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Shōjo, Kawaii, and Yōkai Iconographies in Chiho Aoshima's *Strawberry Fields* and How They Relate to Contemporary Gender Dynamics in Japan

By Neo Sim Yee

SHŌJO, KAWAII, AND YŌKAI ICONOGRAPHIES IN CHIHO AOSHIMA'S *STRAWBERRY FIELDS* AND HOW THEY RELATE TO CONTEMPORARY GENDER DYNAMICS IN JAPAN

by

Neo Sim Yee

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in

Art History and Visual Culture

at

Lindenwood University

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Art and Design Department in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Art History at Lindenwood University

By

Neo Sim Yee

Singapore

November 2023

Abstract

SHŌJO, KAWAII, AND YŌKAI ICONOGRAPHIES IN CHIHO AOSHIMA'S *STRAWBERRY FIELDS* AND HOW THEY RELATE TO CONTEMPORARY GENDER DYNAMICS IN JAPAN

Neo Sim Yee, Master of Art History and Visual Culture, 2023

Thesis Directed by: Dr. Jonathan Frederick Walz, PhD

This paper analyzes the shōjo, kawaii, and yōkai iconographies in Chiho Aoshima's digital painting *Strawberry Fields* and examines how they relate to contemporary gender dynamics and anxieties in Japan. The painting bears the artist's distinctive, characteristic style, which includes elements that are childlike and monstrous, cute and dark. The work, rich in layered context, simultaneously reminisces about the innocence and freedom of adolescence, and critiques the prominent the unequal, rigid, and highly restrictive gender roles dictated by the Japanese patriarchal system. The distinct two halves of *Strawberry Fields* depict the dichotomous vision of Japanese women—innocent and girly versus defiant and subversive. Through the two female humanoid figures inspired by traditional yōkai, the artist expresses strong sentiments against the dependence and dominance of men on women in Japanese society. The painting offers a window of escapism and solace from reality by celebrating a temporary freedom from established norms and order. Imbued with Japanese popular cultural codes and folk beliefs, the work offers a uniquely Japanese experience. *Strawberry Fields* appeals to Japanese and non-Japanese, as well as male and female, viewers alike. The image's appeal derives from the fact that the sense of oppression and constraint under the patriarchal system, and the desire to free oneself from the binding social norms imposed by the system is universal across culture, gender, and nationality.

Acknowledgements

A special thank you to Kok Wai and Ashley for their constant support and understanding, and for giving me the time and space I need. I would also like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Jonathan Walz, for his invaluable guidance and warm, cheery encouragement throughout this process, without which the journey would have been very different. I would also like to express my heartfelt appreciation to my committee members, Prof. Scheffer and Dr. Olsen for their direction and advice on my research.

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Introduction

Chiho Aoshima (b. 1974) is one of the first and one of the most well-known female artists of the Superflat contemporary art movement. She expresses complex layered content in childlike cuteness, making her works simultaneously endearing and intriguing. Shona Martyn lauds Aoshima as a "Japanese art star" and highlights the distinctive characteristic of Aoshima's works:

> signature doe-eyed 'little girls' who exhibit both 'cuteness and darkness at the same time.' Despite their doll-like demeanor, they are powerful comments on the interaction between humans and the natural and spiritual world, concepts that are closely entwined in Japan.[1]

According to the founder of the Superflat movement, Takashi Murakami, Aoshima's style "is based on innocent and spiritual ideas sandwiched in the mixture of [sic] an outsider art context and the cultural complexes of post-war Japan…this, then, snugly fits into a feminine, spiritual world that is an area of calm air amidst the context-ridden, testosterone-filled worldview of contemporary art."[2] To better understand Aoshima's works, it is necessary to have a some understanding of the Superflat movement.

Superflat art, which propelled Japanese postmodernism into the international spotlight, often incorporates elements from manga (comic books and graphic novels originating from Japan) and anime (animation originating from Japan) as well as images from traditional Japanese woodblock prints. Cute characters permeate and dominate almost every part of Japanese consumer culture, particularly the works of Superflat artists. The motifs from Japanese popular culture that populate the landscapes in Superflat art are generally regarded

[1]Shona Martyn, "Cute and Dark: The Magical World of Japanese Art Star Chiho Aoshima," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 25, 2019, https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/cute-and-dark-the-magical-world-of-japanese-art-star-chiho-aoshima-20191017-p531iz.html.

[2]Takashi Murakami, "Little Miss Gravestone of a Metropolis," Kaikai Kiki Gallery, n.d., http://en.gallery-kaikaikiki.com/2016/07/state_rebirth-of-the-world/.

as *kawaii* (Japanese style of cuteness), and their juxtaposition with traditional Japanese images gave rise to an art form that many scholars argue lie between high and low art.

On one hand, the confusing mixture of pop and traditional images in Superflat art is sometimes mistakenly associated with superficiality.[3] Noi Sawaragi, for example, claims that Japanese neo-pop art is produced by sampling and remixing a wide range of consumer junk found in the "passified [sic] US-dependent lives" of the Japanese after the Americans pulled out of Japan.[4] Kawaii motifs inspired by Japanese pop culture are also thought to conflict with the anti-aesthetic ideas of social critique under postmodern theory. However, other scholars believe that there is some kind of power hidden beneath the palatable aesthetics of Superflat art,[5] and that, under the guise of its visual appeal, Superflat art makes commentary on Japanese culture and society.[6] This view is strongly encouraged by Murakami, who on many occasions has sought to explain the movement to non-Japanese viewers. In an interview with *TimeOut*, he offers this explanation on the term "Superflat":

> Initially, when I started using the word, it was about the visual; how as opposed to the western 3D composition of a painting, Japanese painting really had these multiple points of view and a painting structure that was flat. But I gradually started coming to think that the social structure and the dynamism that formed the structure is the Superflat. Now I think more about the social aspect of Superflat.[7]

Since the Superflat movement started, scholars have studied it from Marxist, social critical, gender, and psychoanalytical perspectives.

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[3]Douglas McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy*, November 11, 2009, https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/11/japans-gross-national-cool/

[4]Adrian Favell, *Before and After Superflat: A Short History of Japanese Contemporary Art 1990-2011* (Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher Limited, 2012), 19.

[5]Favell, *Before and After*, 45.

[6]Michael Darling, "Plumbing the Depths of Superflatness" *Art Journal* 60, no. 3 (2001): 77. https://doi.org/10.2307/778139.

[7]Ben Netzue, "Takashi Murakami and Japan's Mystical Monsters Come Face to Face in this Exhibition," *TimeOut,* November 8, 2019, https://www.timeout.com/sydney/news/takashi-murakami-and-japans-mystical-monsters-come-face-to-face-in-this-exhibition-110819.

While the Superflat movement is attributed by some scholars to the infantilization of Japanese society and the identity crisis among Japanese men following Japan's defeat in World War II, most of these claims focus on the works of male Superflat artists and their perceived male audiences. Female Superflat artists tend to use different motifs from their male counterparts, often foregrounding *shōjo* (pre-adolescent girl) and *kawaii* (cute) creatures. There is, however, comparatively less scholarship examining the use of such iconographies by female Superflat artists. This study will address the current gap in the field of Superflat study through close reading of selected works by Aoshima, which are characterized by kawaii, shōjo, and *yōkai* (traditional Japanese spirits, demons, monsters, or other supernatural phenomena) iconographies. It will be made evident that these iconographies reflect the modern Japanese woman's rejection of, wish to escape from, anxiety, resentment, and resignation towards the traditional gender roles imposed upon them by the patriarchal society.

Aoshima fills imaginary landscapes in her works exclusively with young female beings and kawaii creatures, which reflects a cultural trend in Japanese pop art. As noted by Adrian Favell, works of art like those by Aoshima cement "the peculiar and often salacious impression of the contemporary visual arts in Japan as dominated by representations of and by young girls."[8] Many scholars believe that such motifs reflect hidden fears, fantasy, desires, and an escapist mindset. Emily Wakeling, for example, argues that "pursuing the question of women's place in an indifferent universe…became an especially vital medium of spiritual healing and empowerment for adolescent girls."[9] In Japanese literature, manga, and anime,

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[8]Adrian Favell, "Resources, Scale, and Recognition in Japanese Contemporary Art: 'Tokyo Pop' and the Struggle for a Page in Art History," *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 26, (December 2014): 146. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43945795.

