

All she can see

Local artist Yuka Yamaguchi sets to expand and revamp her online gallery of artwork and “useless toys for adult-children”

“ALL I CAN SEE”

“In my drawing, a boy is having breasts sewn over his eyes. He’s happy about it. He is being made more feminine. Usually, that means taking something away (castration). But this is an addition, not a subtraction. I think femininity, including traditional parts like motherhood, is a positive thing. Men and women are both better off if they can be feminine. Not instead of other things, but in addition to them.”

— taken from *plastiquemonkey.com*



FELICIA CHEN
Arts Writer

Yuka Yamaguchi is, among other things, a purveyor of pure, unadulterated imagination. Her creations feature all that is in her mind the moment colour pencil touches paper. Many depict a girl-child that is tentatively a representation of herself; the persona appears to stroll through Yamaguchi’s musings and observations.

Yamaguchi explained in her interview with the Sheaf, “In a way... everything I do is me. In terms of drawing, even a man figure is me, but that doesn’t mean I’m trying to create myself in a man’s form. It just ends up feeling like it’s me... In the piece I call “Self-Portrait, Age 17” (see B2) I didn’t look like that at all. Her school uniform is from my high school, though. I wrote ‘the students weren’t allowed to hold a dead fish in their mouths’. Japanese high schools are strict that way. Some people seem to take it seriously, but it’s obviously a joke.”

Yamaguchi’s approach also stems from good humour and fun.

“I laugh a lot when I’m drawing,” said Yamaguchi. Simply put, as far as art is concerned, Yamaguchi’s philosophy is to have no philosophy at all. Said Yamaguchi “there’s no plan, it just happens on the paper. Sometimes indentations in the paper tell you where to go.” This sentiment is easily seen in her work, with its jigsaw-puzzle-like process, pieces are put together as they fit or as they emerge.

Yamaguchi’s artwork seems, at first, a portfolio containing images that span the space between the cute and the surreal. Yamaguchi considers her art technique ‘old school’, using colour pencils and ballpoint pens for the majority of her work. Used not only for the effect they produce, Yamaguchi feels a warmth and attach-

ment to the instruments she uses to create her art.

“Colour pencils, even kids use [them]. It’s familiar, it’s reachable, but there are so many things you can do with them. So many possibilities in a pencil. I like pencils because they’re so humble.”

Delicate pencil crayon drawings that Tim Burton would lust after depict tween-looking girls with lobster or fish poking out of their eye sockets. Some of the more popular works are “My Secret Elephant Recipe” (an elephant’s head gets gently coaxed out of a smiling girl-child’s naked abdomen) and “Happy-Muscle-Knitting: Art Recipe” (a girl sits calmly braiding the muscles of her right leg). Yamaguchi also expresses her imagination in other artistic media such as photography, children’s books, and calligraphy.

A purveyor of pure, unadulterated imagination

YUKA continued from page B1

Her work, now seen by roughly one hundred visitors daily (expressed Yamaguchi, "I get comments from people from all over the world. People are looking at my drawings from their study rooms or living rooms or wherever – a gallery in everyday life. I like that.") on a not so old school website, showcases Yamaguchi's idiosyncratic observations on the world, the highly personal images engineered first and foremost for the creator herself.

"My life as an 'artist' [and] my drawings have rapidly become public this year... [It's] exciting that so many people are interested in what I'm doing, but I still manage to draw without worrying about what people will think. I wouldn't even know how to draw something to please anybody else but me."

Of plastiquemonkey.com Yamaguchi said, "my website is my gallery. I can post my new drawings as soon as I finish them. I don't need to wait forever for a gallery to accept my work." On more traditional methods of displaying her work, the fledgling artist responded, "I like doing gallery shows too, but I miss a sense of everyday life. I draw at home on my 1960's kitchen table. I don't have a studio, so I want my drawings to be in someone else's everyday life. In Kingston, I did a show in a café... that was great. My drawings were in the background, visible and invisible... People could talk about them if they wanted to, or ignore them totally; much better than at gallery shows where everyone has to make a big deal of 'looking at the art'. They always cross their arms and nod."

As things pick up with Yamaguchi's presence not only in the local art scene, but also on her web domain, she explained, "I've been trying to show my drawings to the public as much as possible. I'd never shown anything in public until two years ago. Now I take part in every local festival, street fair, and gallery show I can find. I've been open to new projects, like designing

a t-shirt for the CFCR fundraiser and my work is constantly available on my blog and on Flickr."

With the increasing traffic, "my blog is getting a makeover" said Yamaguchi. "There will be a new gallery and an online shop. It's all intended to make it easier for people to see my work, and for people outside Saskatoon to buy it, if they like... [My husband] Paul is working hard on designing it. Everything is being done from our apartment, so I have complete control over how my work is presented. I connect with people directly (as much as you can online), without someone presenting or representing me."

Only recently, Yamaguchi decided to more formally launch an art career after a lifetime of drawing on and off primarily for the joy she found in the artistic pursuit.

"Ever since I was three years old, my grandma gave me some paper and I just drew for fun," said Yamaguchi. Recounting another story of happy childhood doodling, Yamaguchi reminisces, "in elementary school, sometimes when you take a test, and you have extra time you can draw on the back, on the blank side. I drew so much cool stuff, because I wasn't trying to make something [and] it was so fun!"

With no formal training, Yamaguchi's work continues in that vein to this day.



"I don't want to draw a perfect object and think I'm an artist; it's not necessary to me. Like when I was drawing a letter to my friend it was the best thing ever because I was so happy to be writing to her. If I don't remember how much fun it is to draw I can get trapped into drawing for my technique alone."

Kingston, Ontario first offered Yamaguchi a chance to take her then-hobby more seriously. After encouraging results, Yamaguchi decided to pursue a future in art more vigorously. With wonder and bewilderment, Yamaguchi explained, "the reaction was huge. There were 300 artists (6000 people came to the show) in the park [where it was held], [and] people kept

"SELF-PORTRAIT, AGE 17"

"This was my school uniform in high school. I didn't usually carry a dead fish in my mouth, because that was prohibited at my school. Japanese schools are very strict."

– taken from plastiquemonkey.com

coming back to see my work...it was really encouraging and I was so touched," Yamaguchi emphasized, "that I kept going."

After getting to know Yamaguchi, it becomes easy to see that the simple label of 'local artist' slips and slides on Yamaguchi, futilely trying to pin itself on a person unwilling to hold still.

Literally speaking, Yamaguchi is indeed a local, having relocated from Kingston, Ontario a year ago last Canada Day with her husband of five years. Originally, the artist hails from Kobe, Japan.

But with her work being viewed primarily on plastiquemonkey.com, the artist's audience is global, making her physical location almost moot in terms of her work. 'Local' never seemed so inappropriate.

As far as the word 'artist' is concerned, Yamaguchi is hard-pressed to confirm her burgeoning status as one. Sitting in her kitchen in her downtown apartment, Yamaguchi mused, "[Being an 'artist'] is not as important as actually creating things." Likening the experience to any other sort of categorization, Yamaguchi informed, "When people call me 'artist', it's nice, but I feel uncomfortable just like I feel uncomfortable when people say 'she's Japanese' to describe me. Yes, I'm Japanese, but as soon as the word comes out, my instinct is to say, 'not really.'" Turning the interviewing tables, Yamaguchi asked a question, though decidedly rhetorical, "That's kind of sad, isn't it? It's like there is no possibility beyond the category. You and I have more possibilities than the categories that people fit you in. We are full of possibilities, that's why there is no ceiling in the sky."