjuku, Tokyo)

*Azemichi* also served as the promotional image for Aida Makoto's first solo exhibition, entitled *Doutei*, (Journey) in 1999. According to Japanese art historian Yamashita Yuji, *Azemichi* functions as a parody of *nihonga*, or traditional Japanese-style

painter Higashiyama Kaitō's famous *Road* (1950), which was painted as a social commentary on the nation's unknown future following World War II.<sup>68</sup>

Higashiyama discussed his work in its 1985 exhibition catalogue,

“As I was painting *Road*, I sometimes thought of it as the road I was to tread in the future and sometimes as the road I had passed along up to that point in my life. It is a road upon which despair and hope pass each other time and again, it is both the end of all wanderings and a new beginning.”<sup>69</sup>

It is Higashiyama Kaitō's concept of a difficult past and unclear future path illustrated in *Road* that Aida reincorporates into *Azemichi*.

Within the first ten months of 1990 the exuberant bubble economy Japan had experienced for nearly a decade burst. The Nikkei index lost almost fifty percent of its value.<sup>70</sup> The 1991 collapse of the stock and real estate markets brought to an end an era of unprecedented economic growth. It is at this moment that Aida Makoto creates *Azemichi*. Parallel to Higashiyama Kaitō's hope and despair expressed in *Road*, the path found in *Azemichi* beginning within the figure of the *shojo* and stretching into an unknown future landscape symbolizes the end of the 1980s commodity era. Aida Makoto figures the metaphorical path of *Azemichi* through the image of the *shojo*, so that this young schoolgirl represents both Japanese men and women at the crash of Japan's bubble economy.

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<sup>68</sup> Yuji Yamashita, “Aida Makoto, Pretend Villain-Premeditated Quotations from Japanese Art History,” in *Aida Makoto: Monument to Nothing, Tensai De Gomenasai* ed. Mami Kataoka (Tokyo: Seigensha Art Publishing, Inc., 2013), 192.

<sup>69</sup> Tomoaki Kawakita, *Kaitō Higashiyama* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1985), 13-14.

<sup>70</sup> Lena Fritsch, *The Body as a Screen: Japanese Art Photography of the 1990's* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag), 30.

In contrast to Japanese male conservative critics' identification of the greater Japanese society in 1980s through the concept of the *shojo*; postwar novelist, Mishima Yukio in his essay, "A Defense of Culture" (1949) identifies the trend of modernization residing within the realm of the masculine.<sup>71</sup> Aida has attributed the writings and criticisms of Mishima as having the most profound influence on his artistic career. Mishima's theorization indicates the modern world as a masculine realm, while anti-modernity resides within the feminine. Within this, Aida uses the cultivated landscape that engulfs the *shojo* in *Azemichi* to signify a return to Japanese grass roots culture following the fall of its economic miracle.

The distant background of *Azemichi* is also critical. Aida depicts the image of the *shojo* within an agricultural landscape of the sort referred to as the *satoyama*, loosely translated as a human settlement surrounded by hills. The Japanese cultural concept of the *satoyama* is roughly equivalent to a Westerner's notion of a "hometown." However, the typical farm village depicted in *Azemichi* appears deserted and abandoned. By 1985, agricultural employment fell below ten percent of the total Japanese workforce.<sup>72</sup> In *Azemichi*, the desolate landscape references the dramatic flow of farmers into the cities from 1950 to 1970 during the nation's postwar economic growth period.

Aida builds a rich iconography in this work, pulling on Japanese history and popular culture to create multi-valiant signifiers. The path that runs down the center of

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<sup>71</sup> Midori Matsui, "The Place of Marginal Positionality: Legacies of Japanese Anti-Modernity," in *Consuming bodies: Sex and Contemporary Japanese Art* ed. Fran Lloyd (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 143-144.

<sup>72</sup> Gordon, 305

the schoolgirl's hairline serves to divide the piece into two eras within the Japanese historical timeline. The left refers to the postwar economic miracle, the right referring to its pre-industrial era. Thus, the abandoned-looking car on the left serves as a kind of archaic ruin to the postwar economic growth period. The farmhouse on the right references a time prior to the great migration of workers into Japan's largest cities between the 1950s through the 1970s. The *shojo*'s hair, which is securely held in pigtailed by two elastic bands, each adorned with a tiny plastic rabbit, additionally adds cultural symbolism. The icon of the rabbit on each of the hair bands is synonymous with concepts of long life, good fortune and good business in Japanese culture.<sup>73</sup> While the image of the rabbit on the left pigtail is turned away from the viewer, the pigtail on the right displays the image of rabbit clearly, so that it coincides with the rice field associated with Japan's pre-industrial era. Thus, the *shojo*'s hairstyle merges her form within both historical periods and allows her to embody both Japanese men and women. This presents the *shojo*, or the greater Japanese society she embodies, within both eras. Most importantly, the path between the two rice fields resides within the center of the *shojo*'s form, and identifies a future path for Japanese society somewhere between its pre-industrial era and its recent economic legacy.

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<sup>73</sup> Willem R. van Gulik, "The 12 animals of the zodiac cycle," in *A Brush with Animals: Japanese Paintings 1700-1950*, eds. Robert Schaap (Leiden: Hotei Pub., 2007), 24.

## Japan as an “Economic Menace”: Trade Tensions in the 1990s

By the late 1980s, Japanese economists announced Japan as a “corporate society” and argued, “what was good for the company was good for the larger society.”<sup>74</sup> Since the historic political merger of multiple conservative parties into the Liberal Democratic Party in 1955, the greater Japanese society expressed a satisfaction with their nation’s economic stability and growth. However, international trade relations with Japan by the end of the 1980s through the early 1990s were met with a mixture of envy and admiration. The American media, for example made use of the Japanese pop cultural icon of Godzilla as an embodiment of Japan’s powerful and threatening economy. Godzilla originated in postwar Japanese cinema as a terrorizing mutated sea creature that was created from nuclear experiments in the Pacific Ocean. It wasn’t until the late 1980s to early 1990s that this icon began to be cast as a protector of Japan in new Godzilla franchise films. The destructive nature of Godzilla resonated strongly with American economists’ perception of Japan as an endangerment to American manufacturing companies.<sup>75</sup>

As early as the 1970s, Japanese products began to outpace the flow of American exports to Japan. This resulted in annual American trade deficits reaching fifty billion by the mid-1980s.<sup>76</sup> Japanese corporate investment and purchases of North American landmarks like Rockefeller Center in 1989 were met by headlines describing such

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<sup>74</sup> John Lie, *Multiethnic Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 298.

<sup>75</sup> William Tsutsui, *Godzilla On My Mind: Fifty Years of the King of Monsters* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 128.

<sup>76</sup> Gordon, 290.



purchases as “Japanese invasions.”<sup>77</sup> For example, a front page story in the *New York Times* magazine in 1985 entitled “The Danger from Japan,” by Theodore White targeted Japan for “dismantling American industry,” and incorporated a photo spread contrasting a new Japanese steel mill with a rusted American facility.<sup>78</sup>

#### The Theory of *Nihonjinron* and U.S./Japan Trade Relations

During the peak of American and Japanese trade frustrations, foreign policy makers singled out the theory of *nihonjinron*, or the idea of the Japanese people being uniquely different from all other races as the nation’s most strategic trade asset.

Sociologist John Lie writes in his *Multiethnic Japan* (2001) that at the core of *nihonjinron* are ideas of Japanese difference from all other races in combination with an assumption of cultural uniformity.<sup>79</sup> It is a concept very similar to theories advanced by Michelet and other French sociologists in the era of nineteenth century nationalisms.

This mono-ethnic ideology became prevalent during the rapid economic growth period following the end of World War II, and gained widespread support through the nation’s unparalleled economic successes. Regional diversity and status hierarchy that had previously limited prewar social integration was superseded by this cultural theology, the democratization of the Japanese government, and a rapid consumption of mass media. By the mid-1960s, eighty percent of all households owned a television set, which fostered a movement of cultural homogenization and national solidarity.<sup>80</sup> For the first time, the

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<sup>77</sup> Gordon, 292.

<sup>78</sup> Gordon, 292.

<sup>79</sup> Lie, 125.

<sup>80</sup> Lie, 128.

majority of Japanese households identified with and partook in the same mass cultural programs, which created a new perception of postwar ethnic homogenization.

Aida Makoto's joint exhibition with Nobuhira Narumi entitled *F(o)rtunes* at the Roentgen Kunst Institut in 1993, marked the unveiling of his gigantic 122x161.4cm *The Giant Member Fuji versus King Ghidorah* (1993) (Figure 2).<sup>81</sup> This large acetate film print attempts to recreate a visual atmosphere of an animation cel, the transparent sheet onto which objects are painted for traditional animation. The work features one giant female figure and one giant dragon-like monster entangled in a deadly and erotic struggle that has caused the destruction of the city around them. The giant, multi-headed dragon simultaneously violates the girl and tears out her internal organs. The work's intense subject matter in combination with its monumental size is meant to shock the viewer.

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<sup>81</sup> Adrian Favell, *Before and After Superflat: A Short History of Contemporary Japanese Art* (Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2011), 96.



Figure 2

**Aida Makoto (1965-)**

*The Giant Member Fuji versus King Ghidorah*, 1993

Acetate film, acrylic, eyelets, 310 X 410 cm

(Reprinted with permission from Mizuma Gallery, Shinjuku, Tokyo)

Similar to *Azemichi*, *The Giant Member Fuji versus King Ghidorah* is compositionally based upon another previous Japanese artwork known as *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife* (1814) by renowned nineteenth century woodblock print artist, Hokusai Katsushikai. In the West, Hokusai is most well known for his seminal landscape prints such as *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa*, part of his series *Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji* (1829-1832). However, in Japan woodblock print artists published under many

aliases and dabbled in many artistic genres. In particular, the genre of *shunga*, or erotic prints was an outlet almost all Japanese print artists participated in.

In this *shunga* print, Hokusai presents a sexual entanglement between a Japanese woman and an octopus. Aida's replacement of Hokusai's original subject matter with two postwar Japanese mass media icons, King Ghidorah and Giant Member Fuji, allows this painting to embody a new and powerful message legible amongst his postwar generation. In contrast to Hokusai's print, the female figure in Aida's composition does not present a state of sexual ecstasy, but rather an emotionless expression complimented by a single tear running down her face. The girl's expression in Aida's composition is presented as the direct opposite to the female figure's in Hokusai's original print.

The contemporary outlets of prostitution and pornography in Japan are highly profitable markets; however, they maintain rather ambiguous existences. According to Japan's Prostitution Prevention Law of 1958, no person "shall prostitute or be the client of a prostitute," but the violation of this decree carries no penalty.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, Japan's porn industry has also gotten around government laws regarding the explicit exposure of male and female genitalia. Through the parodist substitution of other forms for female and male sexual organs, Japanese porn producers have created a way to get around illegal

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<sup>82</sup> Mark D. West *Lovesick Japan: Sex, Marriage, Romance, Law* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 147-152. The law more specifically prohibits and penalizes, "public solicitation and advertising, serving as an intermediary, contracts to prostitute, supplying a venue, capital, land or buildings for prostitution, and compelling a person to stay in a house of prostitution-but not prostitution itself."<sup>82</sup> Also, the definition of prostitution according to the Prostitution Prevention Law requires "sexual intercourse."<sup>82</sup> This specific and limited definition of prostitution allowed for a wide variety of sexual services regulated by Japan's Entertainment Law to emerge. Simultaneously enacted in 1948, the Entertainment Law required these sexual businesses to be licensed, sanctioned to specific areas, open certain times of the day, and discerned as legal as long as the workers abstain from vaginal sex, and were not recruited into these jobs against their freewill. According to official police statistics in 2005, more than five thousand statutory sex businesses were accounted for throughout Japan, and another twenty-five thousand sex "delivery services."

government sanctioned images of sexual intercourse. For example, the sexual entanglement presented in Aida's *The Giant Member Fuji versus King Ghidorah* adopts this strategy of substituting one of Ghidorah's many heads for a phallus that penetrates the young girl. The image presents an erotic and rather pornographic scene between a gigantic girl and a three-headed dragon. Mimicking both Hokusai's original print and an outlet of Japanese pornography referred to as "tentacle porn," Aida's image comments on the paradox of Japanese law identifying exposed genitals as problematic, but not the porn industry as a whole. The immediate shock value of this image is meant to call attention to the inconsistent nature of the Japanese government, and its disproportionate attention to the smaller issues of Japan's porn industry, rather than the big picture. Rather than focusing and worrying about the exposure of male and female genitalia, which is symbolically and intentionally hidden in *The Giant Member Fuji versus King Ghidorah*, the "giant" title and treatment of the female figure projects herself as at the center of this issue. In *The Giant Member Fuji versus King Ghidorah* Aida purposely builds upon the highly intertextual cultural sign of the *shojo*. Through the reference and incorporation of post-war media culture, feudal Japanese art history, contemporary international affairs and government sanctioned pornography laws Aida creates an image reflective of a larger Japanese society along with a glimpse into his own personal opinion. Throughout the 1990s in Japan, many convicted sex offenders and their crimes were understood to be the result of the consumption of pornographic material. However, the Japanese government neglected to raise any concern regarding the obscenity and protection of the women within the Japanese porn industry.

*Godzilla vs. King Ghidorah* (1991)

It is significant that Aida Makoto's *The Giant Member Fuji versus King Ghidorah* quotes a popular Godzilla franchise film entitled *Godzilla vs. King Ghidorah* (1991). Produced during the steady fall of the Japanese economy, the general plot of the film follows a small band of renegade time travelers that travel back from the future to stop Japanese economic expansion from taking over the world. These time travelers are composed of one American and one Russian, and use King Ghidorah, a large golden hydra-like dragon, to battle Godzilla as it attempts to protect Japan. After Godzilla has defeated King Ghidorah, he proceeds on his customary destruction of Tokyo on its way back to sea.

Economic historian William Tsutsui identifies the film *Godzilla vs. King Ghidorah* as the “unequivocal pronouncement on the state of United States and Japanese relations,” arguing that it represented the Japanese indignation at America’s overseas trade frustrations.<sup>83</sup> Parallel to the franchise film, King Ghidorah in *The Giant Member Fuji versus King Ghidorah* serves as an embodiment of the United States and all other foreign trade leaders who began to impose new trade policies on the Japanese economy. The United State’s Super 301 clause of 1988 allowed American trade politicians to gain leverage with foreign countries through unfair trade penalties imposed on exports. This trade bill outlined that if a foreign country’s domestic market was unfairly closed to imports, then the bill would grant the United States permission to unilaterally impose penalties on exports from that country. The early 1990s witnessed a pattern of American

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<sup>83</sup> Tsutsui, 101.

pressure on Japanese officials to further open their domestic markets. In 1993, the General Agreement on Tariff and Trade, or GATT eliminated all remaining trade restrictions, tariffs and state subsidies for the United States, which allowed them full access to Japan's domestic market.<sup>84</sup> In this 1991 Godzilla franchise film, the American and Russian time travelers represent a threat to Japanese society, and serve as a stand in for contemporary tariffs imposed on the Japanese economy.

Aida's work, like the movie upon which it is based, employs heavy use of postwar-derived mass media signifiers. While King Ghidorah, the classic archenemy of Godzilla plays the role of the United States in both the early 90s film and within this artwork, what does the Giant Member Fuji represent? Like King Ghidorah, Giant Member Fuji, or Science Special Search Party member Fuji Akiko originated from Japan's postwar mass media age of the 1960s. Fuji Akiko was a fictional character that starred in a widely popular children's science fiction television program known as *Ultra Q*, which followed the adventures of the Science Special Search Party (SSSP), or a team of individuals that sought out hostile monsters and aliens in order to protect humanity. A typical *Ultra Q* episode involved the SSSP protecting Japan from alien invaders.