[9]Emily Jane Wakeling, "Girls are Dancin': Shōjo Culture and Feminism in Contemporary Japanese Art," *New Voices in Japanese Studies*, 5 (2011): 136. http://dx.doi.org/10.21159/nv.05.06.

shōjo often refers to a stereotypical wide-eyed, mostly innocent and vulnerable-looking preadolescent girl who is gifted with unnatural powers that help her to accomplish what are otherwise unachievable by someone of her age and gender. Wakeling and Midori Matsui claim that shōjo-centered works reference "the subversive qualities of shōjo science-fiction"[10] and should hence be studied in the context of feminism and gender dynamics.

Kawaii can be understood as cuteness, particularly that associated with anime and consumer culture. Art and social critics have examined Superflat art from gender perspectives based on kawaii motifs. For example, Yuko Hasegawa claims that being drawn to cute imagery, such as those in Superflat art, reflects a poorly formed identity among Japanese men. As a consequence of this weak sense of self, Japanese men desire both protection from a motherly figure and sexual gratification from non-threatening females. Japanese women are thereby forced to take on the dual roles in the same relationship, offering both maternal comfort and passive submission to male sexual overtures with shōjo-like innocence.[11] Many scholars also argue that kawaii elements suggest deferral of transition to adulthood among women,[12] presumably stemming from the reluctance to take on the associated social responsibilities.

Some scholars note that kawaii motifs have the potential to incorporate darker themes. Ivan Vartanian believes that kawaii motifs can facilitate access to darker human qualities, and kawaii characters act as loci of emotion and identification.[13] Hence, there is potential for uncovering gender anxieties through the examination of kawaii elements in Superflat art.

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[10]Wakeling, "Girls are Dancin'," 136.

[11]Yuko Hasegawa, "Post-Identity Kawaii: Commerce, Gender and Contemporary Japanese Art," in *Consuming Bodies: Sex and Contemporary Japanese Art*, ed. Fran Lloyd (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2002), 128.

[12]Marilyn Ivy, "The Art of Cute Little Things: Nara Yoshitomo's Parapolitics," *Mechademia* 5 (2010): 19, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41510955.

[13]Ivan Vartanian, *Drop Dead Cute* (United States: Chronicle Books, 2005), 11.

However, current studies on kawaii and shōjo motifs remain limited, generalized, and lacking in substantial supporting evidence from the works of specific artists. Through in-depth analysis of selected works of Chiho Aoshima, this study aims to provide more insights on the kawaii and shōjo iconographies used and the gender dynamics and gender anxieties reflected therein.

A hitherto relatively unexamined aspect of Aoshima's works is the yōkai iconography. Many scholars believe that yōkai has metamorphosized in contemporary pop culture into aesthetically pleasing, cute, wide-eyed creatures. In its present-day form, yōkai continues to reflect the realities of modern society and its related traumas and anxieties. In an interview about her sources of inspiration, Aoshima explains that she believes in souls and spirits in nature, "which connects to the yōkai tradition."[14] In another interview about her exhibition *Rebirth of the World*, Aoshima credited Katsushika Hokusai, especially his art depicting *yōkai*, as her main influence from the pantheon of Japanese art.[15] Examining the kawaii imaginary creatures in the artist's works as evolved forms of yōkai can presumably uncover the fear, anxiety, and distress, in particular those related to gender, expressed either consciously or unconsciously in the artist's works.

The first part of the study comprises a review of existing scholarship on the appeal of Superflat art in general, as well as the use of shōjo, kawaii, and yōkai iconographies by female Superflat artists, including Aoshima. The second part of the study seeks to uncover the artist's misgivings, anxieties, and fear towards the gender-specific expectations imposed by the Japanese society by referring to existing scholarship on the shōjo, kawaii, and modern-day yōkai elements in contemporary Japanese fiction and visual art. The study then analyzes

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[14]Martyn, "Cute and Dark."

[15] Yusuf Huysal and Ili Saarinen, "Interview: Chiho Aoshima," *TimeOut*, August 8, 2016, https://www.timeout.com/tokyo/art/interview-chiho-aoshima.

recurring iconographies in selected works by Aoshima, focusing on a digital painting title *Strawberry Fields* (Fig. 1). I will argue that the artist has expressed gender anxieties by referring to the shōjo and kawaii aesthetic conventions in expressing subversion towards the gender-related responsibilities forced upon the Japanese woman by the contemporary Japanese society. The study concludes that the use and combination of these motifs reflect vulnerability, escapism, gender transgression, and empowerment of women in contemporary gender dynamics in Japan.

Literature Review

Chiho Aoshima is one of the earliest female Superflat artists and one of the most talented female protégés of Murakami. The artist's works are characterized by "doe-eyed ingénues…within a garden of unreality populated by themes milled from centuries of Japanese culture, ranging from Edo scrolls to Sailor Moon."[16] As highlighted by Zoey Mondt, Aoshima integrates traditional Japanese landscapes and traditional Japanese motifs of animals, birds, flowers, insects, and yōkai with kawaii imagery typically found in contemporary Japanese pop culture.[17] Despite the cute imagery, art critics and scholars note that the artist's works are "undeniably dark."[18] Aoshima revealed that she finds inspiration in her vulnerability, fears, and self-perceived "strangeness."[19] When describing her drawing experience, the artist says, "when I draw, I always feel as though I am a little girl myself. Just as when I was little, I still cannot draw a boy or a man. I was quite a cheerful child, but my personality gradually changed and I became afraid of talking to people. This is because I believed I was different from other people."[20] Of the gloominess perceived in her works, Aoshima explains, "I wanted to be alone in the mountains or in a quiet place. This darker side appeared in my artwork."[21] Aoshima's artistic influences include 19th-century artist Katsushika Hokusai and French symbolist painter Odilon Redon,[22] as well as Frank Lloyd Wright, Vincent van Gogh, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Gustav Klimt.[23]

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[16]Zoey Mondt, "Chiho Aoshima," Frieze, May 5, 2002, https://www.frieze.com/article/chiho-aoshima.

[17]Mondt, "Chiho Aoshima."

[18]Seattle Art Museum, "Chiho Aoshima: Rebirth of the World," accessed May 14, 2023, https://www.seattleartmuseum.org/chiho.

[19]Martyn, "Cute and Dark."

[20]Martyn, "Cute and Dark."

[21]Martyn, "Cute and Dark."

[22]Martyn, "Cute and Dark."

[23]Seattle Art Museum, "Chiho Aoshima."

Aoshima's works are connected to the Superflat movement both in terms of formal characteristics and iconography. As with other Superflat paintings, the structural similarity with traditional Japanese art is readily identifiable. Matthew Welch notes that Aoshima's "emphasis on line, unmodulated color, and dramatic cropping also draws on traditional Japanese art"[24] and that her narratives owe "much to Asian handscroll painting."[25] Welch observes that in Aoshima's first animation *Edo Pop*, the visuals progress from right to left and the narrative of the entire painting is formed through the combination of individual segments that can be separately appreciated—a style that is typically found in Japanese handscroll paintings. To create the perception of deep space, Aoshima enlarged motifs in the foreground in an approach similar to that used in traditional Japanese woodcuts by Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858). In Vartanian's study of Aoshima's painting *The Birth of a Giant Zombie*[26], he calls attention to the artist breaking up the space within the image into several independent sections and linking them through mist-like gradations.[27] The elements in the painting recurring in other works which further connects the parts to form a complete whole.[28]

Aoshima's abundant use of shōjo and kawaii motifs with distinct influences from Japanese pop culture associates her stylistically with the Superflat movement. Today, Superflat art is simultaneously celebrated and dismissed in Europe and the United States. Specifically, postmodern theory scholars scorn its apparent superficiality, while social critical

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[24]Matthew Welch, "Artistic Remix: Contemporary Takes on Timeless Prints," *Impressions* 34, (2013): 136. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42597905.

[25]Welch, "Artistic Remix," 137.

[26]Chiho Aoshima, *The Birth of a Giant Zombie*, 2001, digital c-print, 32 3/8 by 88 5/8 in., accessed June 21, 2023, https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/The-Birth-of-the-Giant-Zombie/E639FD2327F96477.

[27]Vartanian, *Drop Dead Cute*, 34.

