



**THOSE WASCALLY WABBITS:** Momoyo Torimitsu's vibrant, 16-foot-tall inflatable bunnies both delight and frighten. 'Even work that looks juvenile is somewhat harrowing,' says curator Susan Talbott.

COURTESY OF NORTON MUSEUM OF ART

## Artists 'toon in

**Making art from cartoon figures today is like 'painting a Madonna in the Renaissance.'**

By **Carol Strickland** | Special to The Christian Science Monitor

**NEW YORK** - A recent boom in contemporary art is actually more of a bang! boom! as cartoon imagery explodes in new work seen in museums these days. Judging from how often characters from the comics pop up, artists have no problem staying 'toonied to their inner child to explore grown-up subjects.

When Pop artists Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol first used cartoon images like Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck to create fine art in the 1960s, it was shocking.

"Working with comics as imagery was implicitly an affront," says Lawrence Rinder, curator of contemporary art at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art. Now, the distinction between high and low is a non-issue. Borrowing from pop culture "is completely acceptable, a part of the normative language of artmaking," according to Mr. Rinder.

Which is not to say artists are dumbing down their ambitions. They tackle highbrow subjects like identity and morality with lowbrow tools like Snoopy or Spider-Man.

Making art from cartoon figures today "is like painting a Madonna in the Renaissance," says Mr. Rinder. With cultural literacy at a low ebb, a riff on Superman communicates more universally than Bible stories, mythology, or fairy tales. Archie and Veronica have become our Aries and Venus.

US artists whose work reflects cartoon influence include established artists like Elizabeth Murray, who paints exploded cartoonish shapes in Day-Glo colors. A younger generation includes Arturo Herrera, who fractures Disney fairy tales under an abstract overlay.

"It's hard to be a figurative artist today and not be influenced by comics and cartoons," says Laura Hoptman, curator of contemporary art for the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. "We keep going back to figures who embody basic attributes of human experience," says Bernard Welt, a professor at Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington, D.C. "Artists today feel comfortable venerating Mickey Mouse or the Road Runner, indomitable figures who hit something archetypal."

The legacy of comics influences artists of "all generations," Rinder says, "and in the younger generation it's even more pronounced."

"You covet what you see," says Cindy Workman, a New York artist who uses Batman and the Lone Ranger in her work. "It's natural to reflect on things in the media, chew on it, and spit it out."

Artists use the potent graphic style of cartoons in various ways. Some transform existing cartoon imagery. Others employ the visual conventions, such as sequential narrative; symbolic color; dialogue balloons; flat, exaggerated forms; and the "pow! zap!" vocabulary.

"Some are just having a lot of fun," says Valerie Cassel, curator at Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum, "while others explore character as a novelist would."

Ms. Workman, whose art is on display at Lennon, Weinberg, a gallery in New York's SoHo, uses comic-strip imagery to investigate gender roles. She grew up reading superhero and romance comics, fascinated by the way men and women were depicted. "The Donna Reed mentality impacted me - the role-playing [that] one is expected to do and the reality," she says. Using ready-made images facilitates communication. "There's a history there - an instantaneous recognition."

In "Whap" (2003), Workman superimposes a "found" drawing of the Lone Ranger adjusting his mask over a photograph of a nude woman, with the word "Whap!" in red and a burst of yellow lines. She explains, "It's very bright and happy looking on the

surface, but when you really look, the subject is intense."

Using comics "brings humor to things that are serious," she says, "and helps us get through them."

"Humor is very important when you are looking at art because it becomes very accessible," Meredith Allen explains in a text panel beside her photograph of Snoopy (created out of ice cream) in an exhibition, "Comic Release: Negotiating Identity for a New Generation," shown earlier this month at the New Orleans' Contemporary Arts Center.

It quotes Mort Walker, creator of Beetle Bailey: "Cartoons make the worst of our experiences bearable by putting them into a humorous perspective. Comic characters become our friends because they share our problems and remind us of our universal humanity."

The exhibition "Splat Boom Pow! The Influence of Cartoons in Contemporary Art" has been packing them in at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston. "We set a record at the opening," says Ms. Cassel, adding, "The visitors are all ages."

Visitors see David Sandlin's "Sin-occhio," an irreverent take on a familiar Disney character, and Polly Apfelbaum's "Townsville," a collage reflecting the Powerpuff Girls. Children appreciate the playful forms and vivid colors, while adults, she says, "bring their own life experience and can appreciate what it has to say."

The art movement is homegrown and influenced from abroad. Japanese animé, seen in video games, TV series, movies, and in comic books (or *manga*), have attained cult status in Japan. The movement hit the US in the 1980s and '90s (Hello Kitty and Pokémon, for example) and now enjoys "worldwide popularity," says Glenn Tomlinson, curator of education at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Fla., where an exhibition on contemporary art and Japanese animation has been showing. Hayao Miyazaki's "Spirited Away" won the 2002 Academy Award for Best Animated Feature.

Since "cartoon" and "comics" hardly spark the same kind of intimidating feelings as the terms "museums" and "contemporary art" among mainstream America, these exhibits are drawing larger crowds than normal. Susan Talbott, co-curator of "My Reality," which originated at the Des Moines Art Center, called the public reaction "enormous," saying the exhibit brought in nearly twice the usual number of visitors.

Artists use cartoon material in various ways. Their work can be playful and entertaining - an homage to comics - or ironic, satirical, and critical. It's art, according to Jeff Fleming, co-curator of "My Reality," "because it possesses the ability to transform us."

Comics "are our contemporary fairy tales," says Cassel. She cites the misadventures of Homer Simpson, through whom "we learn right from wrong."

Some artists critique consumer culture. Tom Sachs's "Hello Kitty" sculpture is an assemblage of commercial merchandise. Another approach explores feelings of helplessness.

"The idea of empowerment and transformation pervades the work," says Mr. Tomlinson. Artists such as Dara Birnbaum and Jennifer Zackin, for example, manipulate Wonder Woman to debate power politics.

Some Japanese artists dissect the aesthetic of "cuteness." "Even work that looks juvenile is somewhat harrowing," says Ms. Talbott. She cites Momoyo Torimitsu's 16-foot-tall, inflatable pink bunnies looming over museum visitors.

Well-known Japanese artists Yoshimoto Nara and Takashi Murakami create animé-derived characters in vibrant color. Mr. Murakami's psychedelic mushrooms, dotted with eyeballs, and his character DOB (indebted to Mickey Mouse), are visually appealing, slickly surreal. They play on the innocence and trauma of childhood.

The works created by these artists draw on a collective visual inventory of cartoon characters ranging from cute to corrosive.

"We're looking for something greater than ourselves in these uncertain times," Cassel says. "Contemporary society is so volatile and unpredictable, we need mythology."

"It's what gets us through the day," she said. "That, and a cup of coffee."