During my research into the themes and narratives of this popular series, I located Aida Makoto's depiction of a giant Fuji Akiko to the series' thirty-third episode entitled "The Forbidden Words."<sup>85</sup> In this episode, Member Fuji of the SSSP is captured by a foreign alien and transformed into a monstrous scale rivaling that of Godzilla. Fuji is

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<sup>84</sup> Gordon, 316.

<sup>85</sup> *Ultra Q: Episode 33: Kinji Rareta Kotoba, "The Forbidden Words."* Hulu video, directed by Toshitsugu Suzuki (1967; Tokyo, Japan: Tsuburaya Productions, 1967).

subsequently placed under a form of mind control and proceeds to go on a destructive rampage through a Japanese city.

In Aida's work, Giant Member Fuji has been defeated in the middle of her rampage by the armless, three-headed and two-tailed flying King Ghidorah. Aida's painting has reversed the 1991 franchise film's original ending. In his work, the fall and violation of Giant Member Fuji embodies the fall of the Japanese domestic economy to new American trade policies. While the fall of Giant Member Fuji in the place of Godzilla seems unclear, Tsutsui argues that since the 1990s, the mass cultural icon of Godzilla has transformed from serving solely as a destructive force into one serving as a protector of Japan.<sup>86</sup> Particularly the Heisei period (1989-) re-installment film, *Godzilla vs. King Ghidorah* (1991) presents a Godzilla that has, "transformed into a conscience for Japan." While Godzilla in the 1991 film protected Japan up until the defeat of King Ghidorah, Giant Member Fuji in episode thirty-three was depicted as only being capable of destruction.

#### The Giant Member Fuji as *Shojo*

Where social critic, Horikiri Naoto labeled all Japanese consumers as literal "Lolita" during Japan's prosperous economic times, Aida has similarly presented the Japanese nation through the figure of a young girl. The identity of the Giant Member Fuji is confirmable through the detailed depiction of the television heroine's bright orange jumpsuit in *The Giant Member Fuji versus King Ghidorah*. However, the young female figure within the costume is more or less generic. This female individual is made

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<sup>86</sup> Tsutsui, 86.



to seem considerably younger than the actress, Sakurai Hiroko, who was twenty when she played the role of member Fuji Akiko in the *Ultra Q* series. Therefore, it is possible to interpret the young female individual in this composition as the same *shojo* image presented in *Azemichi*. The reuse of the *shojo* image as an embodiment of a fallen Japanese economy perpetuates Japanese cultural critics predictions of Japan's obsession with conspicuous consumption and disregard of social responsibilities as the source of its ultimate downfall.

In comparison to the female's expression of sexual ecstasy depicted in Hokusai's original erotic print, the *shojo* in *The Giant Member Fuji versus King Ghidorah* maintains a blank and emotionless expression. Aida depicts the face of the *shojo* engulfed in a dead, lifeless trance and shedding a single, silent tear. Japanese literature scholar and animation critic Susan Napier has defined the "genre of pornography as bringing the body to the fore, not only in terms of sexuality, but also in relation to aesthetics, gender and social identity."<sup>87</sup> In *The Giant Member Fuji versus King Ghidorah*, the *shojo* serves as an embodiment of the Japanese nation as it is continuously violated by the United States, as personified in the image of King Ghidorah. One of King Ghidorah's multiple heads simultaneously rip out the *shojo*'s rather long intestines in a carnal frenzy. Aida has purposely brought special focus upon the *shojo*'s intestines in order to symbolically reference American and Japanese trade disputes in the early 1990s.

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<sup>87</sup> Susan Napier, "The Frenzy of Metamorphosis: The Body in Japanese Pornographic Animation," in *Word and Image in Japanese Cinema* eds. Dennis Washburn and Carole Cavanaugh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 342.

The curious attention to *shojo*'s intestines derives from one of the many postwar cultural myths serving the discourse of *nihonjinron*. Specifically, it was believed that Japanese people possessed longer intestines than any other race. This enabled Japanese trade politicians to bypass foreign beef imports because of the Japanese intestines' inability to digest foreign beef. However, in *The Giant Member Fuji versus King Ghidorah* this myth of Japanese uniqueness is symbolically dismantled. This Japanese myth surrounding beef can be traced back to post World War II doctors' attempt to silence complaints involving war deprivations.<sup>88</sup> Through King Ghidorah's tearing open and exposing of the *shojo*'s intestines, Japan's fanciful identity of superiority and difference is exposed. Parallel to the revoking of Japan's own postwar social order headed by Liberal Democratic Party in 1993, *The Giant Member Fuji versus King Ghidorah* powerfully encapsulates the fall of an ever-prosperous and racially superior Japan.

#### Challenging of Postwar Social Taboos: 1990s Japanese Political Art Production

The third work by Aida featured in this chapter builds on the points advanced by the prior two and serves to demonstrate the deeply contextualized meanings instrumental to all his work. The conclusion of the Showa era triggered *zainichi*, or the "temporarily staying in Japan Koreans" and Japanese Korean communities to address their postwar social injustices. In addition, a number of contemporary Japanese artists also began producing artwork that challenged previously avoided social taboos deriving from

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<sup>88</sup> Sam Jameson, "Bane to Foreigners: In Japan, Unique is a State of Mind," *Los Angeles Times*, August 2, 1988.

Japan's controversial past. Historian Fujitani Takashi defines the early 1990s in Japan as a period where a "flattening out of culture," took place. The collapse of longstanding, historically codified truths motivated a young generation of artists to search for a true national authenticity.<sup>89</sup>

During this unprecedented period of national criticism, many artistic projects emerged including Yanagi Yukinori's *Banzai Corner* (1991), which criticized the forces of postwar nationalism via children's mass media. Another highly politicized piece was Murakami Takashi's *Randoseru Project* (1991), which evaluated residing militarism within the Japanese national education system.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, Shimada Yoshiko's contemporary etchings and installations dedicated to the topic of Korea's colonization and Japanese women's participation in the war effort, such as the piece *White Aprons* (1993) strongly challenges longtime postwar societal beliefs<sup>91</sup> For example, in the early 1990s, Aida Makoto also contributed to this critical discussion of Japanese social taboos surrounding the topic of World War II. In his series entitled *A War Picture Returns*, Aida integrates the visual atmosphere of the *sensouga*, or the propaganda paintings commissioned by the Japanese government during World War II. Through the employment of *sensouga* artistic techniques, Aida paradoxically presents some of the

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<sup>89</sup> Alexandra Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994), 341,

<sup>90</sup> Dana Friis-Hansen, "The Meaning of Murakami's Nonsense: About 'Japan' Itself," in *Takashi Murakami: The Meaning of the Nonsense of Meaning* ed. Amanda Cruz (New York: Center for Curatorial Studies Museum, Bard College in assoc. with H.N. Abrams, 1999), 34.

<sup>91</sup> Louise Dompierre, *The Age of Anxiety: The Power Plant*, contemporary art gallery at Harbourfront Centre, September 22 through November 26, 1995 (Toronto: Power Plant, 1995), 25.

Japan's most shunned wartime atrocities through one of its most historically prestigious and self-glorifying artistic legacies.

*A War Picture Returns: Beautiful Flag* (1995)

The series, *A War Picture Returns*, includes one work presenting the issues involving *zainichi* and Japanese Koreans residing in Japan since World War II. In *Beautiful Flag* (1995), a pair of folding screens on *fusuma*, or traditional Japanese sliding doors, displays two monumental female figures rendered in charcoal, self-made paint and acrylic (Figure 3).

Aida depicts these large female figures within a bleak and desolate landscape. The atmosphere depicted in *Beautiful Flag* strongly recalls similar moods expressed in classic *sensouga* works, such as Fougjita Tsuguharu's *Desperate Struggle of a Unit in New Guinea* (1943). In Fougjita's monumental warscape, an atmosphere of impending death and destruction is engulfed in predominately deep hues of gold and brown. The dusty and torched landscape in Aida's *Beautiful Flag* intentionally triggers and reuses Fougjita's color palettes and rustic technique when defining its overall mood.



Figure 3

**Aida Makoto (1965-)**

*Beautiful Flag* from a *War Picture Returns* series, 1995

Pair of two-panel sliding screens, hinges, charcoal, self-made paint with a medium made from Japanese glue, acrylic, each 169 X 169 cm

(Reprinted with permission from Mizuma Gallery, Shinjuku, Tokyo)

The left side of the composition presents the image of a young Japanese schoolgirl; identifiable through two cultural signifiers. First, the girl's clothing incorporates hallmark visual traits of the traditional Japanese school uniform ensemble: a short pleated skirt and a "sailor collar" blouse. Secondly, she clasps onto a large Japanese flag, also known as the *hinomaru* flag, or "circle of the sun flag." On the right side of this piece, another female figure is found mirroring the Japanese in height and presence. She is similarly identifiable through the garment she is depicted in. A *hanbok*, or traditional Korean dress, typically is complemented by a high waistline, long skirt and a decorative sash found at the waist, and thus identifies her as Korean. Like the Japanese

schoolgirl, this Korean schoolgirl bears the *taegukgi*, or South Korean flag. While the Japanese girl's wounds, as well as the integration of bamboo poles for each flag references their Pacific War confrontations, their mutual body language most clearly serves as the strongest visual indicator of these two nation's current relationship.

In *Beautiful Flag*, the image of the *shojo* again serves as an embodiment of the Japanese nation. On the left side of the composition, the Japanese schoolgirl clings to the Japanese flag, enabling it to serve as a visual barrier between herself and the gaze of the Korean schoolgirl. The Japanese schoolgirl's awkward grasp of her flag, along with her tight and confined stance appears unstable in comparison to the steady, well-planted legs of the Korean schoolgirl. While the Japanese schoolgirl maintains her distance from the center of the composition, the Korean schoolgirl thrusts her chest forward toward the Japanese schoolgirl. The Korean schoolgirl projects her body in front of the *taegukgi* flag in absolute confidence of her ability and identity, while the Japanese schoolgirl appears to be hesitantly leaning on the Japanese flag. While the Japanese schoolgirl grasps the Japanese flag with both of her hands, her Korean counterpart only requires her left hand to hold onto her nation's flag, while forming a fist in her right. The Korean schoolgirl maintains an identity grounded within both her Korean heritage symbolized by the holding of the Korean flag in her left hand, while leaving one hand available. The forming of a fist in the Korean schoolgirl's right hand can be interpreted as symbolizing postwar *zainichi* aggression, as well as the budding strength felt among new Japanese Korean generations.

## The Death of the Showa Emperor and the Rise of Korean Minority Voices

The struggle to preserve Japanese postwar social theories arose from many factors. The social theories like *nihonjinron* can be attributed to the collapse of the nation's market economy, the fall of dominating postwar Liberal Democratic Party and the passing of the Showa emperor on January 7, 1989. The death of the Showa emperor marked the end of a sixty-three year reign that had overseen the rise of imperialism, defeat in the Pacific War, an American Occupation and the exponential growth of the its domestic economy.<sup>92</sup> However, the Showa emperor's death also triggered a societal remembrance of Japan's disputed role in World War II. Various Japanese war crimes and postwar social injustices emerged within the media as Japan's remarkable economic legacy came to an end.

By the end of the Showa era, Japanese war crimes involving Korean nationals gained large media attention. For example, in February 1995 a case was brought to the Hiroshima district court regarding forty-six plaintiffs filing a suit against the Japanese government and their former wartime employer, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries. These Korean minorities sought compensation from the state based on the denial of their medical benefits as *hibakusha*, or atomic bomb victims.<sup>93</sup> These individuals also demanded to be paid their promised wages as immigrant workers during World War II.

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<sup>92</sup> Munroe, 339.

<sup>93</sup>Michael Weiner and David Chapman, "Zainichi Koreans in history and memory," in *Japan's Minorities: the Illusion of Homogeneity*, ed. Michael Weiner (London: Routledge, 2009), 169.

After a decade of appeals, in 2005 the court ruled in the plaintiffs' favor, however unaccounted Mitsubishi wages were not returned.<sup>94</sup>

In 1910, Japan began its thirty-five-year annexation of the Korean peninsula. Japan's colonization scheme was based on a program of assimilation known as *naisen ittai*, or Japan and Korea as one body. In the early 1940s, the coming together of Korea and Japan to form one nation was celebrated within Japan's Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.<sup>95</sup> Although the assimilation of Eastern countries was promoted with an end goal of defeating the West, the true agenda of Japan's *naisen ittai* campaign was to import hundreds of thousands of Korean men for the emperor's army and construction sites and women for the "comfort women" prostitution system. The *naisen ittai* program also enforced Japanese racial superiority policies, such as forcing Koreans to adopt Japanese style names. During their occupation of Korea, the Japanese government created separate family registries for Korean families, which allowed them to discount their Japanese identity following Japan's defeat in World War II.

Sociologist John Lie identifies Japan's war empire as maintaining an ideology of "multi-ethnicity" that became superseded by a mono-ethnic social identity in the postwar period.<sup>96</sup> After World War II, former Korean imperial subjects were dismissed for their lack of a "true" Japanese identity. Korean immigrants' "non-existence" allowed Japanese local and national governments to neglect their citizenship rights in the

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<sup>94</sup> Weiner and Chapman, 170.

<sup>95</sup> Sonia Ryang, "Introduction: Resident Koreans in Japan," in *Koreans in Japan: Critical Voices from the Margin*, ed. Sonia Ryang (London: Routledge, 2000), 2.

<sup>96</sup> Lie, 133.



following postwar decades. The normalization strategy of the postwar Japanese government was to establish a binary system of native Japanese citizens versus foreigners.

#### Korean Identity in Postwar Japan: Legacy of the *Zainichi*

In 1952, the San Francisco Peace Treaty established the nation of Korea independent from Japan, and subjugated all Korean nationals still residing in Japan to immediately fall under Japan's national Alien Registration Law.<sup>97</sup> Koreans and other foreign individuals under the Alien Registration Law were denied basic rights to political representation and social welfare programs. In extreme cases, particular minorities like the Korean *hibakusha*, atomic bomb victims were denied crucial medical services. Japanese family registries on Korean immigrants ultimately became an invaluable tool for the Japanese government to bar immigrants from integrating into the larger society.

It wasn't until the 1981 United Nations Refugee Convention that the *zainichi* were finally granted permanent residence and re-entry permission for overseas travel.<sup>98</sup> As a result, with the granting of permanent residence, the Alien Registration Law was met with protest by more than ten thousand *zainichi* residents. Korean immigrants refused to undergo the law's fingerprinting requirement based on the process's criminalizing connotation. In 1993, foreign fingerprinting mandates were removed thanks to a rising younger generation of *zainichi* and their outside supporters.

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<sup>97</sup> Weiner and Chapman, 176.

<sup>98</sup> Ryang, 6.

## The Search for a Hybrid Identity: Japanese-Korean Identity

By the mid-1980s, younger Japanese Korean generations fought to broaden the definition of what constituted a Japanese citizen. This new social perspective stemmed from the rising number of Japanese born Koreans, with ninety percent of all Korean children attending Japanese schools and less than ten percent identifying through Korean names.<sup>99</sup> Younger Japanese Korean individuals began to consider the importance of establishing their future in Japan and finding legitimization within their hybrid cultural identities.

Hallmark approaches to a new definition of fluid Japanese Korean identity included Kin Tang-Myung's theory of the "Third Way" (1988), that defined Japanese Korean identity as "between homogenous national Japanese identity, while protecting diasporic Korean national identity."<sup>100</sup> In the 1980s, other social theorists such as Kang Sang-jung and Yang Tae-ho preached the ideas of "*zainichi* as method" and "*zainichi* as reality."<sup>101</sup>

This intensive summary of the events being communicated by Aida allows us to focus on specific details within his *Beautiful Flag*. The body language of these two figures retells Japan's reluctance and refusal to accept their Korean immigrants throughout most of the postwar period. The strong and open stance of the Korean schoolgirl symbolizes the progression of the *zainichi* and younger Japanese Korean individuals' optimistic perspective on a future hybrid identity. The strong metaphorical

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<sup>99</sup> Lie, 140.