[28]Vartanian, *Drop Dead Cute*, 34.

theory scholars argue that it should be appreciated beyond its mass appeal. English-language critics identify Superflat art, which brings together kawaii or otaku (nerdiness associated with video games, manga and anime) elements and traditional Japanese motifs, as distinctly and explicitly Japanese. Art historian Kirstin Ringelberg attributes this to the failure to appreciate the complexity and influence of Superflat art or the real Japanese culture by Eurocentric critics. [29]

In his article "Japan's Gross National Cool," Douglas McGray ascribes the perception of contemporary Japanese culture as shallow by non-Japanese to the "the contradictory values of a nation in flux." [30] The confusion reflected in curious amalgam of the traditional and modern in Superflat art is misunderstood as a lack of depth in meaning, and the art is regarded as "devoid of perspective and devoid of hierarchy, all existing equally and simultaneously." [31] Consequently, many Eurocentric scholars label Superflat art as pop or low art. Ringelberg, however, argues that it is the preoccupation with "Orientalism" in English-based discourses on contemporary Japanese art that has led to analyses that equate Japanese culture with "the weakened, effeminate masculinity of otaku." [32] She claims that the Western expectation of stereotypical Japanese "trendy" art is merely a product of construction by European and American curators and patrons and encouraged by Superflat artists such as Takashi Murakami and Yoshimoto Nara for marketing and promotional purposes. [33] While it is common to fit new art into existing paradigms and tropes in order to be appreciated within the structures from which the tropes are created, this may lead to the eventual denigration of

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[29]Kirstin Ringelberg, "Little Sister, Big Girl: Tabaimo and the Gendered Devaluation of Contemporary Japanese Art," *Woman's Art Journal* 38, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2017): 32. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26430760.

[30]McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool."

[31]McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool."

[32]Ringelberg, "Little Sister," 31.

[33]Ringelberg, "Little Sister," 32.

the art.[34] This Japanese visual culture reflected in Superflat art, which is meant for adults but expressed in a childlike style, runs counter to the anti-aesthetic ideas of Eurocentric postmodern theory. If "good" contemporary art must be unattractive, it would be hard to place the predominantly enticing Superflat art, which is unabashed in its seductive cuteness. Ringelberg postulates that contemporary Japanese art with highly palatable aesthetics should be examined critically to understand how it bridges the gap between the "criticality of anti-aesthetic art and the desire for pleasure in viewing."[35] According to Ringelberg, artists who use approachable imagery may be considered avant-garde as their use of kawaii and otaku aesthetics may be understood as gestures of critique.

Ringelberg's view, however, is not shared by Susan Kandel who argues against reading Aoshima's work beyond surface value, as she believes that the artist takes genuine delight in her cute imageries.[36] Kandel believes that viewers are drawn to Aoshima's work for the inherent exoticism associated with *otaku*-ness and the way her work "plays with and against a specific pop subculture, bound less by nationality than obsession."[37] Close reading of the artist's work focusing on the presence (or absence) of commentary on contemporary Japanese society and the imposed gender roles makes an important contribution to the art historical field.

Like the works of many other Superflat artists, Aoshima's works are have a distinctive cuteness. The concept of kawaii, however, is not limited to Superflat art. Not only does it hold a special place among teens and youths, the same phenomena can be observed in

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[34]Ringelberg, "Little Sister," 32.

[35]Ringelberg, "Little Sister," 32.

[36]Susan Kandel, "Chiho Aoshima: Oops, I Dropped my Dumplings!" *Artext* 73, (2001): 41.

[37]Kandel, "Chiho Aoshima," 42.

the elite, adult, and even the global art world.[38] Janice Brown claims that in addition to its strong link to consumer products and popular taste, kawaii can also be understood as a minor aesthetic that has profound impact on Japanese contemporary art and culture.[39] Sharon Tran claims that kawaii aesthetics is a tool through which Japan claims and exerts soft power,[40] and this view is shared by Favell.[41] Tran argues that kawaii is not merely a symptomatic presentation of infantilization and feminization of Japan, but, rather, a complex aesthetic arising out of the country's attempt to create a less threatening form of aesthetic or a "disarming aesthetic"[42] that can seduce foreign consumers and promote sales of Japanese-made consumer products. Tran attributes the success of kawaii consumer goods in the United States and other countries to the way in which the inherent "otherness/foreignness" are packaged to seduce the consumers into lowering their guard.[43] Hasegawa argues that besides "cute," "pretty," and "lovely," kawaii may also refer to that which draws people and evokes the desire to protect something pure and innocent.[44] According to Sianne Ngai, the smallness and vulnerability projected by kawaii figures have a double effect of promoting affective feelings in the consumer and encouraging "the consumer's sadistic desire for mastery and control."[45] However, this view of kawaii being merely a selling factor for products fails to

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[38]Favell, *Before and After Superflat*, 10.

[39]Janice Brown, "Re-framing 'Kawaii': Interrogating Global Anxieties Surrounding the Aesthetic of 'Cute' in Japanese Art and Consumer products," *The International Journal of the Image* 1, no. 2 (2011): 2. http://doi.org/10.18848/2154-8560/CGP.

[40]Sharon Tran, "Kawaii Asian Girls Save the Day! Animating a Minor Politics of Care," *MELUS* 43, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 21. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26566151.

[41]Favell, *Before and After Superflat*, 13.

[42]Tran, "Kawaii Asian girls," 21.

[43]Tran, "Kawaii Asian girls," 20.

[44]Hasegawa, "Post-identity Kawaii," 128.

[45]Brown, "Re-framing 'Kawaii'," 2.

consider its powerful influence on Japanese society and why Japanese culture appears to be obsessed with all things kawaii.

Amy Lai claims that kawaii exerts a powerful and omnipresent influence in Japanese culture.[46] Lai attributes the affection towards kawaii to that of childhood itself.[47] In Japan, childhood is a time of indulgence, while adulthood represents onerous responsibilities, expectations, and conformity pressures. This contrast is stronger in Japanese culture than others. According to Ivy, kawaii characters stoke the desire for all things cute, which suggests a sense of longing for perpetual childhood or deferral of transition.[48] Ivy postulates that in Japanese society, remaining kawaii— a perpetually undefined and indeterminate state— has the political function of undermining current gender and power ideologies on one hand, while juxtaposing the notion of a perpetually incomplete or empty identity that is perceived as normal on the other. This view is shared by Kumiko Saito, who adds that the Japanese kawaii values stem from the aversion to and refusal to undertake the adult gender roles dictated by societal standards.[49] She argues that these values are effective and popular in Japan, where gender inequality is deeply embedded in the social system, because not only do they express resistance to the existing power structure, but they also simultaneously maintain the very same. Tran claims that kawaii makes visible unequal power relations, and by providing conditions of "heightened constraint, dependency and vulnerability,"[50] it promotes questioning of the existing power structure.

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[46]Amy T.Y. Lai, "Chapter fifteen: Consuming 'Hello Kitty': Tween Icon, Sexy Cute, and the Changing Meaning of 'Girlhood'," *Counterpoints* 246, (2005): 245. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42978703.

[47]Lai, "Chapter Fifteen: Consuming 'Hello Kitty'," 246.

[48]Ivy, "The Art of Cute Little Things," 19.

[49]Kumiko Saito, "Magic, 'Shōjo', and Metamorphosis: Magical Girl Anime and the Challenges of Changing Gender Identities in Japanese Society," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 1 (February 2014): 161. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43553398.

[50]Tran, "Kawaii Asian Girls," 22.

Scholars also recognize that kawaii characters have the potential to express darker themes. Vartanian suggests that kawaii is not necessarily shallow, as "cuteness, though ostensibly devoid of irony, does not negate darkness, and can in fact be a means to accessing darkness, as characters become loci of emotion and identification."[51] This view is shared by Brown, who claims that Murakami loosed the kawaii aesthetic to "create a riotous extreme that harbors an altogether darker and threatening underside."[52] Hence, while viewers relate emotionally with the cute characters, the overall interpretation of the work may be more ominous. Vartanian claims that since kawaii is emotionally charged, it may at times incorporate gore and may seem pointedly brutal.[53] Hence, art incorporating kawaii elements may be simultaneously cute and dark. Aoshima herself explains that "duality is extremely important… happiness comes at the cost of going through something really tough."[54] Scholars appear to appreciate this bipolar characteristic of Aoshima's works. Wakeling, for example, notes that Aoshima employs a cute aesthetic characterized by "little girls" with cute bodies, but who are simultaneously ugly, abject, and scary.[55] Martyn claims that Aoshima's doll-like characters are commentaries on the relationships between humans and the natural and spiritual realms.[56]

Japan's obsession with kawaii has also been studied from the perspective of collective consciousness. Hasegawa hypothesizes that while attempting to resolve postwar issues reminiscent of the past century, Japan seeks modern bearings to ensure other worldly and real-life survival and this inevitably led to the introduction of elements of collective

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[51]Vartanian, *Drop Dead Cute*, 11.

