

FLATLANDERS

SASKATCHEWAN ARTISTS ON THE HORIZON





Every day, hundreds of people all around the world view Yuka Yamaguchi's drawings via her website, *plastique monkey*. A new mother, Yamaguchi spends most of her time at home, taking care of her baby son, Elijah, and drawing when he "allows." (Yamaguchi's website contains another section titled, simply, *baby*, which holds literally hundreds of photographs of Elijah in action). Yet despite her international profile, Yamaguchi feels her web presence has lent her work a nice layer of anonymity.

"People who see my images on the web don't know who I am," explains the artist, who also frequently exhibits her drawings at street festivals, where she sits with her work and meets everyone who comes by. "On the web, they can't tell if the artist is old or young, male or female, Asian or Western," she states.

Yamaguchi's work lends itself well to this ambiguity. Her images are full of contradictions and mixed emotions. They often include what might be perceived as bodily violence or desecration of some sort, such as chopped off limbs, misplaced organs, or animals bursting through a human's flesh. Yet there is also a kind of lightness pervading all the drawings, a sense of playfulness and even peace. It is hard to tell if the drawings "mean" anything; instead, they create a mood.

Yamaguchi lived for a short time in Winnipeg, where drawing rose to prominence in the late 1990s with the work of Marcel Dzama and other members of the Royal Art Lodge. Dzama's small-scale ink and watercolor drawings of human figures, animals, and imaginary hybrids share an unsettling quality with Yamaguchi's work. Like Dzama's early drawings, Yamaguchi's work is both darkly comic and hermetic—her figures float in air, devoid of context like landscape or setting. Yet Yamaguchi says she was not influenced by the Winnipeg artists. Perhaps the similarities can be attributed to the fact that the artists are from the same generation, one in which many people prioritize individual, psychological experiences over collective or public concerns. In this regard, Surrealism plays a major role in shaping the field of possibilities for such drawings.

"My images are very personal and tend to come to me spontaneously, when I'm cleaning the house or taking a shower or doing something ordinary," Yamaguchi explains. "They might all be self-portraits of some kind or another, responding to an experience or sensation or dream I've had." She points to one drawing where a crab's claw protrudes from the eye of a young girl. "This image came to me spontaneously when I got shampoo in my eyes while showering. It hurt!" Once an image occurs to Yamaguchi, she sits down and tries to recreate it faithfully.

Yamaguchi has been drawing since she was a child, but only began pursuing it as a serious activity about three years ago. She's entirely self-taught, and doesn't look much at other artists' work or at art history. She draws primarily with coloured pencils, calling them "adorable—anybody can use them if they want to." Even in the way Yamaguchi talks about her work, there is an almost Warholian elusiveness. Perhaps as a nod to her current home province, she asserts: "Art is like being a farmer. I'm farming my brain and my heart and my hand to grow something. After that, it's up to other people to cook it in different recipes and digest it for themselves."

Yuka Yamaguchi was born in Kobe, Japan. She moved to Canada in 2000, and now lives in Saskatoon. Along with drawings, she makes "useless toys for adult-children." Yamaguchi's art blog and online gallery have been accessed from all over the world. Her drawings have been exhibited nationally and internationally, including galleries in Tokyo, Los Angeles, New York, and Berlin.

Yuka Yamaguchi, clockwise from top left:

I Can See Better, 2008; *It's Harvest Time*, 2008; *The Sound of Silence*, 2008; *Rendezvous*, 2008.

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