<sup>100</sup> Weiner and Chapman, 174.

<sup>101</sup> Weiner and Chapman, 174.

surge of wind present in the Japanese flag versus the weak fluttering of the Korean flag symbolizes the perpetual identification of the Japanese within a narrowly defined ethnic identity in comparison to the weakening Korean identity felt by those Japanese Koreans residing in Japan.

Although the visual separation of these two figures and their body language represent their continual postwar conflicts, Aida has confronted the figures of these two young girls in order for the viewer to recognize their innate similarities. For example, the two nation's flags also share similar design and color attributes that support the message in this piece. In *Beautiful Flag*, the Japanese schoolgirl represents the continual resistance of the Japanese state to recognize ethnic minorities, such as the *zainichi* Koreans as legitimate Japanese citizens. The Korean schoolgirl embodies the willingness of the *zainichi* and Japanese Korean communities in contemporary Japan to put forward their present collective identity before their Pacific War memories in order to realize a more progressive definition of contemporary Japanese identity.

The image of the *shojo* is a constant symbol employed by Aida Makoto within his early career works discussed in this chapter. As a socially perceived embodiment for the larger Japanese society since the prosperous 1980s, Aida has engaged the Japanese schoolgirl image within topics devoted to the fall of the Japanese economic miracle, heated foreign trade disputes and contemporary conceptions of Japanese identity. In the next chapter, two works of Aida Makoto's dating from the late 1990s depict a visual transformation of the *shojo* image that reflects constantly evolving gender roles and a domestic media keen on interpreting them.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Japan's 'Lost Decade' and the Role of the *Shojo*

The theme of Japanese identity at the heart of this study is intimately connected to the changes in employment practices and their contrasting effects on Japanese men and women in the 1990s. The societal and culturally defined construct of the *shojo* will continue to serve as a placeholder for the greater Japanese society; however, her image has radically evolved. Aida Makoto's *Gunjyo-zu '97* (1997) and *Harakiri Schoolgirls* (1999) present the emergence of anti-establishment youth movements mediated by new schoolgirl images. A social analysis of these two works dedicated to the opposing *kawaii*, or cute and demure schoolgirl image versus the *kogyaru*, or socially perceived assertive and promiscuous schoolgirl image, uncovers the significant role played by this new *shojo* image by the end of the twentieth century. By the late 1990s, Aida Makoto's gradual focus on solely the *kogyaru* image signifies its seminal role within the societal perception of a national identity crisis.

### The "Employment Ice Age": Japanese Male Workers' Struggle

Following Japan's economic boom in the 1980s and its ultimate burst in 1989, the nation's economy gradually shifted into a deep recession. The 1990s marked a continuous breakdown of the nation's postwar political, economic and social systems, which in turn cultivated a loss of national identity and culturally prescribed gender roles among its populace. From the inception of Japan's postwar economic surge, beginning in the 1960s and continuing through the 1980s, the health of the nation's economy had

dominated state interests. Therefore, when the Japanese economy burst in 1989, the nation equated this event with the demise of its own identity.

At the heart of this corporate economy were Japan's *sarariiman*, or "corporate warriors," which was predominately made up of male, white-collar workers often subjugated to sixty to eighty hour workweeks. Although *sarariiman* were often overworked and exhausted, they received strong societal recognition and respect through their personal sacrifices made for the good of their families. During the 1980s economic boom, *sarariiman* were rewarded through monetary and emotional support via the comradely of their male coworkers as contributing players in the nation's booming economy. The postwar period's lingering ideal career held by Japanese men was maintaining a full-time, white-collar job that allowed the male to support his family. However, by the mid-1990s, the extreme work hours of the *sarariiman* were replaced by a growing demand for non-regular, freelance workers.

Japanese historians define the period between 1995 and the 2000s as the "employment ice age." During this period, male high school and college graduates struggled to locate full-time, permanent employment. Young men were often subjugated to an endless cycle of irregular, part-time or temporary contract work. Beginning in 1995 to 2009, "the number of male non-regular employees more than doubled, from 1.89 million to 4.15 million."<sup>102</sup> As the Japanese workforce looked to employ more and more part-time employees, Japanese men found it impossible to secure full-time jobs and fulfill

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<sup>102</sup> Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: from Tokugawa Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 342.

their socially proscribed gender role as sole breadwinner within their families. By 2011, *kato-jisatsu*, or suicide from overwork claimed one third of the total 30,000 reported suicides according to the National Police Agency, and continues to be the leading cause of death for males between the ages of twenty to forty-four.<sup>103</sup> The fact that more and more men were forced to accept part-time positions, which had long been reserved for women during the postwar period, caused Japanese men to feel feminized. In 1995, an unemployment rate of 8.9 percent was established, and by 1997, male labor participation fell to an all-time postwar low of 63.3 percent.<sup>104</sup> As men struggled to find and keep full-time, white collar positions in the 1990s, social proverbs and stereotypes describing their struggles proliferated, labeling diminished male workers as *sodaigomi*, (oversized garbage), and professing “a good husband is healthy and absent.”<sup>105</sup>

The bursting of the national economy not only sparked a gradual trend of Japanese men taking irregular or temporary work assignments. It also established an increasingly competitive work environment between these young men and women.<sup>106</sup> By the 1990s, the erosion of postwar-codified social spheres, such as the realms of public male production and private female consumption resulted in the shifting of gender roles. Japanese women absorbed the growing demand for cheap and flexible irregular employment that Japanese men would avoid unless they were desperate for work.

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<sup>103</sup> Keiko Hirata and Mark Warschauer, *Japan: The Paradox of Harmony* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 31.

<sup>104</sup> Sharon Kinsella, *Schoolgirls, Money and Rebellion in Japan* (London: Routledge, 2013), 5.

<sup>105</sup> Yumiko Iida, “Between the Technique of Living an Endless Routine and the Madness of Absolute Degree Zero: Japanese Identity and the Crisis of Modernity in the 1990’s,” *Positions* 8 (2000): 432.

<sup>106</sup> Hirata and Warschauer, 25.

Non-regular employment among Japanese women, “increased from 32 percent in 1985 to 54 percent in 2008.”<sup>107</sup> By 1995, twenty million women had joined the workforce.<sup>108</sup> In addition, by 2004 women exceeded ten percent of all managerial positions for the first time in Japanese history.<sup>109</sup> As more and more women entered the workforce, this societal shift provoked a sociocultural fear of the feminine eclipsing Japan’s masculine national identity.<sup>110</sup> Sociologist Manuel Castells recognizes the “subordination of female labor as a core component of Japanese socioeconomic order,” during Japan’s postwar rebuilding period. During the nation’s economic miracle of the 1960s to the 1980s, new gender roles were conceived and maintained to preserve conservative patriarchal values into the postwar middle class narrative.<sup>111</sup> However, by the 1980s, a combination of government instituted work reforms and male conservative criticisms projected the emerging career woman as a social impeding threat.

In 1985, Japan’s Diet enacted the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEO) to increase the number of career track women in the workforce. However, most Japanese companies invented two new categories to classify full-time jobs: managerial career track and regular service track.<sup>112</sup> While the EEO did not promote women to pursue long term careers by placing them within the regular service track; the greater Japanese social system continued to maintain gender barriers for the workingwoman such as: the length

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<sup>107</sup> Hirata and Warschauer, 42.

<sup>108</sup> Yuko Ogasawara, *Office Ladies and Salaried Men: Power, Gender and Work in Japanese Companies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 17.

<sup>109</sup> Gordon, 315.

<sup>110</sup> Yumiko Iida, *Rethinking Identity in Modern Japan* (London: Routledge, 2002), 255.

<sup>111</sup> Yumiko Iida, 430.

<sup>112</sup> Fusami Ogi, “Female Subjectivity and *Shoujo* (Girls) *Manga* (Japanese Comics): *Shoujo* in Ladies’ Comics and Young Ladies’ Comics,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 36 (2003): 782.

of the work day, corporate transfers and a national lack of childcare support services. Therefore, in the mid-1990s, Japan's increasing part-time employment opportunities were equally bombarded by its male and female gender segments. However, the sociocultural resentment and anxieties placed on career-seeking women, whose average monthly wage in 1994 was only sixty-two percent of that of her male counterpart, was met with an increase in divorce rates and the steady increase of the average marriage age.

Simultaneous with the nation's economic downturn, women of varying strata were blamed for the country's financial missteps. Housewives were blamed for being "free riders" on the nation's healthcare and pension system, while working women were blamed for being unattractive and sexually frustrated.<sup>113</sup>

Subcultural critic Honda Toru coined the term "love capitalism" to embody this movement of women refusing to marry part-time employed men, and cast them as victims to relationship inequality.<sup>114</sup> As women were accused of stealing men's jobs and then humiliating men by not marrying them, the growing male subcultural obsession with prepubescent girls began to gain momentum. This male fascination with the image of the young girl was derived from a complex combination of personal resentment towards women and nostalgic identification with their unfixed status in society.

Since the early 1980s, various Japanese mass media outlets have continuously exploited images of female innocence. This has resulted in a blurring of the boundaries between professional and amateur sex workers. In the late 1980s, an emergent literary

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<sup>113</sup> Hirata and Warschauer, 78.

<sup>114</sup> Kinsella, 95.



genre referred to as *cho-kawaii*, (ultra cute) comics began to be produced by men for specifically male consumption. The *cho-kawaii* genre centered on female characters displaying childlike, yet voluptuous physiques that emphasized the character's sexual appeal. The genre's focus on violent and pornographic imagery of prepubescent girls is analyzed by sociocultural historian Sharon Kinsella as a reaction to the "increasing power and centrality of young women in society," in combination with the Japanese male's "desire to see young women disarmed, infantilized and subordinated."<sup>115</sup>

In the 1980s, rising Japanese celebrities began to adopt a form of hyper gender enactment known as *kawaii* enactment (cute enactment). This form of cute enactment required its performer to act childish and emphasize her physical weaknesses. Media icons, such as Matsuda Seiko became the decade's reigning teen celebrity through her projected childish demeanor. In the 1990s, female cute enactment continued to be promoted by the mass media, within which the female served as a non-threatening entity towards the postwar patriarchal order.<sup>116</sup> While these cute female figures acted as idealized and vulnerable embodiments of femininity for their male fans, this cute social enactment gradually evolved into a site of fantasy and subversion for Japanese women by the 1990s.

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<sup>115</sup> Sharon Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan," in *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan*, eds. Lise Skov and Brian Moeran (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 427.

<sup>116</sup> Merry White, "The Marketing of Adolescence in Japan: Buying and Dreaming," in *Women, Media, and Consumption in Japan* ed. Lise Skov and Brian Moeran (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 191.

## The *Shojo* and the *Kawaii* Movement

During the 1990s, Japanese women came to romanticize the period of childhood over adulthood known as the “bleak period of life.”<sup>117</sup> The stress felt by Japanese youth in regards to the falling of the national economy and a rising unemployment rate was captured in surveys that presented their negative outlook on adulthood as a time associated with conformity and deferment to society. Apart from the marketed image and consumption of the female cute gender performance by Japanese men, the essential concept of the term *kawaii* embodies a “sweetness, innocence and purity,” that became increasingly attractive to women seeking to escape the harsh obligations of society.<sup>118</sup>

The emphasis of the *kawaii* genre in the “fancy goods” market (Japan’s domestic character goods market) amounted to an annual profit of two hundred billion yen in 1990, and an entire market profit of ten trillion yen. Beginning in the 1970s and originating in companies like Sanrio, the creator of Hello Kitty, this arena of *kawaii* culture is identified by cultural anthropologist Anne Allison as reflecting the unease of contemporary times and serving as a form of “character therapy.”<sup>119</sup>

As the concept of *kawaii* came to serve male, female and youth consumers as a form of social therapy; similarly, the concept of the *shojo* became a nostalgic figure synonymous with freedom from the greater social obligations of Japanese society.

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<sup>117</sup> Kinsella, “Cuties,” 242.

<sup>118</sup> Kinsella, “Cuties,” 220.

<sup>119</sup> Anne Allison, “New Age Fetishes, Monsters, and Friends: Pokémon Capitalism at the Millennium,” in *Japan after Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990’s to the Present*, eds. Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 353.

A Japanese female individual either fell into one of two social spheres: the *shojo* (young girl) or the *onna* (woman). The *shojo*'s ability to indefinitely defer society's recognition of her as a woman by not marrying or bearing children, positioned her as the closest image equivalent to the *kawaii* social concept. In the 1990s, these two social concepts merged to create the ultimate personification of youth and innocence. The *kawaii shojo* not only served as a site of male lust, but also represented a symbol of youth that cultivated a strong nostalgic identification within Japanese men and the greater Japanese society.

In the 1990s, sociocultural historian Honda Masako defined the *shojo* as, "neither adult woman, nor girl child, neither man nor woman."<sup>120</sup> Honda's definition of the *shojo* emphasizes its perception as an ideal personification of youth within Japanese society. This aspect of the *shojo* specifically intrigues her male counterpart because of its indefinitely unfixed social status. In comparison, the Japanese male follows a strict, age dependent progression of *shonen* (young boy), *seinen* (young man), and *otoko* (man).<sup>121</sup>

By the late 1980s, features that had been formerly found in young girl's comics and young boy's comics began to appear in one hybrid genre. For example, the early to mid-90s serial comic *Sailormoon* incorporated, "the female protagonist, the slim-cute body style, interest in romance and transformativity characteristic of *shojo* [young girl's] comics with the plot-driven combat stories of *shonen* [young boy's] narratives."<sup>122</sup> As

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<sup>120</sup> Sharalyn Orbaugh, "Busty Battin' Babes: The Evolution of the *Shojo* in 1990's Visual Culture," in *Gender and Power in the Japanese Visual Field*, eds. Joshua S. Mostow, Norman Bryson and Maribeth Graybill (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 205.

<sup>121</sup> Orbaugh, 205.

<sup>122</sup> Orbaugh, 215.

young men avidly consumed the image of the *shojo* through an increase of these marketed heroines in *manga*, (Japanese comic books) throughout the 1990s, the essence of the *shojo* was subconsciously channeled into their own identities.<sup>123</sup> The socially and culturally condoned concept of the *shojo* became a sign that could float freely and be adopted by anyone. Likewise, the female *kawaii* gender enactment evolved to suit the various needs of Japanese men, women and youth generations.

*Kawaii* as Social Critique: *Gunjyo-zu '97* (1997)

In the early 1990s, many emerging Japanese artists adopted the *kawaii* visual aesthetic as a means to presenting contemporary social issues. For example, Japanese contemporary artist Nishiyama Minako incorporates the visual aesthetic of the *kawaii* into her works like *Za pinku hausu* (The pink house) (1991) and *Tokimeki Erika no telepon* (Erica's palpitating telephone club) (1992) in order to deconstruct gendered childhood fantasies, and more specifically the ambiguous juxtaposition of the cute and sexual aspects of the *shojo* image. Cultural art historian Gunhild Borggreen identifies this *kawaii* visual aesthetic as an important framework of cultural critique re-appropriated in the visual arts.<sup>124</sup> In a *byobu*, or traditional Japanese screen painting entitled *Gunjyo-zu '97*, or *The Girls '97* (1997), a dense landscape of schoolgirls unfolds over the span of its four life-sized panels (Figure 4).

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<sup>123</sup> Orbaugh, 216.

<sup>124</sup> Gunhild Borggreen, "Cute and Cool in Contemporary Japanese Visual Arts," *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 29 (2011): 42.