[52]Brown, "Re-framing 'Kawaii'," 4.

[53]Vartanian, *Drop Dead Cute*, 11.

[54]Vartanian, *Drop Dead Cute*, 32.

[55]Wakeling, "Girls are Dancin'," 134.

[56]Martyn, "Cute and Dark."

consciousness, collective intelligence, and co-existence.[57] Hence, the word kawaii may be extended to describe all interesting things that evoke a response in the collective consciousness, and, further, that Superflat art that includes kawaii motifs is referring to this collective consciousness. The same piece of art may evoke different responses in Japanese and non-Japanese viewers as the latter is presumably unacquainted with the anxieties of postwar Japan. However, the desire for eternal childhood and the apprehension towards transition is not unique to Japanese culture and society, and Superflat art may evoke similar, though not entirely identical responses, in non-Japanese viewers. More in-depth study in this area is therefore warranted.

A feature that distinguishes the works of female Superflat artists from those of their male counterparts is the incorporation of non-sexualized shōjo iconography. Although the flood of young girl motifs in contemporary Japanese culture has led to the "peculiar and often salacious impression of the contemporary visual arts in Japan as dominated by representations of and by young girls,"[58] limited studies have been done to analyze the difference in motifs in the works of male and female Superflat artists. As opposed to male Superflat artists, whose works tend to feature voluptuous, sexually appealing young women, female Superflat artists prefer the shōjo, typically characterized by disproportionately large eyes, absence of developed breasts, and general childlike appearance, such as that in Takano's *Moon*[59] and Aoshima's *Rabbit Girl* (Fig. 4). While sexually mature and seductive female figures appeal to male viewers with submission fantasies, shōjo figures are thought to engage in feminist discourses.

[57]Hasegawa, "Post-identity Kawaii," 141.

[58]Favell, "Resources, Scale, and Recognition," 26.

[59]Aya Takano, *Noshi and Meg on Earth, Year 2036*, 2005, lithograph, 22 4/5 × 20 1/10 in., Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, accessed June 18, 2023, https://www.artsy.net/artwork/aya-takano-noshi-and-meg-on-earth-year-2036-1.

Limited study has been done from feminist perspective on the shōjo motifs in Aoshima's works. Favell claims that female Superflat artists like Aya Takano and Chiho Aoshima tap into the "delicate and pretty iconography of the teenage girl's bedroom,"[60] and these works act as windows into the life of the ordinary, introverted, and strange girl-next-door, who are the perfect objects of otaku fantasy. According to Favell, Takano and Aoshima's works, which feature cute cartoon girls set against backgrounds of adolescent science fiction and future paradise, are infused with notions of androgynous romance, naïve sexuality, injured doll girls, and submission fantasies.[61] He describes these works as "sexy sci-fi manga as contemporary art, and/or contemporary art as sexy sci-fi manga"[62] and associates them with the sci-fi idealization of Tokyo as a city. Favell's use of words such as "sexy", "submission fantasies", and "objects of otaku fantasy" suggests the presumption that such works were created primarily for the consumption of a male audience. However, Favell fails to consider the warm reception of the works, and the gender-transgressive contents depicted in them, by a female audience. Art critic Midori Matsui, on the other hand, interprets the shōjo in Aoshima's works in relation to the subversive characteristics of shōjo science fiction as "pursuing the question of women's place in an indifferent universe… It became an especially vital medium of spiritual healing and empowerment for adolescent girls."[63] Although the artist herself has explicitly repudiated allegations of political or feminist motivations, Wakeling nonetheless regards Aoshima's work as a feminist critique, arguing that being able to see the world from the perspective of a girl renders the person involved

[60]Favell, *Before and After Superflat*, 33.

[61]Favell, *Before and After Superflat*, 33.

[62]Adrian Favell, "Visions of Tokyo in Japanese Contemporary Art," *Impressions* 35, (2014): 73. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24869101.

[63]Wakeling, "Girls are Dancin'," 136.

outside accepted gender categories. Studies on shōjo figures outside the field of Superflat art provide insight for further analysis of these motifs in Aoshima's works.

The first decade of this century saw the beginning of the development of *shōjoron* (discourse on pre-adolescent girls). William Gardner postulates that shōjo does not merely indicate a demographic group but also "an eminently marketable and intensively analyzed cultural style based on an aesthetic of 'cuteness.'"[64] The early stages of shōjoron saw shōjo being interpreted as "vessels and commodities for consumption, and even stood for a kind of mindless and voracious consumerism in late capitalist society,"[65] and shōjo motifs were often interpreted purely based on the assumption of a predominantly male audience. Hence, scholars like Favell assume that shōjo figures are featured in art works to sexually entice male viewers and to provide voyeurism pleasure. Many scholars, however, began to recognize that the shōjo in the works of female artists or female writers differ from that of their male counterparts. Scholars believe that the adolescent girls characteristic of the shōjo culture built by female writers and artists expresses the empowerment of women or the longing for deviation from conventional gender roles. For example, in studying works of female shōjo fiction writers, Mary A. Knighton calls for looking beyond superficial readings of victimized or repressed women and shōjo.[66] She notes that shōjoron wrestles with polarized visions of what constitutes a shōjo, and feminist debates have shifted to considering the innocence and essential girliness versus the subversion and emancipation in the representation of shōjo. According to Knighton:

> psychoanalytic theory and its language might speak anew to agency and power across discursive fields of sex, sexuality, and gender, particularly for representations of girls whose subjectivity is troubled precisely at the coordinates of girls' analytical or

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[64]Gardner, "Attack of the Phallic Girls," 486.

[65]Mary A. Knighton, "Down the Rabbit Hole: In Pursuit of Shōjo Alices, from Lewis Carroll to Kanai Mieko," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 40, (2011): 60. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42772306.

[66]Knighton, "Down the Rabbit Hole," 50.

> intellectual prowess and their naturally intuitive or inchoate innocence about the world around them.[67]

To understand how real women or girls historically and culturally consume and are consumed by powerful images of shōjo, Knighton encourages reading across representational fields.

Shōjo figures in visual representation is the subject of many feminist studies. Kinsella describes the shōjo figure as representing an exotic world of decadence from which individuals seek fulfillment, consumption, and entertainment.[68] Kinsella, however, did not elaborate on what personal aspects were fulfilled through this creation and consumption. Wakeling claims that shōjo figures are "positioned as champions of fantasy and gender transgression….gender defiance is rife within shōjo culture."[69] According to Wakeling, the shōjo culture negates the dominant cultural stereotype and sexual objectification through girlish and fantastical aesthetics as well as gender-transgressive ideals.[70] She postulates that to understand the shōjo motif in the context of contemporary feminist art, it is necessary to consider arguments about the gender-transgressive nature of shōjo culture. She believes that shōjo culture celebrates femininity and girlishness, an idea that is common to third-wave feminist thought.

Fusamai Ogi, Lucy Fraser, Isabelle Bettridge, and Liisa Kuru analyze shōjo culture based on second-wave feminist theory. They claim that shōjo representations in shōjo culture challenge gender and societal conventions.[71] According to these authors, shōjo manga, produced by women artists, is read and created from the position of an undifferentiated

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[67]Knighton, "Down the Rabbit Hole," 51.

[68]Sharon Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan," in *Women, Media and Consumption in Japani,* ed. Lise Skov and Brian Moeran (1st ed.) (Honolulu: University Hawaii Press, 1995), 244. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315026312.

[69]Wakeling, "Girls are Dancin'," 142.

[70]Wakeling, "Girls are Dancin'," 134.