Figure 4

**Aida Makoto (1965-)**

*Gunjyo-zu '97 (The Girls or Young Girls '97)*, 1997

Panel, wrapping paper of characters “Hello Kitty” and “Kerokero Keroppi” made by Sanrio Co., Ltd., acrylic, marker, 116.5 X 91 cm

(Reprinted with permission from Mizuma Gallery, Shinjuku, Tokyo)

This highly detailed 116.5 x 91cm composition presents twenty-four middle and high schools girls rendered through a mixed media combination of acrylic, marker and collaged fancy goods wrapping paper. The schoolgirls in *Gunjyo-zu '97* are depicted within an atmosphere rendered in pastel paint smears and wrapping paper. Aida depicts a horde of schoolgirls waiting at a train station after a summer field trip to Disneyland. The composition’s atmosphere surrounds and embeds these girls as parallel symbols.

Aida's *Gunjyo-zu '97* serves as a visual parody of the Genroku period (1688-1704) screen entitled *Irises* (1705) by Ogata Korin. Ogata's *Irises* screen depicts a scene deriving from the classic sixth century Japanese literary tale known as the *Ise Monogatari*, or *Tales of Ise*. In the tale's most famous scene, the male protagonist of the *Ise Monogatari*, Ariwara no Narihira, stares longingly at a patch of irises while contemplating a past lover.<sup>125</sup> In *Gunjyo-zu '97*, the greater Japanese society plays the role of the protagonist in the *Ise Monogatari*, but instead of longing over a past lover, Japanese viewers stare at the carefree image of the *shojo*. The theme of yearning for the past is paralleled in Aida's piece, and contemporized with the image of the *shojo*. The continuous repetition of the *shojo* image throughout this immense composition mimics the undulating growth of the *kaikisuhara* (irises), depicted in Ogata's sixth century screen painting, and reminds its viewers of a free-floating time in life that has either long passed, or never existed.

Within traditional Japanese poetry, the iris serves as a symbolic motif embedded within sociocultural references to summer, nostalgia and longing.<sup>126</sup> These sociocultural embedded qualities make the iris a symbolically appropriate comparison to the early 1990s image of the *shojo*. The removal of all sense of place in combination with the pairing down of the composition's essential elements creates a greater sense of immersion for the viewer. The incorporation of a collaged gold background in Ogata's original *Irises* screen presents the luxurious and prosperous period of the Japanese

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<sup>125</sup> Doanda Randell, *Korin* (New York: Crown Publishing Inc., 1960), 11.

<sup>126</sup> Haruo Shirane, *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 52.

Genroku period. In *Gunjyo-zu '97*, the background has been similarly collaged with cute character wrapping paper, however to symbolize the devaluation of the period.

During Japan's economic recession in the 1990s, an unprecedented rise in one hundred yen shops, equivalent to Western dollar stores, embodied the economic struggles and mood of the decade.<sup>127</sup>

View from the Train: The Image of the *Shojo* in Tayama Katai's "The Girl Fetish"

Although Aida's framing of a train station in *Gunjyo-zu '97* may seem trivial at first, this compositional decision recognizes the historical and social prominence of the train within everyday Japanese lifestyles since the early twentieth century. As a, "place to watch and for being watched," Aida's train station serves as an important space of encounter.<sup>128</sup> On January 28, 1912, an article in the *Tokyo Asahi Shinbun*, (*Morning Sun Newspaper*) recorded the prevalence of the male train voyeur, and announced the creation of the *hana densha*, or flower train. The flower train was a separate train car instituted specifically for female student passengers. This separate passenger car was designed to protect female students from having their "beautiful figures looked at and enjoyed," by male passengers."<sup>129</sup> The train station, and the train itself are social settings where workingmen and women could innocently cross paths with schoolgirls.<sup>130</sup> After a decade of train service, a short story appeared in the literary journal, *Taiyo* (The Sun) entitled

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<sup>127</sup> Manami Okazaki and Geoff Johnson, *Kawaii!: Japan's culture of cute* (Munich: Prestel, 2013), 16.

<sup>128</sup> Alisa Freedman, "Commuting Gazes: Schoolgirls, Salarymen and Electric Trains in Tokyo," *The Journal of Transport History* 23 (2002), 23.

<sup>129</sup> Freedman, 31.

<sup>130</sup> Freedman, 23.

“The Girl Fetish” (1907) by Tayama Katai. “The Girl Fetish” presented an allegorical tale of an average man who is mentally debilitated by his everyday social obligations. As a form of mental therapy, this male protagonist stares at schoolgirls while waiting at train stations and when riding on the train.

The male protagonist’s fascination with schoolgirls for their undefined social stature is directly translatable to contemporary male viewers’ preoccupation with the *shojo* image in the 1990s. Similar to the male protagonist’s gaze in Tayama’s short story, *Gunjyo-zu ‘97* has replaced the typical scenery viewed from a train window with that of a rambling landscape of schoolgirls. By the mid-1990s, Japanese society’s preoccupation with the carefree and rambunctious energy inherent in its schoolgirls facilitated a full-blown high schoolgirl boom that designated the *shojo* as an object of desire.

In the 1990s, the *shojo*’s lack of a socially codified identity intrigued working-class adults seeking escape from their socially prescribed gender roles, which had become increasingly difficult to fulfill during the nation’s employment drought. Japanese male and female individuals flocked to the image of the *shojo* as an undefined and optimistic identity removed from greater social expectations.

#### The *Shojo*’s Dark Side: *Kogyaru*

For all the hope and optimism the image of the *shojo* provided for a transitioning Japanese society in the early 1990s, her image gradually instigated a strong surge of resentment by the late 1990s. Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley argue in their study *Bad Girls of Japan* that the changes of Japanese women’s roles throughout history have instigated frequent movements of social anxiety, often culminating into a search for a



“bad girl” scapegoat.<sup>131</sup> The 1990s equivalent of this bad girl historical phenomenon, known as the *kogyaru*, is defined as a combination of the term *kokosei gyaru* (high school girl), and the social movement referred to as *gyaru* (girl) culture.

The term *kogyaru* first appeared in a Japanese men’s magazine article in 1993 entitled “The Lure of the *Kogyaru*.” In this article, the term *kogyaru* is defined as a younger version of the 1980s *gyaru*, or girl in her early twenties that was recognized for her independent status and self-serving materialistic tendencies.<sup>132</sup> The *kogyaru*’s perceived celebration of the self above all other social concerns linked her image to the popular phrase “*san nai gyaru*,” or three negatives, referring to the trend of young women not working, not marrying and not bearing children in the 1990s.<sup>133</sup>

Cultural anthropologist Laura Miller argues that the *kogyaru* became the number one interest of mainstream anxiety and voyeurism in the late 1990’s through her challenge to female beauty norms. The *kogyaru* became an identifiable “living brand” and was distinguished by her hiked-up skirt, baggy oversized white socks, brown-tinted hair, tan skin and possession of luxury brand accessories.<sup>134</sup> In *Gunjyo-zu '97*, the *kogyaru* presented are easily identifiable through their distinct fashion style, and general baring of more skin than their demure sailor suit-clad middle school counterparts.

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<sup>131</sup> Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley, “Introduction,” in *Bad Girls of Japan*, eds. Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1.

<sup>132</sup> Kinsella, *Schoolgirls*, 60.

<sup>133</sup> Laura Miller, “Those Naughty Teenage Girls: Japanese Kogals, Slang, and Media Assessments,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 14 (2004): 228.

<sup>134</sup> Patrick Macias and Izumi Evers, *Japanese Schoolgirl Inferno: Tokyo Teen Fashion Subculture Handbook* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007), 46.

In the 1990s, the uniform of the schoolgirl transformed from a symbol of discipline, order and purity, to become a visual sign of erotic potentialities, sexuality, excess and violence.<sup>135</sup>

The year 1997 in this work's title refers to a number of important social crises surrounding the image of the *kogyaru*, and a socially defined national travesty known as *enjo kosai*, or compensated dating. Compensated dating is defined as the act of a young girl participating in causal to intimate relationships with older men in exchange for monetary items. In 1996, the Tokyo Metropolitan government published a national statistic claiming that four percent of all high school girls participated in compensated dating.<sup>136</sup> This misrepresented statistic; based largely on the Tokyo Metropolitan area alone, endorsed a social panic and media rampage. The social upheaval and media scare surrounding this practice prompted the Tokyo metropolitan government along with many other prefectures throughout Japan to amend the Solicitation Ordinance Law in 1997. The updated ordinance criminalized adults who solicited minors, such as schoolgirls under the age of 19.<sup>137</sup>

During the peak of this practice in the late 1990s, high school girls were regarded as the sexual objects of preference. In 1997, sixty percent of all domestic porn films featured high school girls, and many teen-marketed magazines, such as *Egg* and *Popteen* were produced within porn editorial offices.<sup>138</sup> Therefore, these publishing houses played

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<sup>135</sup> Jennifer Craik, *Uniforms Exposed: From Conformity to Transgression* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 225-226.

<sup>136</sup> Kinsella, *Schoolgirls*, 26.

<sup>137</sup> Kinsella, *Schoolgirls*, 34.

<sup>138</sup> Kinsella, *Schoolgirls*, 44.

a key role in promoting the *kogyaru* image to young girls to emulate, while simultaneously supplying it to Japan's pornography market. For example, the fifty-seventh issue of *Popteen* in December 1993 featured an article entitled "Don't Call Me a Bloomer-Sailor High School Girl," which informed young girls where to sell their uniforms for male schoolgirl enthusiasts, and reassured them that selling their bodies was what "clued-in girls" did.<sup>139</sup> Journalists targeted *kogyaru* fashion as a sign for *enjo kosai*, although surveyed schoolgirls and teens claimed to have first heard of *enjo kosai* via the media. The *kogyaru* ensemble's combining of the school uniform with luxury brand accessories led the general Japanese public to infer the worst.

#### The Image of the *Kogyaru* vs. The Image of the *Kawaii* Schoolgirl

Aida's title reads as *Gunjyo-zu '97*, or "*The Girls '97*," but it can also be more loosely translated as an "*Army of Girls '97*."<sup>140</sup> Iida Yumiko a scholar of 1990s ideologies of Japan stresses that the young Japanese schoolgirl began to take full advantage of her commodity status as *kogyaru* by the late 1990s, and this allowed her to become an active participant within the media.<sup>141</sup> Similar to Japanese women's *kawaii* enactment in the early 1990s, the *kogyaru* freed herself from socially proscribed responsibilities and morality through her assertive demeanor.

In *Gunjyo-zu '97*, the *kogyaru* is incorporated amongst the silhouettes of seemingly innocent middle school girls. The body positions of these schoolgirls

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<sup>139</sup> Kinsella, *Schoolgirls*, 35.

<sup>140</sup> Yuji Yamashita, "Aida Makoto, Pretend Villain- Premeditated Quotations from Japanese Art History," in *Aida Makoto: Monument for Nothing*, Tensai de Gomenasai, eds. Mami Kataoka (Tokyo: Seigensha Color Co. Ltd., 2013), 193.

<sup>141</sup> Iida, 431.

methodically parallel the movement of the irises in Ogata's original eighteenth century work. However, Aida has depicted these schoolgirls in various body positions not only to mimic Ogata's composition, but to also create a visual contrast between the *kawaii* and *kogyaru* images. The *kawaii* middle schoolgirls are identified by their innocent facial expressions and conservative body language, while the *kogyaru* are recognized through their self-reliant and lewd body language. Another apparent contrast between these two types is their ensembles. The *kawaii* schoolgirls are rendered in conservative sailor suits incorporating long skirts; while the *kogyaru* schoolgirls are presented in self modified skirts they have rolled up into mini skirts. Specifically within the two central panels of *Gunjyo-zu '97*, these two categories of schoolgirls are depicted bending over either to look into their shopping bags, or to speak to someone who is in a squat position. As the three *kawaii* schoolgirls in right central panel bend over their skirts continue to cover their bodies. In contrast, the *kogyaru* similarly bending over in the central left panel exposes ample amounts of skin.

In addition to the looser, more relaxed body language of the *kogyaru*, they are also depicted as being engaged with less innocent activities, such as smoking. For example, the *kogyaru* depicted on the left side of the central right panel is talking on a cell phone. The cell phone was another symbol highly associated with the *kogyaru* image in the late 1990s because of its role in compensated dating. Therefore, Aida's depiction of this *kogyaru* on a cellphone references the strong socially perceived correlation between the *kogyaru* image and the phenomena of compensated dating.

In *Gunjyo-zu '97*, the juxtaposition of the *kawaii* schoolgirl with the rising *kogyaru* schoolgirl presents the struggle and evolution of the Japanese identity by the late 1990s. The atmospheric incorporation of sweet and innocent fancy good characters and hues embodies national and social expectations of the *shojo* within Japanese society. In contrast, the *kogyaru* represent a subversive youth movement that had bloomed into a media-defined female revolt. The transient depiction of these schoolgirls references the frequent pixelated and cropped images presented in documentaries dedicated to *enjo kosai*, and within the greater Japanese media. While the sailor suit clad middle school girls maintain more reserved body language, the *kogyaru* participate in more aggressive poses. For example, the adoption of the squatting posture is reminiscent of the body language employed by *bosozoku*, or male Japanese bike gangs in the 1980s.<sup>142</sup> *Jibetanian*, a hybrid word combining the act of squatting and the English word battalion was a common phrase associated with *kogyaru* posture and the large groups they traveled in.<sup>143</sup>

By the late 1990s, the *kogyaru* served as a social scapegoat for Japan's economic, social and gender crises. Its image was no less artificial or socially subservient than that of the *kawaii* schoolgirl. However, both of these images were capable and evolved in subversive social movements focused on challenging Japan's greater patriarchal legacy. As Japanese men as a whole continued to lose confidence in their socially proscribed

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<sup>142</sup> Kinsella, *Schoolgirls*, 67.

<sup>143</sup> Miller, 228.

gender roles, powerful female images, such as, the *kogyaru* served as a vessel for Japanese female self-identity and empowerment.

In the summer of 1997, what came to be known as the “Kobe Serial Killing and Wounding Incident” made the child a new site of social anxiety.<sup>144</sup> This incident involved a middle school boy gruesomely killing and publicly displaying his elementary school victim’s corpse at the gate of his school. The perpetrator, referred to by the media as *Shonen A*, or Young Boy A, left a letter of confession in his victim’s body. This letter expressed *Shonen A*’s struggle with his “transparent existence along the lives of the troubled and disembodied subjectivity,” that could only be overcome through an engagement in violence.<sup>145</sup>

Following the *Shonen A* incident, national discussions were held to pinpoint an interior problem within contemporary Japanese society and its education system. Kawakami Ryoichi, a thirty-four-year veteran schoolteacher of Saitama prefecture and member of the Teacher’s Association of Japan, published a best selling book analyzing the *Shonen A* incident entitled *Collapse of the Classroom*. In his book, Kawakami links the social crisis surrounding the image of the child to the contemporary Japanese child’s stressful life schedule. Most Japanese children maintain round the clock schedules involving planning school activities, preparation for exams and after school tutoring sessions that ultimately culminate into miniaturized adult schedules.<sup>146</sup> Although new

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<sup>144</sup> Andrea G. Arai, “The ‘Wild Child’ of 1990’s Japan,” in *Japan after Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990’s to the Present*, eds. Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 221.

<sup>145</sup> Arai, 225.

<sup>146</sup> Arai, 229.

educational reforms were announced to patrol the psychological and physical health of Japanese children, a New Youth Law in 2000 was adopted, which tried youth between the ages of fourteen to twenty years old in criminal court.<sup>147</sup>

#### Japanese Cultural Travesties: *Kogyaru* and *Ganguro* Subcultures

In the late 1990s, the societal consciousness of *kodama ga henda*, (literally, “children are turning strange,”) included the larger *kogyaru* and *ganguro*, or blackface girl movements. These female subcultures purposely adopted appearances that would remove them from the culturally revered image of the well-behaved and reserved schoolgirl, while also embodying a larger fraying of society. By 1999, the *kogyaru* tan began to get darker, and was recognized by domestic tabloids as a cultural travesty. *Ganguro* girls, or “blackface girls,” labeled by the press, pursued deep tans and bleached their hair blonde as a way to stand out from the crowd. The Japanese media labeled *ganguro* girls as animalistic and unintelligent based on their appearance. These *kogyaru* and *ganguro* schoolgirls fought to present a new alternative for female identity; however, their attempts were met with accusations that they were being racial and cultural traitors.

At the peak of the high school girl boom in 1999, cultural anthropologist Sharon Kinsella notes that around fifty girls served as “pro-high school girls,” which were schoolgirls that functioned as points of information for the media.<sup>148</sup> The submissive schoolgirl image evolved into a strong and assertive female identity. These pro-high schoolgirls competed amongst themselves for fame in teen magazines,

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<sup>147</sup> Kinsella, *Schoolgirls*, 36.

<sup>148</sup> Kinsella, *Schoolgirls*, 82.

tabloids and disposable income. The media cast the confident *kogyaru* as a ruthless predator of the older man, and a practitioner of *oyagigari*, or “old man mugging.” As early as 1994, male-marketed tabloids cited instances of *oyagigari*. For example, the infamous “Telephone Club Holdup,” involved two schoolgirls incapacitating and robbing a thirty-eight year old man during a compensated date. According to the article, the two schoolgirls tasered the man, tied him to a chair and gagged him with female sanitary napkins before fleeing with his wallet.<sup>149</sup> Such events further threatened the less confident Japanese male community.

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<sup>149</sup> Kinsella, *Schoolgirls*, 170.





Figure 5  
**Aida Makoto (1965-)**  
*Harakiri Schoolgirls (Suicide Schoolgirls)*, 1999  
Acrylic, print on transparency film, 119 X 84.7 cm  
(Reprinted with permission from Mizuma Gallery, Shinjuku, Tokyo)

The violent presentation of the *kogyaru* and *ganguro* figures as featured in Aida's *Harakiri Schoolgirls* (1999) reference the decade's greater awareness of a "wild child" movement (Figure 5). This 119x84.7cm print is composed of transparency film, and painted in acrylic paint. It depicts Japanese schoolgirls engaged in a battle of mass suicide on a public sidewalk. Upon taking a closer look, the viewer will realize that these schoolgirls are not engaged in a battle against each other, but against themselves. In

*Harakiri Schoolgirls*, the depicted schoolgirls continuously disembowel themselves through various methods while maintaining gleeful to emotionless facial expressions. Only one schoolgirl in the center of the composition has not sliced into her own flesh, and appears to be getting in position to strike down one of her schoolgirl peers beside her.

International curator and critic David Elliott identifies *Harakiri Schoolgirls*' composition as loosely based off of the infamously violent and grotesque woodblock prints of the nineteenth century Japanese artist, Yoshitoshi Tsukioka. Yoshitoshi's print series entitled *Twenty-eight Famous Murders* (1866-1868) featured multiple images of mutilated and decapitated women, each of which could have served as a point of reference in *Harakiri Schoolgirls*. Yoshitoshi's work has been interpreted as serving to chronicle the confusions and anxieties of Japanese society as it transitioned from a feudal society into a Westernized nation state.<sup>150</sup> Aida has specifically chosen to parody *Harakiri Schoolgirls* off of Yoshitoshi's oeuvre for this reason. Similarly, *Harakiri Schoolgirls* presents an atmosphere of pure social chaos, which is embodied within the image of the contemporary schoolgirl during the end of Japan's lost decade. The visual fraying of *Harakiri Schoolgirls*' edges symbolizes Japan's own fraying of society by the end of the 1990s.

The schoolgirls are engaged in *harakiri*, or a ritualistic form of honorable suicide that originated during Japan's feudal era. If a samurai or feudal warlord was engaged in battle and was close to becoming overtaken, the performance of *harakiri* would guarantee

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<sup>150</sup> Eric van den Ing and Robert Schaap, *Beauty and Violence: Japanese Prints by Yoshitoshi 1839-1892* (Amsterdam: Society of Japanese Arts, 1992), 10.

their eternal honor. A strong sense of honor was bound to the act of a warrior slicing open his own abdomen, and the option of *harakiri* was sometimes offered as an alternative to an execution sentence. However, in *Harakiri Schoolgirls*, this extremely painful and serious ritual has been likened to an amusing children's game.<sup>151</sup>

In the 1990s, neo-nationalist groups condemned and equated youth movements, such as the *kogyaru* and *ganguro* as self-absorbed and self-referential social suicides. Cultural anthropologist Laura Miller discusses the narcissism and visual power of the *kogyaru* and *ganguro* image in her study entitled "Bad Girl Photography." She connects the 1995 debut of *purikura*, or coin operated photo-editing machines as a seminal outlet of rising *kogyaru* self-expression and self-absorption. *Harakiri Schoolgirls* presents a horde of high schoolgirls defying conservative social expectations of self-presentation, which compositionally mimicking the appearance of these *purikura* images.<sup>152</sup>

#### *Harakiri Schoolgirls* (1999): The Demise of the Submissive Schoolgirl Image

In *Harakiri Schoolgirls*, the schoolgirls all share various culturally condoned signifiers. Each of the eight schoolgirls are adorned in the common schoolgirl attire of preppy dress shirts, knitted cardigans and pleated skirts; however, their skin tones range from fair to dark. At the center of this composition stands a *ganguro* schoolgirl identifiable through her deep tan.

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<sup>151</sup> David Elliott and Testuya Ozaki, *Bye bye Kitty!!!: Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art* (New York: Japan Society Inc., 2011), 10.

<sup>152</sup> Laura Miller, "Bad Girl Photography," in *Bad Girls of Japan*, eds. Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 130.

The hierarchical and overtly Western presentation of this central *ganguro* schoolgirl is comparable to contemporary magazines' recognition of the *ganguro* within similar pyramidal diagrams. For example, in May 2000, the magazine *Weekly Shukan Playboy* published the pyramidal diagram "The Shibuya Hierarchy," identifying the *ganguro* as the most ferocious female on the schoolgirl food chain.<sup>153</sup> The schoolgirls that surround the central *ganguro* figure are depicted in subverting poses in contrast to the strong, upward stance of the central figure. The schoolgirls' poses and facial expressions can be interpreted as both expressing large amounts of pain, but also hints of flirtation and erotic sensibilities. Their flirtatious body positions reference the pornographic film and literature movement that had sprung up around their image by the late 1990s. In comparison, the tall silhouette of this *ganguro* schoolgirl is physically unharmed by herself or by her peers. While her fellow classmates gruesomely disembowel themselves, the central *ganguro* draws back her long sword and waits to end the suffering of the schoolgirl who clutches onto her leg in pain, or in sexual ecstasy. The stance and body position of the central figure identifies her as the most powerful figure in the composition, as well as the *kaishakunin*, or the appointed "second" within the *harakiri* tradition. The "second" is an individual designated to assist the individual performing the *harakiri* ceremony. If the individual engaged in *harakiri* is unable to complete the ceremony, their "second" will be signaled to cut off their head. A close investigation of each schoolgirl's visual signs and roles within *Harakiri Schoolgirls* presents the central *ganguro* schoolgirl as symbolically assisting in the death of a

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<sup>153</sup> Kinsella, *Schoolgirls*, 112.

conservative Japanese female identity. Comparable to an angel of Death, the central *ganguro* schoolgirl passes her judgment on the submissive and socially proscribed schoolgirl. The central *ganguro* figure is depicted as triumphing over her *kogyaru* counterparts who die in subversion to her image.

The violence depicted casts the image of the schoolgirl as capable of actions previously unimaginable by the greater Japanese society. Aida's *Harakiri Schoolgirls* serves as a testament to a decade of tremendous societal conflict grounded in changing gender roles and a national anxiety surrounding the independence of various youth movements. As the image of the *shojo*, or more specifically the *kogyaru*, served as a vital source of cultural energy and female empowerment, it also served as a vital source of cultural ridicule and social deterioration. In 1999, a large marketing campaign dedicated to the return of the pale face beauty emerged. The hallmark tan of the *kogyaru* was overrun by the revival of a demurer, European-esque pale face. By the early 2000s, numerous Japanese women would readopt this pale complexion and provide Aida Makoto with the next generation of *shojo* models.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Japan's Idol Industry and the Contemporary *Shojo*

This final chapter explores how the most recent works of Aida Makoto have engaged with the *shojo* image from the early 2000s up until the early 2010s. The image of the *shojo* is contemplated in this chapter in regards to the continual struggle of the Japanese economy. This chapter begins with the revival of the Japanese female idol industry and its influences on the formation of contemporary Japanese identity.

The emerging media trends, stagnated economy, and ever-evolving forms of technology all contribute to new readings of the culturally condoned *shojo* image during the 2000s.

An in-depth analysis of his *Edible Artificial Girls Mi-Mi Chan* series (2001), *Picture of Waterfall* (2007-2010), and *Jumble of 100 Flowers* (2012) will continue to present Aida's perspective on the transitional status of Japanese male and female gendered identities.

#### The White Beauty Boom

As the *kogyaru* style established in the 1990s began to fade, it was supplanted by traditionally conservative ideologies pertaining to Japanese feminine beauty. By the early twenty-first century, the submissive power behind the *kogyaru*'s hallmark deeply tanned skin waned due to its wide acceptance among mainstream youth. In its place came a return to the pale complexion, which signified culturally implicit ideologies of traditional Japanese femininity. Known as the *bihaku bumo*, or "beautiful white boom," Japanese women's desire for a pale complexion caused skin-lightening products to fly off

the shelves.<sup>154</sup> This return to a white complexion among young women and girls signified the resurrection of a traditional image of Japanese femininity. In general, pale skin reflects historical ideals regarding the role women were to play in society. Since Japan's Heian period (794-1185) feminine beauty has been documented and embodied through a pale complexion. By the nation's feudal times known as the Edo period (1603-1867), an artistic genre known as *bijin-ga*, or portraits of beautiful women presented the ideal of a pale face. Only Japanese women of the upper classes during the Edo period were able to afford and participate in this whitening trend, which led to the pale complexion becoming a sign of social status. It wasn't until Japan's Meiji era (1868-1912) with the flooding of Western technology and customs that the white face came to signify native tradition and Japanese-ness.<sup>155</sup> Although body frame preferences have shifted considerably between various eras, the desire for fair, pale skin has remained a constant ideal throughout Japanese history. Cultural anthropologist Merry White identifies this return to pale skin as a, "rummaging in patriarch's memory."<sup>156</sup> In alignment with White's concerns, cultural anthropologist Laura Miller recognizes Japan's return to a more conservative image of femininity as symptomatic of greater shifting social values.

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<sup>154</sup> Laura Miller, *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 35.

<sup>155</sup> Miller, 35.

<sup>156</sup> Miller, 37.

## The Revival of the Female Idol Industry

Other related social developments parallel to the *bikaku bumu* included Japan's falling national birthrate, large percentages of stress related suicides among Japanese men and more and more women refraining from marriage. While Japanese women received the bulk of the blame for the nation's declining 1.39 birthrate in 2011, Japanese men also suffered from a lack of self-worth in regards to fulfilling residual postwar gender roles.<sup>157</sup> It is within this social atmosphere of disintegrating gender constructs that the Japanese female idol gained its revival. The Japanese idol embodies and transmits a culturally acceptable image of Japanese femininity avidly consumed by her male fans.

Since the mid-1990s, Japan's male white-collar workers have been met with criticism for their perceived inability to uphold steady jobs. The identity of the male white-collar worker, or *saraiiman*, originated from a postwar socially prescribed gender role that expected him to sacrifice his time and personal health for the good of his family.<sup>158</sup> However, since Japan's economic recession lingered on into the late 2000s, the number of non-regular male employees more than doubled from 1.89 million to 4.15 million over the last two decades.<sup>159</sup> For males between the ages of twenty-five through

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<sup>157</sup> Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present* Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 315.

<sup>158</sup> A *saraiiman*, or salaryman is defined typically as a male, white-collar Japanese worker who takes on the responsibility of being the breadwinner within the nuclear family. Salarymen usually spend long hours commuting to work and working large amounts of overtime for the upkeep of their socially prescribed male role, as well as providing a comfortable living arrangement for their families. For more on salarymen please see: Keiko Hirata and Mark Warschauer, *Japan: The Paradox of Harmony* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

<sup>159</sup> Gordon, 342.



thirty-four, this demographic more than quadrupled from 210,000 in 1995 to 900,000 by 2009.

A *sarariiman*'s typically high stress levels from overwork made him susceptible to two growing health hazards known as *kato-jistasu* and *karoshi*. By 2011, *kato-jistasu*, or suicide from overwork claimed one third of the total 30,000 reported suicides according to the National Police Agency, and continues to be the leading cause of death for males between the ages of twenty to forty-four.<sup>160</sup> *Karoshi* is defined as "death from overwork," or more commonly referred to as "*sarariiman*'s sudden death syndrome." *Karoshi* occurs when an individual experiences a sudden heart attack triggered from a lack of sleep or high stress levels. In addition to the state of the Japanese employment market and the Japanese male's struggle to uphold traditionally-codified gendered roles, a social phenomenon known as "parasite singles," or young Japanese women abstaining from marriage and bearing children caused more heated discussions on the state of the larger Japanese society.<sup>161</sup> In 2010, forty-seven percent of Japanese males between the ages of thirty to thirty-four were not married, while thirty-seven percent of women within the same age bracket were also still single.<sup>162</sup>

The idol's image serves as an ideal substitute for the imperfections of the Japanese woman in contemporary Japanese society. The female idol is purposely cast within historically conservative gender concepts such as *ryosai kenbo*, or the

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<sup>160</sup> Keiko Hirata and Mark Warschauer, *Japan: The Paradox of Harmony* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 31.

<sup>161</sup> Hirata and Warschauer, 74.

<sup>162</sup> Hirata and Warschauer, 81.

longstanding social proverb of “good wife, wise mother.”<sup>163</sup> *Ryosai Kenbo* upholds that a women’s role is within the home and at the service of her husband and children.<sup>164</sup>

During the idol industry’s revival in the early 2000s, idols were marketed to represent a conservative female image.

The Japanese female idol industry also experienced a revival within the mass media. An *aidoru*, or idol is a young, highly produced and promoted performer who sings, poses for photos and appears frequently in the media.<sup>165</sup> Ethnographic sociologist Aoyagi Hiroshi attributes the concept of this female performer to a 1963 French film entitled *Cherchez L’idole*, which was translated at the time as, “In Search of An Idol.”<sup>166</sup> It was the singing and dancing performed by the film’s stars Dany Saval and Frank Fernandel that inspired the earliest conceptions of this female entertainer within the Japanese mass media. In Japan, as in other countries throughout the world, idols can be male or female, and are equally supported by male and female fan bases. This particular phenomenon of highly commoditized performance groups is not limited to Japan. Similar comparisons in the West date as far back as the mid-1950s up until the rise in popularity of American and British male and female music groups, such as *N’Sync* and *The Spice Girls* in the early 1990s. In addition, the immensely popular American program known as *American Idol* celebrated its twentieth and final season in 2016.

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<sup>163</sup> Hiroshi Aoyagi, *Islands of Eight Million Smiles: Idol Performance and Symbolic Production in Contemporary Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), 90.

<sup>164</sup> Susan D. Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 10.

<sup>165</sup> Patrick W. Galbraith and Jason G. Karlin, “Introduction: The Mirror of Idols and Celebrity,” in *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture*, eds. Patrick W. Galbraith and Jason G. Karlin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 4.

<sup>166</sup> Aoyagi, 5.