[71]Fusamai Ogi, Lucy Fraser, Isabelle Bettridge, and Liisa Kuru, "Beyond Borders: Shōjo Manga and Gender," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 54, (2018): 76. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27159867.

female figure and is deeply connected to and an expression of girls' agency. Such shōjo representations should therefore be closely examined for ideas of gender as they relate to Japanese women and girls, as well as how they challenge contemporary societal power structures in which the women's voices are not represented.[72] Ogi et al. postulate that shōjo should be understood as a code that provides a database of "aesthetic conventions and narrative tropes."[73] One of the aesthetic conventions noted is that the ideal body is not a muscular, masculine body, but rather, a beautiful, ephemeral feminine physique; the ideal character therefore is feminine regardless of actual sex. Further, as the shōjo is not yet a woman, representations of shōjo deconstruct the concept of "woman" and question the possibilities of what is currently understood as woman.[74] Another aesthetic convention in shōjo manga is the absence of men. Ogi et al. claim that this creates a space that is free from the influence of the power dynamics between the two sexes.[75] As the subject is not male, it challenges the dominant ideology of heterosexuality and the inherent value system in which the subject is masculine. Ogi et al. also note the absence of signifiers of "Japan" in shōjo manga, attributing it to the intention of creating a space that is free from social expectations of being a Japanese woman.[76]

Other scholars share the idea that shōjo refers to a database of aesthetic conventions and narrative tropes is shared by other scholars. A common narrative trope in shōjo manga and literature is the possession of magical powers by the shōjo, who will eventually lose such powers once she marries or becomes a woman. The significance of magic lies in its contest of

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[72]Ogi et al., "Beyond Borders," 89.

[73]Ogi et al., "Beyond Borders," 77.

[74]Ogi et al., "Beyond Borders," 87.

[75]Ogi et al., "Beyond Borders," 92.

[76]Ogi et al., "Beyond Borders," 91.

ideas of what the woman can and should do, which according to Kumiko Saito, are divided between the freedom from social restriction during adolescence and the inevitable path of domestic work and community service associated with an adult woman.[77] Lai hold a similar view; she claims that the preadolescent female represents a state before young women are forced to accept the expectations of a woman that the society imposes upon them.[78] Masuko Honda extends the claim of resistance to conventional gender roles further to include preadolescents of both genders. According to Honda, shōjo manga does not privilege either gender and reflects the rejection of traditional ideas of femininity and masculinity among both boys and girls.[79]

The shōjo in Aoshima's works often have monstrous or yōkai-like transformations. In the introduction to Aoshima on the website of Kaikai Kiki Gallery, which represents Aoshima, the artist is described as using "imagery dealing mainly with Japanese yōkai and graveyard spirits, [the artist] uses dialog with the extra-dimensional to explore the personal landscape of her own subconscious."[80] In an interview with *TimeOut*, Aoshima cited Katsushika Hokusai's art depicting yōkai as one of her main artistic influences.[81] As a source of inspiration for and common motif in Aoshima's works, it is important to understand the significance of yōkai in Superflat art in general, and specifically in Aoshima's works. Although many critics and scholars have identified yōkai to be an important and common motif in Aoshima's works, there is, however, only limited study on the significance of the use

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[77]Saito, "Magic, 'Shōjo', and Metamorphosis," 151.

[78]Lai, "Chapter fifteen: Consuming 'Hello Kitty'," 245.

[79]Masuko Honda, "The Invalidation of Gender in Girls' Manga Today, with a Special Focus on 'Nodame Cantabile'," trans. Lucy Fraser and Tomoko Aoyama, *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 38, (2010): 21. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42772007.

[80]Kaikai Kiki Gallery, "Chiho Aoshima," accessed May 15, 2023, http://en.gallery-kaikaikiki.com/category/artists/chiho_aoshima/

[81]Huysal and Saarinen, "Interview: Chiho Aoshima."

of yōkai iconography specific to the artist's works, and especially in relation to feminism and gender dynamics. Current scholarship on yōkai and its significance to contemporary Japanese society offers potential insights to Aoshima's yōkai iconographies.

Yōkai (which can be understood as spirits, demons, monsters, or other supernatural phenomena) is a rich resource from which Japanese contemporary pop culture derives much of its inspiration. The widespread visual representation of yōkai in manga and anime in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century led to a yōkai boom in recent decades.[82] According to Zilia Papp, visual representations of yōkai are constantly evolving. In Superflat art, traditional yōkai has been given a fresh breath of life, adopting cute and infantile forms. In the past, yōkai mirrored social anxieties and issues of the Muromachi and Meiji periods; in the twenty-first century, yōkai, with its modern makeover, assumes distinct roles that mirror the realities of the society and culture in the twenty-first century and the related traumas.[83] Michael Dylan Foster holds a similar point of view. He claims that "if we keep the word yōkai relatively loose in definition and open-ended in usage, it can encompass an exciting diversity of phenomena."[84] Shamoon explains that the widespread use of yōkai in contemporary popular culture may be ascribed to its the encyclopedic nature.[85] Since most Japanese yōkai's are not specific to any particular traditional folklore or region, they can be flexibly used to achieve different effects; they are free agents and therefore versatile metaphors.

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[82]Michael Dylan Foster, "Review of Traditional Monster Imagery in Manga, Anime and Japanese Cinema, by Z. Papp," *Asian Ethnology* 71, no. 2 (2012): 288. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23339396.

[83]Zilia Papp, *Anime and its Roots in Early Japanese Monster Art* (Netherlands: Brill, 2010), 162.

[84]Michael Dylan Foster, *The Book of Yokai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 85.

[85]Deborah Shamoon, "The Yōkai in the Database: Supernatural Creatures and Folklore in Manga and Anime," *Marvels & Tales* 27, no. 2 (2013): 278. https://doi.org/10.13110/marvelstales.27.2.0276.

Papp postulates that yōkai is the visual materialization of the anxieties relating to historical and society changes, the fear of deviation from the norm and segregation from the group, and the fear of unknown dangers presented by the outside world.[86] To Papp, yōkai represents “transmutability,”[87] which is inherent in all beings. They represent constant transformation and uncertainty, which is the ultimate nature of all lifeforms. Foster understands yōkai as an expression of empathy and a projection of our thoughts and actions onto something non-human.[88] Melek Ortabasi claims that the supernatural creatures create a distinct culture, which can be understood as “space within which humans can inscribe their own questions about identity.”[89] Yōkai can hence be read as projections of hidden human anxieties, fears, and desires. Science fiction is a common theme in anime and manga. Ortabasi argues that this genre may be understood as a futuristic form of folklore, wherein instead of mystical creatures, human emotions are mirrored in robots, cyborgs, and even hybrid beings.[90] These technologically based creatures can be understood scientifically morphed forms of yōkai that have been called upon to represent the challenges and dilemmas of a new age. Like their traditional counterparts, they define humans by “their connection to and participation in a world of ‘other’ forces and agencies.”[91]

It is therefore apparent that the yōkai iconography is interpreted differently by different critics. The deviations may be due to varying degrees of understanding of Japanese contemporary culture by Eurocentric critics. The interpretation of icons reflects the viewer’s

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[86]Papp, *Anime and its Roots*, 12.

[87]Papp, *Anime and its Roots*, 10.

[88]Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 86.

[89]Melek Ortabasi, “(Re)animating Folklore: Raccoon Dogs, Foxes, and other Supernatural Japanese Citizens in Takahata Isao’s Heisei Tanuki Gassen Pompoko,” *Marvels & Tales* 27, no. 2 (2013): 255. https://doi.org/10.13110/marvelstales.27.2.0254.

[90]Ortabasi, “(Re)animating Folklore,” 270.

[91]Ortabasi, “(Re)animating Folklore,” 270.

own cultural experiences. This means that Japanese and non-Japanese viewers will interpret yōkai imagery in different ways. When yōkai motifs are used, they reference the encyclopedic information common to viewers familiar with the Japanese culture.
Close reading of Superflat art with these motifs can therefore shed light on what the artists intend to convey.

In conclusion, scholars interpret Superflat art as a product of a mix of sociopolitical and cultural influences with individual artistic choices. The palpable aesthetics of the movement has led some proponents of postmodernism to the classify the art as superficial and "low" by proponents of postmodernism, while others have argued that Superflat art blurs the distinction between high and low art, that is, if the approachable imagery is interpreted as avant-garde through the use of kawaii, shōjo, and otaku aesthetics specifically as a critical gesture. There is comparatively limited scholarship analyzing the works of female Superflat artists. Even though Superflat works generally derive influences from Japanese contemporary culture, the motifs used by female and male Superflat artists differ. Studies dedicated specifically to the works of female Superflat artists and the iconography included are therefore necessary to understand the critique that they make on contemporary Japanese society and the gender roles that society prescribes.