## Japanese *Jimsho*

Idol promotion agencies, known as *jimsho* emerged in the early 1970s and are still today solely responsible for producing these mass media icons. Beginning in the postwar period and continuing on into the present, Japan's top *jimsho* are responsible for most of the content within the Japanese entertainment industry. *Jimsho* are also often connected to larger industrial monopolies known as *keritsu*.<sup>167</sup> Similar to the monopolizing publishing houses that promoted the *kogyaru* style to both adult men and teenage girls in the mid to late 1990s, powerful *jimsho* often control various outlets of television, music companies and film.

W. David Marx's study dedicated to the interworking of the *jimsho* system in relation to the larger Japanese entertainment market recognizes *jimsho* as holding most, if not all the power in entertainment negotiations.<sup>168</sup> The Japanese entertainment industry's focus on musical performance creates a structural dependence on *jimsho* for access to performers. A *jimsho* may require television networks to employ smaller or newer performers for other television shows in exchange for a *jimsho*'s well-known celebrities. At present, an estimated 1,600 *jimsho* are accounted for within Tokyo alone.<sup>169</sup> *Jimsho* compete amongst each other for limited television airtime and product sponsorships. The top agencies are much like the early Hollywood star system, and an idol is often treated

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<sup>167</sup> Aoyagi, *Islands*, 47.

<sup>168</sup> W. David Marx, "The *Jimsho* System: Understanding the Production Logic of the Japanese Entertainment Industry," in *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture*, eds. Patrick W. Galbraith and Jason G. Karlin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 43.

<sup>169</sup> Marx, 39.

as a disposable commodity and can be blacklisted if she attempts to leave her affiliated *jimsho*.

By the mid-1960s, more than ninety percent of all households owned a television, which allowed for a shift in popular entertainment.<sup>170</sup> The outlet of television became a routine and personal experience. The struggling domestic film studios were overtaken by new and powerful idol talent management agencies.<sup>171</sup> In the short span of four years (1971-1974), the Japanese public had been introduced to over 700 new idols.<sup>172</sup>

Television became the most powerful and influential outlet of mass culture that elected idols as its new stars. Highly promoted idol groups like Sanin Musume (Three Daughters) and national idols like Yamaguchi Momoe became the focus of a growing national audience.<sup>173</sup> Yamaguchi Momoe came to prominence during the dawning of Japan's postwar television age. Alongside schoolgirl-age idols Mori Masako and Sakurada Junko, Yamaguchi was a part of "The Schoolgirl Trio," dubbed by the media. Debuting at age thirteen, Yamaguchi performed in a sailor-style school uniform and sang songs with rather adult lyrics compared to more conservative idols during the 1950s and the 1960s.

In 1971, the music program *Star Tanjo! (A Star is Born!)* debuted and initiated Japan's movement of mass produced performers. In the early 1970s, the debut of

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<sup>170</sup> Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present, Third Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 264.

<sup>171</sup> Christopher Howard, "National Idols? The Problem of Transnationalizing Film Stardom in Japan's Idol Economy," in *East Asian Film Stars*, eds. Leung Wing-Fai and Andy Willis, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 50.

<sup>172</sup> Galbraith and Karlin, 5.

<sup>173</sup> For more information on early media constructed idols see: Brain Ashcraft and Shoko Ueda, *Japanese Schoolgirl Confidential: How Teenage Girls Made a Nation Cool* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2010), 50.

Japan's idol industry coincided with the nation's own "youthful" period of rebuilding its society and economy following World War II. Cultural anthropologist Marilyn Ivy classifies the nation's postwar mass culture during this reconstruction period, as containing no populist dimensions, and argues that its "standardization was linked to the decline of communally-based popular culture."<sup>174</sup>

#### The Female Japanese and the *Ren'ai Doramu*

Idols increasingly starred in television dramas, the most important format of the 1990s. The plots of these popular series focused on themes of love and relationships, and in Japan these programs often starred schoolgirl characters. The *ren'ai doramu*, or love dramas became a crucial vehicle that allowed female idols to become more humanized and appear more accessible to their audiences.<sup>175</sup> As an idol underwent the process of becoming a lover, they gained a more memorable position within their audiences' consciousness. Japanese literary scholar Hilaria Gössmann identifies the audiences' consumption of television programs such as the Japanese drama in order to develop and maintain particular gender role identifications.<sup>176</sup>

Gössman presents television as a kind of "significant other," in which viewers "develop, maintain and revise their self concepts, including perceptions of gender and

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<sup>174</sup> Jan Bardsley, "Purchasing Power in Japanese Popular Culture," *Journal of Popular Culture* 31 (1997): 11.

<sup>175</sup> Eva Tsai, "The Dramatic Consequences of Playing a Lover: Stars and Televisual Culture in Japan," in *Television, Globalization and Japan*, eds. Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, Eva Tsai and JungBong Choi (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies, 2010), 109.

<sup>176</sup> Hilaria M. Gössmann, "New Role Models for Men and Women? Gender in Japanese Television Dramas," in *Japan Pop: Inside the World of Japanese Popular Culture*, eds. Timothy J. Craig (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 207.

role identification.”<sup>177</sup> Consumers of these television dramas are invited to re-evaluate their own gendered identities. Surveys drawn from Japanese men and women who watch television dramas found that these individuals consumed this form of entertainment in order to learn about life.<sup>178</sup> As a purveyor of conservative popular culture and capable of presenting narratives displaying gradual social change, Japanese television dramas reflect the historical development of contemporary gender roles.

Beginning in the 1990s, serial television dramas began to present home life and family relationships in Japan in a more critical light. Narratives dedicated to the issues of mother-fixated sons and wives leaving their husbands depicted a reevaluation of the Japanese family life ideal. For example, in the 1993 television drama *Otona no Kiss* (Adult Kiss) the wife declares her separation from her husband because she feels like nothing but a mother to him, and is no longer willing to fulfill that role. It is only after her husband is able to take care of himself that they are again able to be together. Another series entitled *Kamisama Mo Sukoshi Dake...* (God, Just a Little Bit Longer...) (1998) presents the story a schoolgirl that contracts HIV through her participation in a paid date. During the transformation of becoming a lover, the schoolgirl played by Fukuda Kyoko undergoes a difficult process of coming to terms with her family, her lover, and accepting herself. Through the consumption of *ren'ai doramu*, Japanese individuals are confronted with numerous female idols that embody a history of dramatic roles, and increasingly feel connected to them through the consumption of these roles.

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<sup>177</sup> Gössmann, 207.

<sup>178</sup> Gössmann, 207.

## The Japanese “Idolization” Process

The effectiveness of Japan’s idol production industry derives from its re-appropriation of cultural and nationally condoned signifiers pertaining to a conservative femininity within a particular time in history. Similar to what theorist Roland Barthes defines as a system of connotation, “a system which takes over the sign of another system in order to make them its signifiers,” the idol industry appropriates traditional attributes of femininity to inform both the idol and the processes of “idolization.”<sup>179</sup> Aoyagi Hiroshi defines the latter as a “symbolic process where the idol frames her personality in a publically adorable way.”<sup>180</sup>

In 1971, the inception of two of Japan’s first *jimsho*: Hori Agency and Sun Music Productions produced images of femininity within a defined “cute” style. This cute presentation style required young girls to pose coyly, project pure and modest personas, and present an exaggeratingly childish demeanor, known as *huri-huri isho*.<sup>181</sup> Image is the most important commodity for idol producers. An idol is not valued for her talent, but rather her ability to stand as a blank canvas for her male producers to decorate. It is an idol’s responsibility to uphold her highly constructed image for the sake of its marketable value. A young idol was expected to follow certain rules that forbid her from partaking in “impure activities” such as drinking, smoking and publically dating in fear of damaging her marketable image.<sup>182</sup> If an idol does not maintain her socially appealing

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<sup>179</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 36.

<sup>180</sup> Aoyagi, *Islands*, 2.

<sup>181</sup> Hiroshi Aoyagi, “Pop Idols and Asian Identity,” in *Japan Pop: Inside the World of Japanese Popular Culture*, eds. Timothy J. Craig (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 313.

<sup>182</sup> Galbraith and Karlin, 8.

image, she becomes socially unattractive and no longer separate from her audience. Japanese literary scholar John Whittier Treat defines the idol's "absence of value [as] now itself a value," therefore positioning her as a disposable commodity within the Japanese entertainment industry.<sup>183</sup> A Japanese idol must remain generic enough for her fans to be able to project their personal desires onto her, however an idol's very generic-ness makes her easy to replace.

The successes of paramount idol groups like *Onyanko Club* (Kitty Club) and solo idols like Matsuda Seiko in the 1980s derived from their micro-managed smiles consumed by an expanding national audience. Idol producer of the prominent 1997 female idol group *Morning Musume* (Morning Daughter) known as Tsunku identifies his preferred girl as one capable of something referred to as an "image change."<sup>184</sup> According to Tsunku, an ideal idol candidate is first and foremost obedient within the "idolization" process, and therefore valued for her lack of a strong sense of self.

#### Consumption of the Female Idol Image

The formation of a socially and culturally appealing idol image is highly motivated by its abilities to maximize the consumption of various goods and services. In advertising campaigns, idols promote the consumption of various goods, while their images are simultaneously consumed. Since the 1980s "golden age of idols," which turned out an unprecedented fifty new idols a year, an idol would debut as an

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<sup>183</sup> John Whittier Treat, "Yoshitomo Banana Writes Home: *Shojo* Culture and the Nostalgic Subject," in *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture: Gender, Shifting Boundaries and Global Cultures*, ed. D. P. Martinez (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 283.

<sup>184</sup> Patrick W. Galbraith "Idols: The Image of Desire in Japanese Consumer Capitalism," in *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture*, eds. Patrick W. Galbraith and Jason G. Karlin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 192.



“image character,” or advertising mascot and often provide an “image song,” or short jingle for a particular good or service.<sup>185</sup> The integration of the idol’s image within commercials, magazines, television dramas, and billboards placed them within the everyday lives of Japanese individuals. Therefore, the intertextual presence of the female idol image generates an intimate relationship between her consumers and herself.

Cultural anthropologist Patrick Galbraith compares the role of the female idol within the Japanese entertainment industry to media scholar John Fiske’s concept of an “inescapable intertextuality.”<sup>186</sup> The idol’s image functions within an “inescapable intertextuality” where, “all texts refer to one another, and not to any external reality.” This allows her image to serve as an axis around which various media outlets revolve. The audience’s familiarity with past idols builds upon the identity of new emerging idols. The Japanese entertainment industry casts idols for various media performances based on the strength of their “intertextual” profiles.<sup>187</sup>

For example, if a female performer gains a large enough following in music, her talent agency will interpret this as probable indication for her success in other media outlets. An idol’s name can be enough to evoke a history of roles and performances that allow *inaki*, or entertainment committees composed of T.V. producers, publishing houses and advertising firms to exploit the idol’s intertextual image for their own agendas.

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<sup>185</sup> Howard, 56.

<sup>186</sup> Galbraith, 186.

<sup>187</sup> Gabriella Lukacs, “Dream Labor in Dream Factory: Japanese Commercial Television in the Era of Market Fragmentation,” in *Television, Globalization and Japan*, eds. Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, Eva Tsai and JungBong Choi (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies, 2010), 185.

## The “Post Idol” of the 1990s

However, by the mid to late 1990s, the oversaturation of the cute idol market in combination with the nation’s fall in economic prominence initiated what Japanese idol critic Nakamori Akio defines as the “idol winter period.”<sup>188</sup> The idol image that arose out of the nation’s various social and economic dilemmas in the mid-1990s was no longer “cute-ified,” but rather a highly sexualized and assertive female identity. The origins of this “post idol” image reflected larger social trends, such as the female-empowered *kogyaru* movement. In response to changing market demands, idol producers adjusted the connotated image of the cute idol into one emphasizing power and vibrant sexuality. Head producer of the successful Body Wave talent agency, Yoshinori Mukai asserted that the “purity of so-called cute idols was a made up image,” and that, “to be pure,” required a girl to be, “honest to her senses.”<sup>189</sup> Despite Yoshinori’s and *Morning Musume* producer, Tsunku’s individual claims, the image of the female idol, whether cute or sexy continued to be framed by male producers for the consumption of a predominately male audience.

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<sup>188</sup> Aoyagi, “Pop Idols and Asian Identity,” 318.

<sup>189</sup> Aoyagi, *Islands*, 116.

*Edible Artificial Girls, Mi-Mi Chan* (2001)

The literal consumption and exploitation of young girls is presented in Aida Makoto's series entitled *Edible Artificial Girls, Mi-Mi Chan* (2001), which is composed of eight digitally constructed prints (Figure 6). Parallel with the *bikahu bumu*, Aida's depiction of the youthful *shojo* transitions from the deeply tanned *kogyaru* to pale faced beauties in this series. The name "Mi-Mi" within the series' title serves as a pun for the word, *bibi*, or the Japanese onomatopoeia phrase for delicious. This series of eight works, each measuring 29.7x42cm, transforms the objectified *shojo* into a literal edible commodity.



Figure 6

**Aida Makoto (1965-)**

*Mi-Mi on the Chopping Board, Roast Mi-Mi, Mi-Mi Roll, Chilled Mi-Mi, Bowl of Rice with Fresh Salmon Roe* from *Edible Artificial Girls, Mi-Mi Chan* series, 2001

Digital prints (a set of eight works), each 29.7 X 42 cm

(Reprinted with permission from Mizuma Gallery, Shinjuku, Tokyo)

In each digital print a watercolor-esque technique of uneven painterly hues is employed to depict these girls as they are chopped, squeezed and sliced in preparation for consumption. The series includes a short narrative of a future world tormented by hunger.

The mass consumption of the young female image through the pop cultural outlet of the Japanese idol industry has been thoroughly investigated by cultural anthropologist Patrick Galbraith in “Idols: The image of Desire in Japanese Consumer Capitalism.” Galbraith argues that a Japanese female idol “integrates [both] the libidinal and material economy of images,” in order to “gather and focus desire, and becomes a commodity in and of itself.”<sup>190</sup> Further referencing Jacques Lacan’s formation of the ego and theory of lack, Galbraith asserts that consumers of these young female images pursue these objects of desire, however in possessing them only further perpetuates their pursuit.<sup>191</sup> Aida’s *Edible Artificial Girl Mi-Mi Chan* series compares the everyday consummative process of eating with that of the consumption of idol images, inferring that the desire for the young female image has become so prevalent and essential to the lives of their consumers that it will rival food in the future.

In order to resolve worldwide food shortages, *Edible Artificial Girl Mi-Mi Chan* is developed to, “devote...herself to [the] fulfill[ment] of the appetite of men.”<sup>192</sup> Each of this series’ prints transforms the image of the pure, youthful *shojo* into a

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<sup>190</sup> Galbraith 185.

<sup>191</sup> Galbraith, 194.

<sup>192</sup> Makoto Aida, *La trentaine de Makoto Aida* (Tokyo: ABC Shuppan, 2005), 28.

different Japanese dish, such as *Roast Mi-Mi*, *Mi-Mi Roll* and *Bowl of Rice with Fresh Salmon Roe*. In *Chilled Mi-Mi*, the literal packaging of two young edible girls symbolizes the marketability and cultural packaging of the female image in order to be consumed by the masses. One print from the series entitled *Mi-Mi on the Chopping Board* can be related to the “idolization” practice of the Japanese idol industry. The nude miniaturized girl is laid across a wooden cutting board as a hovering knife prepares to transform the girl into an appetizing dish. The young girl’s figure mentally registers as a blank canvas and is laid across a cutting board in preparation for her customer’s orders.