In current scholarship on the works of female Superflat artists, feminist scholars have highlighted that the use of shōjo and kawaii iconographies are associated with feminism ideas and gender commentary. However, such scholarship either discusses female Superflat artists as a group, or merely dedicates a small section of the discussion to each artist. At present, there is no published academic scholarship studying the works of Chiho Aoshima specifically. Aoshima extensively and exclusively uses shōjo, kawaii, and yōkai iconographies in her work. Although the artist herself denies being politically motivated for her creations, based on the iconographies she uses, many scholars argue that Aoshima's

works reflect the rejection of traditional gender and societal roles, as well the anxieties associated with being a modern Japanese woman. Further studies on the iconographies can therefore uncover significant elements of the shōjo and yōkai codes from which the artist makes reference. Close reading of Aoshima's works can potentially uncover the anxiety over, and rejection and critique of, contemporary gender dynamics in Japanese society that the artist intentionally or inadvertently expresses by drawing on the aesthetic conventions and narrative tropes of the shōjo and kawaii cultures.

Analysis

Overall Approach

To uncover the gender dynamics and anxieties as reflected in the works of Chiho Aoshima, I have conducted qualitative analysis on selected works by the artist. The paintings are selected because of their use of shojo, kawaii, and yōkai motifs, the focus of this study. The primary painting for this case study is *Strawberry Fields* (Fig. 1), a digital chromogenic print face-mounted on Plexiglass, measuring 33.5 in. by 53 in. It features a yōkai shōjo figure inhabiting a fantasy landscape together with a mature female yōkai figure and various fauna and flora. The significances of each type of imaginary macrocosm as well as the female figures and kawaii creatures populating the landscape will be discussed, leading to an informed interpretation of the image. The painting will also be compared to other works by the artist to establish recurring themes and iconographies and to highlight significant differences. Gender dynamics and gender-related anxieties expressed by the artist in *Strawberry Fields* and appreciated by the viewers who take delight or find solace in the painting are thereby identified. The case study concludes with a discussion linking the painting to contemporary Japanese society and its associated conformity pressures.

The artist herself maintains that she is not motivated by feminism or political issues in her creation, even though scholars like Wakeling believe otherwise. Based on the premise that the unconscious is present in every human creation,[92] this study seeks to uncover the "path from what is apparent to consciousness to unconscious material latent in the appearance."[93] Jacques Schnier attributes the existence of unconscious thoughts to

[92]Wiseman, "Reviewed Work(s): Art and Psychoanalysis," 486.

[93]Mary Wiseman, "Reviewed Work(s): Art and Psychoanalysis by Laurie Schneider Adams," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52, no. 4 (1994): 486. https://doi.org/10.2307/432043.

repression[94]. According to Schnier, an unconscious idea can assume a changed or disguised form under heavy repression, and through this process, becomes a symbol of the original unconscious thought[95]. Schnier highlights that much like how the artist is unaware about the "unconscious significances" of the symbols used in his work, spectators who appreciate these symbols are also drawn to them unconsciously.[96] Spectators take pleasure in a piece of work because the ideas expressed resonate with them and the work offers "a way back to the comfort of their own unconscious sources of instinctual pleasure and so reaps their gratitude and admiration"[97]. Hence, by examining the art symbols and sources of inspiration in Aoshima's work, this study not only sheds light on the repressed thoughts unconscious to the artist, but also to uncover the sentiments common to spectators for whom the artist's works have a special appeal.

Description of the Work

The picture depicts a fantasy paradisiacal scene set in the woods. As typical of Superflat art, *Strawberry Fields* is largely devoid of any suggestion of intellectual depth and resembles manga or anime in style. The work is divided into two halves, each with a distinct psychedelic color scheme. The left and right halves appear symmetrical with elements such as trees, streams, open space, and strawberries on the ground, mirroring their counterparts on the other half, bringing the two halves into conversation. The colors of the sky, ground, and stream on the right half contrast strongly with that on the left, giving the two halves distinct, contrasting moods.

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[94]Jacques Schnier, "Art Symbolism and the Unconscious," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 12*, no. 1 (1953): 67. https://doi.org/10.2307/426301.

[95]Schnier, "Art Symbolism," 67.

[96]Schnier, "Art Symbolism," 75.

[97]Schnier, "Art Symbolism," 75.

The left half of the picture is generally cheerier with a pleasing color scheme of light yellow sky, blue stream, and green grass. A nude adolescent girl, or shōjo, with rabbit ears, eyes and tail sits on the grass in a secluded clearing in what appears to be a forest. Strewn on the ground around the shōjo are strawberries of varying hues of red and orange; they grow on flowering vines that grow unsupported on the ground. A stream of blue water meanders from the foreground towards the left edge of the middle ground, with two white fish drawn in profile in the water. Trees and ferns surround the central clearing, with the ferns in the foreground partially concealing the clearing, though not the main figure, from the viewer. Branches and vines of the dark tree on the left edge of the picture twist and curl in a serpentine manner, while another vine entangles and entwines itself in the branches of the dark tree. White unknown vegetations with long tentacle-like extensions hang from the branches of the dark tree as if they are dripping white fluid. A variety of fungi, some with luminous colors or luminous spots, sprout from the trunk and branches of the dark tree. This tree itself, with its odd, multicolored outgrowths and the mass of intertwined vines has an overall grotesque look and stands in stark contrast to the rest of the generally paradisal left half of the picture with green trees, plump strawberries, and fluttering butterflies. Echoing the form of the curling vines is a small white snake in the middle of the foreground, resting on the middle fern.

The right half of the picture, on the other hand, has a more ominous atmosphere. In contrast to the yellow, green, and blue scheme on the left, the sky on the right half is in an unnatural graduated pink, while the ground is bright turquoise. The most unnatural part of the color scheme is the bright red stream that meanders from the middle of the foreground to the background and a smaller red stream in the background. Despite also having fluttering butterflies, a semi-enclosed clearing, and plump strawberries on the ground as with the left half of the picture, the right half is overall darker in theme. Firstly, a figure, resembling a

human female, swings fully nude from a large tree. The head of the figure is supported on an unnaturally long, snake-like neck, while an unidentifiable light-bluish mass rests between her exposed breasts. The non-human creatures inhabiting the right half of the picture include a large spotted python hanging from a branch, a small crocodile in the foreground, and a small lizard climbing up a tree trunk. A large tree with brown trunk and green leaves connects the left and right halves, with its branches extending to both sides of the picture.

Title of the Work

The first hint of melancholy in the work is suggested by its title. The words "Strawberry Fields" suggest that the inspiration for this picture is a similarly titled song written by John Lennon and sung by The Beatles – "Strawberry Fields Forever". Strawberry Field is the name of a children's home that Lennon used to visit as a child for garden parties, to hang out with friends, and to sell bottles of lemonade; it was his childhood haven.[98] Despite the origin of its title, the song does not refer to an actual place. Walter Everett classifies it as a fantasy song with a remembrance theme,[99] while Pat Crotty relates it to a yearning for lost childhood.[100] Through the song, Lennon expresses the lingering anxiety that he developed as a child and which he thought would last "forever".[101] The lyrics of the song, the voice in which it is delivered, and the dissonance in the music conjure images of "isolation and insecurity" and suggests "pain and boredom".[102] Of his childhood, Lennon

[98]Pat Crotty, "Music: THE GREAT ICONOCLAST," *The Cork Review* 2, no. 1 (1981): 12. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20768644.

[99]Walter Everett, "Fantastic Remembrance in John Lennon's 'Strawberry Fields Forever' and 'Julia,'" *The Musical Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (1986): 367. http://www.jstor.org/stable/948147.

[100]Crotty, "Music," 12.

[101]Everett, "Fantastic Remembrance," 368.

[102]Crotty, "Music," 12.

lamented, “It was scary as a child because there was nobody to relate to” [103]. He empathized with Oscar Wilde, Dylan Thomas, and Vincent van Gogh, whom he thought “were tortured by society for trying to express what they were.”[104] The disquieting dissonance that resolves in the chorus suggests that Strawberry Fields was a place where Lennon felt free to be himself.[105]

Chiho Aoshima was afflicted by a similar melancholy and sense of alienation as a child. In an interview with *The Sydney Morning Herald,* the artist shared that as a child she felt “different and strange”[106]. She explained that she used to keep secret notebooks filled with her drawings of “intimate, unusual, and even erotic imaginings”[107]. When they were eventually discovered by her parents, the embarrassment and compulsion to conform to social norms drove her to stop drawing altogether. Societal pressures compelled the artist to behave “normally” since then, and she went on to take up the “most ordinary of university courses, economics”[108]. In their childhoods, both Aoshima and Lennon yearned for understanding for the visions they had that were different, which Aoshima expressed in her drawings and Lennon in his songs and writings. Like Lennon, Aoshima empathizes with others before them who faced similar estrangement by society. Vincent van Gogh, for example was also named by Aoshima as a source of inspiration.[109]

[103]Jack Whatley, “A Beatles library: John Lennon's favourite books of all time,” Far Out, May 1, 2022, https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/john-lennon-favourite-books/.

[104]Whatley, “A Beatles library.”

[105]Crotty, “Music,” 12.

[106]Martyn, “Cute and dark.”

[107]Martyn, “Cute and Dark.”

[108]Martyn, “Cute and Dark.”

[109]Seattle Art Museum, “Chiho Aoshima.”

It is very likely that the resonance Aoshima had with Lennon's *Strawberry Fields Forever* prompted her to create the digital painting, *Strawberry Fields*. While the artist had not mentioned John Lennon or The Beatles in any of her interviews, there is evidence that The Beatles have a strong and persisting influence in Japan. The Beatles visited Japan in late June 1966. Video footage shows hundreds of fans waiting to greet them, many screaming and crying in disbelief that they can meet the group in person.[110] Carolyn S. Stevens claims that The Beatles' concerts in Tokyo during this trip "contributed to the construction of new Japanese national identity".[111] In her book *The Beatles in Japan*, Stevens explains how The Beatles was a significant shaping force for Japanese popular culture from the 1960s to 1970s and an enduring influence to this day.[112] According to Stevens, The Beatles' music forged a connection between the Japanese people and the international community with whom they share "common "aesthetic and social values".[113] Daniel A. Métraux attributes the endearment of the Japanese people towards The Beatles partly to Lennon's wife, Yoko Ono, who is Japanese.[114]

The similarity between the titles of Lennon's "Strawberry Fields Forever*"* and Aoshima's *Strawberry Fields* suggest that the song is an inspiration for the image. For his song, Lennon adapted the name of the children's home "Strawberry Field" to "Strawberry Fields" by adding an additional "s" such that it sounds better when sung. Aoshima's work depicts a single clearing separated into two parts by distinct colors on which strawberries

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[110]nonnelnhojmi, "The Beatles in Japan (rare footage)," YouTube, June 30, 2016, 1:02, https://youtu.be/Wp2DqGnlShM?si=KcA2sWlpkeKteNc9.

[111]Carolyn S. Stevens, *The Beatles in Japan*, 1st ed. (London, UK: Routledge, 2018), ii.

[112]Carolyn S. Stevens, *The Beatles in Japan*, 148-161.

[113]Carolyn S. Stevens, *The Beatles in Japan*, 161.

[114]Daniel A. Métraux, "Carolyn S. Stevens, The Beatles in Japan: Media, Culture and Social Change in Asia," *Asian Ethnology* 80, no. 1 (January 2021): 264.

grow. Nevertheless, she too named it in plural form; from a certain perspective, one could say that each half of the painting is a separate "field.". Further, the ground on which the main protagonist sits in the painting can hardly be considered a field given that it is a very small piece of land enclosed within a forest. The influence of Lennon's song on Aoshima's painting is also evident in the color palette. "Strawberry Fields Forever*"* is considered one of the most psychedelic songs by The Beatles and it was written during the period in which the group members were known to be experimenting with hallucinogenic drugs. Aoshima's color palette for *Strawberry Fields* is also psychedelic, with the river on the left side of the picture being in primary blue and the river on the right being in primary red, and the atmosphere on the right being bright yellow while that on the left being in bright pink; the colors of the landscape are bright, saturated, and contrasting. Further, as John Lennon writes in the lyrics of "Strawberry Fields Forever", "nothing is real" in the fantasy world created by Aoshima in this picture. The lyrics of the song also mention "No one I think is in my tree". On the right side of the picture, a lone figure with the body of a woman and elongated snake-like neck hangs leisurely on one of the trees. As discussed in detail below, this figure is likely to be an avatar of the artist as an adult, and she has been transfigured into a monster-like creature as a result of her defiance against social norms. Since she is an disfigured avatar and the ideas of subversion that she symbolizes is frowned upon by contemporary society, she would not be someone Aoshima "thinks of" consciously.

Considering the above, it is reasonable to conclude that Aoshima had taken inspiration from the song *Strawberry Fields Forever* in creating this work and that she resonates with certain sentiments or ideas expressed by Lennon through his song. Through her work, Aoshima could, likewise, be expressing a yearning for a sanctum in which she could be herself freely, a place in which she is untethered by rules of society. Although Strawberry Fields is also the name of a memorial dedicated to Lennon set in Central Park in

New York City, there is, however, no evidence from the picture to suggest that the artist had meant the work to be a tribute to John Lennon.

Symbolism of Strawberries

Named in the title and drawn prominently in the picture, strawberries carry an important significance *Strawberry Fields*. The strawberries in the picture are more than mere illustrations of its title. Fruit sexual metaphors and related images are found in European works through all times, in the classical Greece and Rome literature, and even in literature and art of ancient Near Eastern worlds.[115] The universality of fruits as sexual metaphors may be attributed to the fact that they are the reproductive organs of the plant and they are ideal metaphors for sexual organs as, like the latter, they captivate and entices the senses.[116] The strawberry, in particular, is a symbol of love and romance since the Roman era. In Japan, its bright red color and shape resembling a heart renders it a popular kawaii motif. In Japanese pop culture, the fruit is closely associated with girlishness, cuteness, and child-like innocence. However, Aoshima's *Strawberry Fields* is far from being simply an aesthetically enticing digital painting, but rather, has darker undertones as discussed further below. The large, succulent looking strawberries in the picture, and the sweetness and innocence they symbolize, contrast strongly with the yo figure hanging on the tree and the reptilian creatures that are generally associated with darker themes.

A Fantasy World Devoid of Men

Strawberry Fields depicts a fantasy world. The landscape is populated by a variety of creatures, including some that are not usually associated with paradise, but it does not include

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[115]Ronald A. Veenker, "Forbidden Fruit: Ancient Near Eastern Sexual Metaphors," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 70/71 (1999): 58. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23508866.

[116]Veenker, "Forbidden Fruit," 58.

any male figures, as is the case in all other works by the artist. It is noteworthy that the artist attributes the absence of male figures in her works to a passive inability to draw them rather than an active artistic choice.[117] No explanations, however, has been offered by the artist on her apparent fear of or aversion to the male gender. The artist also confesses that some of the shōjo in her paintings are avatars of herself, and that her paintings express her sense of vulnerability and discomfort in the real world. It is therefore reasonable to interpret the landscape in the artist's work as an imaginary world in which she seeks solace, security, and comfort. This picture appears to suggest that tranquility and carefreeness can be maintained in the absence of men, or even, because of it. It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that men and the patriarchal society they represent are at least one of the causes of her unease in the real world.

The significance of the world in Strawberry Fields extends beyond the mere absence of men. Its fantastic nature is, in itself, subversive. The woods and the clearing in the picture do not appear to be part of the real world. Despite the non-human creatures and plants resembling real floral and fauna, the irrational elements, such as the bright red river and strawberries growing on the ground, place the work firmly in the fantasy category. Parallels can be drawn between this work and Japanese shōjo science fiction set in Utopian worlds. Kotani Mari and Miri Nakamura explain that a strategy used by Japanese female science fiction writers whose stories revolve around shōjo protagonists is the "defamiliarization of the real world" to free the lead shōjo characters from the power structure to which they would have otherwise been bound in reality.[118] The same can be said of the fictious world crated by Aoshima in this painting.

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[117] Martyn, "Cute and Dark."

[118]Kotani Mari and Miri Nakamura, "Space, Body, and Aliens in Japanese Women's Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 29, no. 3 (2002): 399. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4241107.

Miyazaki Hayao, a renowned Japanese animator and filmmaker, whose works are widely appreciated both in and outside of Japan, believes that creation of fantasy opens up the subconscious realm in which psychological reality dominates.[119] Susan Napier defines fantasy as "any conscious departure from consensus reality."[120] However, fantasy is more than a mere conduit for deliberate escape from or compensation for the real world. Napier claims that the essence of fantasy is its "existence in contrast to the 'real.'" [121] At times, it expresses resistance, transgression, and even subversion of the real.[122] Fantasy fiction by female Japanese writers introduces confusion and alternatives to the unitary vision of the world built based on patriarchal ideology.[123] This deviation from reality is subversive as it critiques the reality and dominant ideology, questioning what necessitates the escape.[124] The same applies for fantasy art.