In this series’ other prints like *Roast Mi-Mi* and *Mi-Mi Roll*, girls maintain flirtatious expressions as they are sliced into. In both of these prints the girls are depicted lying down either on a plate of greens or on a sushi roller in preparation for consumption. In contrast to their inviting expressions, each girl’s hands are depicted clasped together, visually registering as if they have been tied up against their will. These young girls’ submissive body positions remind one of Japanese S&M pornography narratives that often center around schoolgirls being restrained and raped.<sup>193</sup>

The piece entitled *Bowl of Rice with Fresh Salmon Roe* most blatantly incorporates the presence and dominance of the male consumer. Two hairy male hands grasp Mi-Mi Chan’s torso and proceed to squeeze red salmon roe from her vagina onto a bowl of white rice. This erotic and disturbing depiction can be read as the taking of the

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<sup>193</sup> Mark D. West *Lovesick Japan: Sex, Marriage, Romance, Law* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 158. In 2002, a case involving a paid date turned abduction tragically concluded with a twelve-year-old schoolgirl being sprayed with mace, hand-cuffed, and locked inside a car. In urgency to flee the abductee’s car, the young girl tragically fell out of the car onto the highway fracturing her skull and dying instantly.<sup>193</sup> This abduction case was understood and ruled as the outcome of the man’s obsessive consumption of rape-based adult videos, which had ultimately led him to carry out his personal desires in real life.

young girl's virginity, symbolically represented by the spilling of the red salmon eggs on top of a bed of white rice. Aida's decision to unite these exploitive images with the essential human activity of eating propels the artist's insight on the troubling extent of the young female image's consumption. As Mi-Mi Chan is created and prepared for the consumption of her male customers; the contemporary Japanese idol is similarly prepared for the viewer's consumption.

#### Female Japanese Idols as Quasi-Companions

The most successful and enduring idol group since 2005 is made up of 48 ever-changing female members known as AKB48, or Akiharaba 48. Akiharaba refers to a particular subcultural district in Tokyo glorified for its futuristic endeavors in technology and Japan's latest pop cultural trends. Comparable to the thirty-nine schoolgirls depicted in Aida Makoto's *Picture of Waterfall* (2007-2010) soon to be discussed these girls serve as deliberately similar cultural signs. In 2012, this schoolgirl-themed idol group had sold a total of 11.8 millions cd's, therefore ranking as Japan's most successful female group of all time.<sup>194</sup> AKB48's forty-eight members have been recognized by sociologist Ogawa Hiroshi for revolutionizing what he defines as *gijiteki-nakama*, or the idea of the "quasi-companion."<sup>195</sup> This contemporary idol group promoted itself as a group of, "idols you can meet," which created a greater sense of intimacy between their fans and themselves.<sup>196</sup> The two hundred or so members in

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<sup>194</sup> Galbraith and Karlin, 21.

<sup>195</sup> Aoyagi, *Pop Idols and Asian Identity*, 312.

<sup>196</sup> Galbraith and Karlin, 17.

AKB48 served as accessible objects of desire that engage their male fans through hand shaking ceremonies, public photo shoots and performances without the fear of rejection.

The idol group AKB48, which has gained a reputation of manipulating and exploiting its predominately male fans, is a prime example of the profit to be made off of extreme fans.<sup>197</sup> AKB48's business philosophy centers on the concept that the greater consumption of the idol group through goods and concerts will lead to a better quality experience. An annual AKB48 election allows fans to vote for their favorite idols based on how many of the idol group's cd's they're willing to purchase. The purchase of one designated cd equates to one vote in this event, therefore creating an ingenious marketing strategy. Fans are encouraged to purchase multiple cd's in order to prove their commitment to their favorite idol. Other more controversial AKB48 marketing campaigns involving the group's eighth single urged fans to collect forty-four distinct posters bundled randomly with the single. If a fan were able to collect all forty-four posters, which meant the inevitable purchasing of more than forty-four copies of the single, they would be granted attendance to an exclusive AKB48 event. AKB48 hand shaking events also functioned on this one cd purchase equates to one handshake rule.<sup>198</sup>

However, ever so often, an idol's fantasy persona is tainted through the breaking of one of their highly regimented rules. On January 31, 2013, Minegishi Minami, a longtime member of the AKB48 group was caught dating a male singer; therefore

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<sup>197</sup> AKB48 stands for Akiharaba 48, referring to the electronic and popular subculture district located in Akiharaba, Tokyo. The number forty-eight references the number of girls in the idol group, however the group has expanded to over 200 members by the late 2000s.

<sup>198</sup> Galbraith and Karlin, 16.

breaking the no-romance idol code.<sup>199</sup> The following day, as a form of self-punishment, Minegishi uploaded a video to the idol group's website publically apologizing to her fans and presenting a completely shaven head. The act of shaving one's head in Japan is a cultural practice associated with deep personal remorse, however the extremity of this act perceived by media outlets outside of Japan caused the video to go viral. Whether Minegishi's actions were purely her own, or concocted by the idol's management team, AKB48 received an unprecedented period of international media attention following the upload of Minegishi's apology video.

The walls in AKB48's personal theater located in Akihabara, Tokyo, are adorned with small brass plaques that recognize idol fans attendance to over one hundred of the group's performances.<sup>200</sup> An AKB48 fan describes his pilgrimages to the AKB48 theater as entering a, "dreamland that brings you fairy tales."<sup>201</sup> AKB48's theater is an escape, which allows Japanese men to escape the stress and obligations of their personal lives and become engulfed in a realm of pure fantasy. The images of idol groups like AKB48 project traditional social values of female chastity and sincerity. Media specialist Inamasu Tatsu recognizes the hypocrisy within these constructed idol images. Inamasu asserts that, "idols appear to be very pure, but they are actually doing something very impure-trying to get money from people's pockets."<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Wendy Xie, "Japanese Idols in Trans-Cultural Reception: The Case of AKB48," *Virginia Review of Asian Studies* 16 (2014): 74.

<sup>200</sup> Ashcraft and Ueda, 33.

<sup>201</sup> Hirata and Warschauer, 72.

<sup>202</sup> Brain Ashcraft and Shoko Ueda, *Japanese Schoolgirl Confidential: How Teenage Girls Made a Nation Cool* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2010), 40.



*Picture of Waterfall* (2007-2010)

In Aida Makoto's *Picture of Waterfall* (2007-2010); an acrylic on canvas painting measuring 439x272cm, a horde of schoolgirls is embedded into a lush, mountainous landscape (Figure 7).



Figure 7

**Aida Makoto (1965-)**

*Picture of Waterfall*, 2007-2010

Acrylic on canvas, 439 X 272 cm

(Reprinted with permission from Mizuma Gallery, Shinjuku, Tokyo)

This piece displays a total of thirty-nine young girls swimming, splashing and jumping in excitement. Apart from the two schoolgirls adorned in their schoolgirl uniforms; the majority of these girls are depicted in school-regulated swimsuits that include individual nametags located on their chests. The plethora of carefree and energetic girls in *Picture of Waterfall* recreates an atmosphere comparable to the fantastic wonderlands of contemporary idol theaters.

The formation of large female entertainment groups such as *Onyanko Club* and AKB48 has allowed fans to maintain a sense of agency when supporting their stars. Cultural anthropologist Merry White argues that through consumer research, entertainment groups are constructed to match the various identified tastes among youth.<sup>203</sup> Female performance groups composed of a large selection of girls maintain a wide range of specific personalities that function as information-saturated images. For example, cultural theorist Otuska Eiji defines the idol fan's pleasure in collecting these idol images as "reconstructing the narrative."<sup>204</sup>

In *Picture of Waterfall*, Aida constructs a narrative through the images of the various schoolgirls, and their relation to the symbolic landscape that surrounds them. In Aida's *Picture of Waterfall*, each schoolgirl acts as a visual marker or cartouche mimicking the format of a pilgrimage mandala, which traces the route of an ancient Shinto pilgrimage path.

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<sup>203</sup> Merry White, "The Marketing of Adolescence in Japan: Buying and Dreaming," in *Women, Media, and Consumption in Japan* ed. Lise Skov and Brian Moeran (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 266.

<sup>204</sup> Galbraith, 189.

The large format and spiritual landscape of *Picture of Waterfall* connect it to an ancient and immersive Japanese art genre known as the *mandala-etoki* tradition. *Etoki* was a form of visual storytelling delivered by a Buddhist preacher in relation to an immersive mandala composition. A mandala depicted a complex visual interpretation of Buddhist paradises, hells, legends of seminal monks and eventually real pilgrimage routes.<sup>205</sup> The cool and refreshing mountain atmosphere of *Picture of Waterfall* functions as visual embodiment for the Japanese concept of *seishun*, or youth, which can be literally translated as green spring. The combination of the *shojo* motif and this culturally embedded landscape cultivate a vision of a world far removed from social expectations. Since the early eleventh century, the mountain has served and has been depicted as a spiritual retreat within Japanese mandalas. The layering of the *shojo* motif on top of a mandala's visual system allows them to embody sanctified realms located within human and the sacred spheres.

The landscape of *Picture of Waterfall* is comparable to a pilgrimage site known as Kumano located in Japan's southeast coast in its Kii prefecture. This is plausible by the direct translation of the schoolgirls nametags and their correlation to various pilgrimage stations located in historical pilgrimage *mandalas* dedicated to Kumano. By the mid-twelfth century, authoritative publications such as *The Origins of Various Mountains* (1180) recognized the rivers and ponds found at the Kumano pilgrimage site to be able to purify the soul.<sup>206</sup> The "mandala-zation" of Kumano can be found in earlier artworks,

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<sup>205</sup> Ikumi Kaminishi, *Explaining Pictures: Buddhist Propaganda and Etoki Storytelling in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 19.

<sup>206</sup> ten Grotenhuis, 166.

such as the *Nachi Pilgrimage Mandala* (1600). This mandala depicts the route a prospective pilgrim would take in the seventeenth century. An *etoki*, or an oral presenter of mandalas, would create an immersive experience through the retelling of a pilgrimage depicted in such works in front of a large audience. The oral and visual components of the mandala-*etoki* tradition are strikingly similar to the role of an idol's image within the imagination of her admirers. The *etoki-mandala* performance was performed to those who were unable to make a sacred pilgrimage, and therefore, this performance brought the pilgrimage to them. Similarly, the mass advertising and marketing strategies surrounding idols create a public presence that fosters personal connections among the populace through their goods and performances.

The immersive and escapist environment created by idol group performances can also be more privately enjoyed through the media outlet known as idol "image videos." The image video was originally developed to promote company products; however, it was adopted by the idol industry to showcase its girls.<sup>207</sup> Idol image videos serve as a form of non-nude erotica, and present the idol from a first person perspective. These image videos often take place in private settings with a tendency for voyeuristic scenes of the idol in bed or in the shower. An idol is often filmed stripping down into a swimsuit or her underwear, and often proceeds to take up a variety of erotically charged poses for the camera.

In *Picture of Waterfall*, the image of the Japanese schoolgirl is depicted in various poses and activities. The schoolgirls' poses in combination with the ample amounts of

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<sup>207</sup> Galbraith, 195.

exposed skin remind the viewer of media outlets such as image videos when contemplating *Picture of Waterfall*. Japanese male consumers of idol image videos stress a sense of purity within them. They are expected to, “heal and energize them their through their stressful lives.”<sup>208</sup> In this composition, the large crowd of pure and innocent schoolgirls is compared to the equally pure sense of the landscape.

The schoolgirls depicted in this lush landscape embody the Shinto concept of *harai*, or the process of restoring the balance in the natural world. The restoring of this natural balance includes ritualistic practices, such as *misogi*, which is the purification practice of washing one’s body in a sacred water source like the Nachi waterfall; an individual’s inner mind and personal behavior could be cleansed. Therefore, *Picture of Waterfall’s* presentation of schoolgirls bathing in a sacred waterfall emphasizes the complete purity associated with their identity. The abundant clusters of moss found throughout the composition can also be attributed to the practice of *musubi*, which according to Shinto beliefs, is defined as the generating of pure spirit and life. The joyous schoolgirls in *Picture of Waterfall* generate new life and pure spirit symbolized by the abundant patches of moss throughout this piece.

Cultural anthropologist Aoyagi Hiroshi recognizes the role of the Japanese idol as similar to that of a *kami*, or sacred spirit within the nation’s native Shinto religion.<sup>209</sup> The performances and fantasies an idol provides for her fans can be theorized as a form of purification, much like a *kami’s* service of answering the prayers of its followers.

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<sup>208</sup> Galbraith, 196.

<sup>209</sup> Aoyagi, *Islands*, 128.

Kumano's sacred pilgrimage route includes a sacred waterfall known as the Nachi waterfall. The Nachi waterfall is recognized as one of the earliest manifestations of kami worship within Kumano's pilgrimage route. Gradually, Kumano's pilgrimage route gained the title of a "woman's womb," for pilgrim's belief in its strong healing powers.

In the Shinto belief system, kami and humans are believed to take the same form, while the Japanese landscape is believed to be a shared realm for both humans and kami.<sup>210</sup> In *Picture of Waterfall*, each individual schoolgirl serves as a visual marker within a traditional mandala composition. The thirty-nine schoolgirls depicted are pronounced in Japanese as "3+9", or *sankyū*. The phrase *sankyū* is widely used as a pronunciation shortcut for the English phrase "thank you," and endures this image with a sense of appreciation comparable to the appreciation felt by idol fans. Each schoolgirl's nametag has been re-appropriated to serve as a marker for the schoolgirl's location within the pilgrimage route. A detectable pilgrimage path is retraceable through each of the schoolgirls nametags starting with the girl in the lower right corner up until the tall, standing schoolgirl in the upper left corner. The schoolgirl's nametag in the upper left corner reads as *mene*, or summit, which connects her to the small shrine on her right. *Picture of Waterfall's* less apparent pilgrimage route is comparable to the pilgrimage route depicted in the previously mentioned *Nachi Pilgrimage Mandala* (1600).

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<sup>210</sup> Motohisa Yamakage, *The Essence of Shinto: Japan's Spiritual Heart*. (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2006), 118.

In addition to the wide array of religious signifiers present in *Picture of Waterfall*, a number of cultural signifiers are also can also be detected, many originating from Japan's *waka* poetry tradition, and creating another layer of implicit readings. Through the recognition of *kigo*, or seasonal poetic signifiers, "a shared, comprehensive and highly encoded representation of nature as it is related to Japanese everyday life," can be understood.<sup>211</sup>

The visual and emotive *kigo* found throughout *Picture of Waterfall* work to create an ideal embodiment of summer within the Japanese cultural mindset. In comparison to the other three seasons, the season of summer is understood as a transitional period. The first summer *kigo* recognizable in this piece is the *natsu yama*, or summer mountain. A typical summer mountain envisioned by the Japanese cultural mindset revolves around a lush evergreen forest. In *Picture of Waterfall*, the deep evergreen forest that frames and mingles with the schoolgirls includes native Japanese tree varieties such as, Japanese oak, cedar and bamboo, which are all culturally associated with immortality.<sup>212</sup> The immortal symbolism embedded within this natural landscape is equally matched by the youthful invincibility projected by the demeanors of the thirty-nine schoolgirls.

The next distinguishable *kigo* is the *hototogisu*, or smaller cuckoo located in the bottom right corner of the piece. As a migratory bird, the *hototogisu*'s cry serves as the bright and cheerful signifier for summer. This seasonal bird's voice is also associated with love poems, longing, loneliness and irrepressible desires. The *hototogisu*'s strong

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<sup>211</sup> Haruo Shirane, *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), xii.

<sup>212</sup> Shirane, 137.

connotation with love and longing are comparable to typical idol lyrics that focus on first love encounters and painful heartbreak.<sup>213</sup> Directly above the *hototogisu*, a *koi*, or carp breaks free from a schoolgirl's grasp. The *koi* serves as another *kigo* associated with love and romantic relationships through its phonetic pronunciation. *Koi*, in combination with the Japanese word for person, or *hito* is combined to form the word, *koibito*, or lover. In *Picture of Waterfall*, the *koi*'s attempt to climb the rapids is a cultural symbol embedded with ideas of success and social ascent.<sup>214</sup> Lastly, the schoolgirl depicted in the process of changing into her swimsuit refers to the *kigo* known as *koromogae*. *Koromogae*, or the changing into one's summer clothes is another cultural signifier related to the transitional nature of summer within the Japanese mindset.

In addition to the wide variety of *kigo* located in *Picture of Waterfall*, poetic constructs known as *haikai*, or combinations of classical *waka* poetry connotations with pop cultural activities have also been incorporated.<sup>215</sup> For example, since the seventeenth century, *oyogi*, or swimming has become a cultural signifier for summer and is prominently incorporated in *Picture of Waterfall*. The culturally invested summer signifiers in this composition connect the concepts of love, memory, depression, and nostalgia within the image of Japanese schoolgirl. The schoolgirl, or *shojo* functions as her own *kigo* and it's presented as a comforting and healing spirit comparable to the relationship between the contemporary Japanese idol and her followers.

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<sup>213</sup> Shirane, 79.

<sup>214</sup> Shirane, 142.

<sup>215</sup> Shirane, 57.



## The Female Japanese Idol as a Construction of Information

The Japanese idol has increasingly served as a vessel for information.

Postmodern literary critic N. Katherine Hayles identifies the, “dominant contemporary understanding of the body is one of virtuality,” which allows information to become more important than its material forms.<sup>216</sup> This concept of virtuality or an information-based identity has been a part of the Japanese idol’s self-presentation approach since its inception. *Toshindai*, or the “life-sized” presentation aesthetic of most idols, instructs that an idol must produce feelings of solidarity between her audience and herself.<sup>217</sup> According to the guidelines of *toshindai*, an idol must maintain flawless manners, yet remain relatable and accessible to her fans. Therefore, an idol is not expected to appear extremely talented, but rather, hardworking and worthy of encouragement from her loyal fan base. By the 1980s, an idol’s endorsing of fiction and reality resulted in instances of self-parody.

For example, late-1980s idol, Moritaka Chisato grew in popularity through the attention she brought to her image’s own artificiality. Moritaka blatantly exposed her lack of ability and authenticity through album releases like *Hijitsuryoku-ha Sengen*, or *Non-Ability Proclamation* (1989), that proclaimed her complete lack of talent. Although this may seem like a contradictory statement, an idol’s balance between fiction and

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<sup>216</sup> Daniel Black, “Digital Bodies and Disembodied Voices: Virtual Idols and the Virtualized Body,” *Fiberculture Journal* 9 (2006): <http://nine.fiberculturejournal.org/fcj-054-digital-bodies-and-disembodied-voices-virtual-idols-and-the-virtualised-body/>

<sup>217</sup> Aoyagi, *Islands*, 311.

non-fiction is what holds the Japanese idol industry together. By the 1990s, the rapid growth of personal computers and then accessible software allowed consumers of idol culture to modify the last component of their fantasy: the woman who performed the idol. The Japanese idol increasingly served as a vessel for information.

#### Debut of the Japanese Virtual Idol

In the mid-1990s, prominent Japanese idol agencies and software publishers like Horipro and eFrontier launched Japan's first virtual idols. The first known as Kyoko Date, was designed to simulate the already highly constructed identity of a Japanese female idol.<sup>218</sup> Although both a living idol and a virtual idol depended on technology to construct their carefully controlled public personas, a virtual idol could avoid the issue of aging, scandals and tantrums that often threatened the life span of a living idol.<sup>219</sup>

In 1997, eFrontier launched Yuki Terai, a virtual idol based on a fictional comic book character, and a specific subcultural demographic that posed a ready market. Japanese animation producer and lecturer, Okada Toshio identifies virtual idols like Terai as very attractive for "idol otaku," or "possessor(s) of extensive knowledge about particular areas of popular culture" who are specifically attracted to the fictional qualities of living and virtual idols.<sup>220</sup> These virtual female idols allowed for a mental blurring of these living idols with fictional characters.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Black, "*Digital Bodies*"

<sup>219</sup> Black, "*Digital Bodies*"

<sup>220</sup> Aoyagi, *Islands*, 206.

<sup>221</sup> Galbraith, 190.

The fictional personalities of real-life and virtual idols are both avidly consumed by their audiences; however, the degree of an idol's fictive identity has also proved to be a delicate topic. In June 2011, AKB48 debuted its first virtual idol member known as Eguchi Aimi. The first appearance of Eguchi among her idol group members was within a Glico ice cream commercial. The fact that Eguchi's virtual existence was publically unannounced before the airing of this commercial instilled AKB48 fans with feelings of resentment and rage toward the idol group's agency. AKB48 supporters felt embarrassed and played for fools by the idol's management team. AKB48 head producer Akimoto Yasushi dubbed Eguchi as the, "ultimate idol," and defended her as not lacking any of the essential qualities of a living idol.<sup>222</sup> Eguchi Aimi was created through the combining of various physical features from the idol groups living members. This process of constructing a virtual idol through the attributes of other living idols was later made accessible to AKB48 fans via the idol group's website; allowing each fan to create their own "ultimate idol." The dubbing of a purely digital entity as an "ultimate idol" solidifies the utmost importance of an idol's artificiality. A virtual idol's literal construction process equates to an "ultimate fantasy," in which her male consumers exercise complete control over her image.

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<sup>222</sup> Galbraith, 194.

*Jumble of 100 Flowers* (2012)

In Aida Makoto's piece entitled *Jumble of 100 Flowers* (2012), a 200x1750cm long canvas depicts a relentless flood of nude, purple-haired girls running towards the viewer (Figure 8). The colorfully disorienting and pixelated background is reminiscent of a television screen or a virtual world found within a video game. The combination of the *shojo* youthful vitality, naïve joy and near-identical bodies of these *shojo* resembles the production and presentation process of the Japanese contemporary female idol.



Figure 8  
**Aida Makoto (1965-)**  
*Jumble of 100 Flowers*, 2012-2014  
Acrylic on canvas, 200 X 1750 cm  
(Reprinted with permission from Mizuma Gallery, Shinjuku, Tokyo)

The sporadically embedded cross hairs, commonly found in first-person shooter video games, are distinguishable throughout this long and immersive composition. These crosshairs clearly relate to the explosive nature of these virtual figures, and appear at sites where these young girls explode into fireworks of cute cultural signifiers. As each of these girl's bodies are targeted and explode into showers of bubbles, candies, stars,

butterflies, strawberries and flowers they transform into literal symbols associated with Japanese innocence.

Although the general atmosphere is one of cheer, its content is morbidly violent. The wholesale destruction of these *shojo* figures can be contemplated within the short lifespan of the average idol, which typically lasts as long as she appears youthful and innocent. The female idol is presented as a highly marketable commodity that is continuously replaced by younger generations.

By the mid to late 2000s, the highly produced identity of the Japanese female idol shared many similarities with the contemporary Japanese *sarariiman*. As with the submissive idol, the ideal Japanese *sarariiman* was defined as non-aggressive and remained, “quietly determined, respectful to his bosses and never voic[ing] opposition to his managers.”<sup>223</sup> This submissive power struggle experienced by Japanese male workers helped stimulate a revival for the Japanese idol industry, and allowed Japanese *sarariiman* to mentally reclaim their authority over their female counterpart. The preservation of a conservative, postwar-defined male identity was realized through the marketing and promoting of a non-threatening female identity.

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<sup>223</sup> Hirata and Warschauer, 41.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to establish more English language scholarship on the contemporary Japanese artist Aida Makoto. The purpose of this discussion is to present Aida Makoto's work as critically engaging in the discourse of Japanese identity alongside his more internationally well-known peers, such as Murakami Takahashi. It is probable that Aida's work has struggled to find a strong audience in the West particularly for his work's engagement with a visual vocabulary heavily embedded with mass cultural signifiers particular to Japan, as well as his trademark presentation style of more shocking and disturbing compositions than his contemporaries. While Aida's contemporaries like Murakami and his artist management company, Kaikai Kiki Co. Ltd.'s work have been introduced to the Western art market as heavily embedded within mass cultural vocabularies, their visual depictions have been recognized as more marketable and digestible to larger Western audiences.

Aida Makoto has employed the culturally and historically embedded image of the Japanese *shojo* throughout his artistic career as a way to chronicle the great societal changes of Japan's first and second "lost decades." The *shojo* is commonly defined as a female individual at the societal crossroads between adolescence and adulthood. While male social critics cast the *shojo* in the 1980s as a culturally defined signifier for consumption, commodification and narcissism, the *shojo* has also been more positively perceived as one of the freest social segments in Japanese society. The cultural concept of the *shojo* has gradually gained an understanding of being neither grounded in the male or female body, "but rather [as] something importantly detached from the productive

economy of heterosexual reproduction.”<sup>224</sup> Therefore, as a liminal and transformative concept of identity, the *shojo* has come to serve as a symbol that is either criticized or celebrated within Japanese contemporary society.

In unison with historical production of “the girl” as a site for society’s struggle with important issues of modernity, Aida Makoto’s engagement with the transformative sign of the *shojo* has been discussed through this study’s three chapters.<sup>225</sup> In Chapter One the consumerist image of the *shojo* is explored as an embodiment of Japanese society as a whole as Japan’s prosperous global image is broken down through economic, political and historical transitions. Chapter Two retraced the *shojo*’s social transformation from a cute, demure and culturally condoned image of femininity, to a cool and confident individual within the media’s proclaimed “women’s decade” of the mid to late 1990s. The *shojo*, or more specifically the Japanese schoolgirl movement referred to as the “*kogyaru* trend,” is comparatively contemplated against the backdrop of Japan’s declining employment rates and breakdown of its national education system. Lastly in Chapter Three, the *shojo* image returns to a conservative presentation of artificial femininity and discussed in context with Japan’s media-driven idol industry.

While the image of the *shojo* is depicted throughout Aida’s images discussed in this study, it is important to remember that the *shojo* sign tells a story of the gender relations, historical transitions and media consumption trends that creates a complete

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<sup>224</sup> John Whittier Treat, “Yoshitomo Banana Writes Home: *Shojo* Culture and the Nostalgic Subject,” in *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture: Gender, Shifting Boundaries and Global Cultures*, ed. D. P. Martinez (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 205.

<sup>225</sup> Sharalyn Orbaugh, “Busty Battin’ Babes: The Evolution of the *Shojo* in 1990’s Visual Culture,” in *Gender and Power in the Japanese Visual Field*, eds. Joshua S. Mostow, Norman Bryson and Maribeth Graybill (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 206.

understanding of Japanese identity. The future role of the *shojo* can be contemplated by its growing global recognition within various media outlets imported throughout Asia. Beginning in the 1980s through the 1990s, Japan's cultural presence in Asia had become more extensive, advertising Japanese female idols as, "symbols of transcendence," for these economically developing countries to follow as "lifestyle models."<sup>226</sup> The consumption of Japanese products was revered as a means of projecting oneself into a modern and dynamic world. This importation of Japanese media culture has arisen a debate on whether this flow of "lifestyle models," should be guarded against as a form of cultural imperialism or a result of the swiftly globalizing world.

In regards to the importation of Japanese idol media throughout Asia, film scholar Christopher Howard argues from a production-oriented standpoint that the Japanese idol industry emphasis on quantity in marketing strategies hinders the industry's potential for transnationalizing its idol subjects.<sup>227</sup> Asian literalist Leo Ching stresses in regards to Japan's consumer connections with Taiwan that a "scrutiny of the system versus [an] individual constituent" is paramount within today's global economy. Ching's study of Taiwanese-Japanese cultural exchange in the 1990s up until the present recognizes Japan's economic prowess in Taiwan in relation to Taiwanese producers' eagerness to imitate Japanese cultural products for profit.<sup>228</sup> The area of Japanese popular music

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<sup>226</sup> Hiroshi Aoyagi, *Islands of Eight Million Smiles: Idol Performance and Symbolic Production in Contemporary Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), 223.

<sup>227</sup> Christopher Howard, "National Idols? The Problem of Transnationalizing Film Stardom in Japan's Idol Economy," in *East Asian Film Stars*, eds. Leung Wing-Fai and Andy Willis, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 57.

<sup>228</sup> Leo Ching, "Imaginings in the Empires of the Sun: Japanese Mass Culture in Asia," In *Contemporary Japan and popular culture*, ed. John Whittier Treat (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 177.



encompassing Japanese idols is the number one imitated outlet of Japanese media throughout the Newly Industrialized Economies or NIE, which include countries like China, Indonesia and the Philippines.<sup>229</sup>

Young people within Asian countries consider Japanese popular culture as a source of new trends, and consume Japanese products like idol music to establish valued self-identity. Contemporary Japanese artist and scholar Shimada Yoshiko is concerned with the younger generations of these Asian countries disregard of history, and argues that Japanese cultural and political institutions use the popularity of these products to suit their own agendas.<sup>230</sup> For example, throughout the late 2000s the Japanese government elected a number of “cartoon cultural ambassadors” to broadcast a friendly and nonthreatening image.

In 2009, the *kawaii taishi*, or “ambassadors of cute,” were comprised of three trendy young Japanese girls who were recognized as important ambassadors of a marketable and unthreatening international image.<sup>231</sup> The *kawaii taishi* are symbolic of what anthropologist Christine Yano argues as Japan’s “pink globalization,” or the nation’s widespread distribution and consumption of Japanese cute goods.<sup>232</sup>

In alignment with McGray’s recognition of “Japan’s gross national cool,” in 2002, referring to the growing popularity of anime (cartoons), manga (comics) internationally, and Nye’s “soft power” theory, recognizing Japan’s contemporary economic prowess

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<sup>229</sup> Ching, 170.

<sup>230</sup> Yoshiko Shimada, “Japanese Pop Culture and the Eradication of History,” In *Consuming Bodies: Sex and Contemporary Japanese Art*, ed. Fran Lloyd (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 188.

<sup>231</sup> Christine Yano, “Wink on Pink: Interpreting Japanese Cute as It Grabs the Global Headlines,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 68 (2009): 685.

<sup>232</sup> Yano, 683.

deriving from its “ability to indirectly influence behavior or interests through cultural or ideological means,” Yano recognizes this feminized visual language of cute as Japan’s current course of re-masculinizing its national image. Shimada combats the claim of Japanese superiority based off of the success of its popular culture and instead urges for the creation of “a new way of thinking about social and political issues,” one that “is aware of the complex nuances of difference through the positioning of gender, class and sexuality.”<sup>233</sup>

Aida Makoto’s works featured in this study were chosen on account of their continual engagement with the *shojo* sign as a highly intertextual cultural signifier. Relatable to Roland Barthes’ “code of connotation” and de Certeau’s ‘ways of operating’ Aida simultaneously presents the cultural sign of the *shojo* within Japanese political, historical, social and mass cultural narratives, while infusing his images with his own artistic statement. In this study, Aida’s works have been reduced to a system of significations, with the *shojo* at the center of a culturally and historically charged visual narrative. An artwork by Aida accomplishes this by the “composition of the image evoking the memory or innumerable alimentary paintings,” films, political events and social trends that send the viewer to an “aesthetic signified.”<sup>234</sup> The compositions featured in this discussion continuously connect to and present a timeline of Japanese art history, therefore grounding the image of the *shojo* within the history and heavily cultural system of signifiers.

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<sup>233</sup> Shimada, 189-90.

<sup>234</sup> Roland Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” In *The visual culture reader*, eds. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 2002), 136.

Similar to the manner in which Guy Debord writes of postwar visual culture—what he calls “the spectacle”—the *shojo* is “not [just] a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.”<sup>235</sup> It is hoped that this preliminary study of Aida Makoto in English and the multiple possible interpretations of the *shojo* image itself will intrigue and inspire more researchers to participate in this academic discussion dedicated to the better understanding of the artist’s work outside of Japan.

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<sup>235</sup> Guy Debord, “The Society of the Spectacle, In *The visual culture reader*, eds. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 2002), 142.

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