Isolation and Solidarity

The main protagonist in the painting appears to be alone in this fantasy world, concealed and isolated from the real world. This solidarity in a hidden realm is significant in Japanese culture. It refers to the Japanese folk belief known as *kamikakushi*, literally meaning hidden by the *kami* (deities). In traditional Japanese folklore, the sudden disappearance of women or children is attributed to abduction by a kami into the spiritual realm. The allegedly abducted child or woman then remains in the spiritual realm, stowed away from the real

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[119]Noriko T. Reider "'Spirited Away': Film of the Fantastic and Evolving Japanese Folk Symbols," *Film Criticism* 29, no. 3 (2005), 8. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44019178.'

[120]Susan Napier, *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature: The Subversion of Modernity*, 1st ed. (London, UK: Routledge, 1995), 9, quoted in Noriko T. Reider "'Spirited Away': Film of the Fantastic and Evolving Japanese Folk Symbols," *Film Criticism* 29, no. 3 (2005), 8. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44019178.

[121]Napier, *The Fantastic*, 5.

[122]Napier, *The Fantastic*, 5.

[123]Napier, *The Fantastic*, 8.

[124]Napier, *The Fantastic*, 8-13.

world. Modern studies on kamikakushi uncover an underlying notion of social escapism. Komatsu Kazuhiko, an anthropologist, interprets the phenomenon of kamikakushi as "social death" in the real world; during this time, the protagonist takes a break from being a social being in the real world and assumes a new identity in another world.[125] In Aoshima's *Strawberry Fields*, the deconstruction and reconstruction of the "self" is symbolized by the metamorphoses of the adolescent girl, who now sprouts rabbit ears and tail, and the woman, now with a serpentine neck.

Isolation is also a common theme in postwar Japanese fantasy fiction. Postwar male and female fantasy fiction share a similarity in reflecting a pessimistic outlook on the relationship between sexes.[126] Napier notes that in "wish-fulfilment" fantasy fiction by female Japanese writers, the main desire of the female protagonists is to be "alone and unencumbered."[127] The woman simply wishes to be left alone to pursue her desires without interference.[128] In somewhat stark contrast to this antisocial sentiment, the male characters are in constant search of some "missing woman or womb"[129] in the sense that they seek a love interest or a protective maternal figure. Napier's observations highlight the gender dynamics in modern Japanese society, in which the woman is expected to play—and yet resents—the dual roles of a sexual object and a protective mother.[130] According to Napier, "the intense desire for solitude on the part of a character whose self had be totally defined by

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[125] Komatsu Kazuhiko, *Kamikakushi To Nihonjin* (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 2002), 229, quoted in Noriko T. Reider "'Spirited Away': Film of the Fantastic and Evolving Japanese Folk Symbols," *Film Criticism* 29, no. 3 (2005), 9. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44019178.

[126]Napier, *The Fantastic*, 80.

[127]Napier, *The Fantastic*, 80.

[128]Napier, *The Fantastic*, 83.

[129]Napier, *The Fantastic*, 80.

[130]Hasegawa, "Post-Identity Kawaii," 128.

her familial and social relationships is surely a poignant, albeit muted protest against the culture which had created that self."[131]

Napier's claim on the solidarity of female protagonists in Japanese fantasy fiction is surely applicable in *Strawberry Fields*. The scene appears to be set in a woods. According to Paolo Linetti, forests and woods are significant in the Japanese culture as they are places in which kami, yōkai, and spirits of the woods reside. In Shintoism, forests and woods are to be venerated because they are protected by kami.[132] Aoshima herself has discussed in interviews that she finds solace and healing in nature[133] and she believes that nature "connects to the yōkai tradition"[134]. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the artist had intended for the protagonist to be hidden away in the woods from the real world where she is kept safe by the spirit or kami residing there. In his analysis of *oni* (Japanese demon/ogre), Kazuhiko Komatsu argues that mountains where yōkai resides may be considered a "spatial otherworld."[135] According to Komatsu, the space in which daily life takes place is "this world", whereas that which is outside of daily life is regarded as the "other world", which includes the woods, river, ocean, etc.[136] Similarly, the woods in *Strawberry Fields* is an "other world" since it lies outside the realm of the real and is a place of the kami and yōkai, as discussed further below. The traditional folklore of kamikakushi takes on new meaning in

[131]Napier, The Fantastic, 84.

[132] Paolo Linetti, Yokai: *The Ancient Prints of Japanese Monsters* (Lausanne: SKIRA, 2023), 110.

[133]Oliver Giles, "Heaven And Earth: Inside The Mind Of Japanese Artist Chiho Aoshima," Tatler, October 7, 2020, https://www.tatlerasia.com/lifestyle/arts/japanese-artist-chiho-aoshima-supernatural-nature.

[134]Martyn, "Cute and Dark."

[135] Komatsu Kazuhiko, *Introduction to Yokai Culture: Monsters, Ghosts, and Outsiders in Japanese History*, trans. Hiroko Yoda and Matt Alt (Japan: Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture, 2018), 58.

[136]Komatsu Kazuhiko, *Introduction to Yokai Culture*, 57-58.

this work to signify escapism into an alternative world, one in which the social norms and rules of the real world are powerless.

The Shōjo

The “escapee” in *Strawberry Fields* is the central female adolescent figure sitting on the ground. The girl lacks developed breasts and womanly curves and is drawn in a typical kawaii manga style. Those who are familiar with Japanese pop culture would immediately identify her as a shōjo. Aoshima’s output features exclusively shōjo, ageless female beings, and kawaii creatures. In particular, doll-like preadolescent girls who exhibit bot “cuteness and darkness at the same time”[137] have become the artist’s signature. In the few interviews that Aoshima has given, the artist describes how she always feels like a little girl,[138] and draws avatars of herself as young girls in fantasy scenes.[139]

Representation of oneself in this period of one’s life is significant in Japanese pop culture. According to Mari and Nakamura, “modern Japan is largely governed by androcentric and patrician systems”[140] and the “shōjo, too, is a concept that belongs to ‘female culture’ imagined by patriarchal society. In studying shōjo in Japanese woman science fiction, Knighton rejects the superficial reading of the works in search of the “‘repressed’ or victimized women and shōjo,”[141] and encourages “readings across representation fields… gaining perspective on real girls in history and culture, consuming and

[137]Shona Martyn, “Cute and Dark: The Magical World of Japanese Art Star Chiho Aoshima,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 25, 2019, https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/cute-and-dark-the-magical-world-of-japanese-art-star-chiho-aoshima-20191017-p531iz.html.

[138]Martyn, “Cute and Dark.”

[139]Martyn, “Cute and Dark.”

[140]Kotani Mari and Miri Nakamura, “Alien Spaces and Alien Bodies in Japanese Women’s Science Fiction,” in *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams: Japanese Science Fiction from Origins to Anime*, ed. Christopher Bolton, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, and Takayuki Tatsumi, NED-New ed., (Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 53. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.cttttc8f.6.

[141] Knighton, “Down the Rabbit Hole,” 50.

consumed by power images of themselves, fictional, social and cultural."[142] Napier believes that shōjo has "taken on an iconic significance in Japanese culture,"[143] and has become a "ubiquitous cultural staple in Japanese society and literature over the last two decades,"[144] with Japanese literature, manga, and anime developing specific genres dedicated to the shōjo. This could be due to recent increase in feminist consciousness among Japanese women.

The shōjo is significant to the feminist awareness in Japan as it is the period in a woman's life before she becomes an adult or gets married. It therefore signifies the time before she assumes the responsibilities and obligations associated with an adult woman.[145] Compared to womanhood, adolescence represents a time of independence and freedom. The feminism approach is valuable in this study because shōjo iconography is closely related to the pre-Oedipal period as defined by Sigmund Freud. Young-Bruehl and Wexler sees this period in which gender roles have yet to be solidified as pre-patriarchal, hence offering the potential for "feminist redemptive vision."[146] Helen Kilpatrick claims that some common tropes in shōjo visual culture manifest the desire to break free, albeit only in the imagination, from social and gender restrictions forced upon the modern Japanese women by Japan's long-standing patriarchal system.[147] An adolescent girl who either battles or internalizes dark,

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[142]Knighton, "Down the Rabbit Hole," 52.

[143]Susan Jolliffe Napier, "Matter Out of Place: Carnival, Containment, and Cultural Recovery in Miyazaki's Spirited Away," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 291.

[144]Napier, "Matter Out of Place," 296.

[145]Mari and Nakamura, "Space, Body, and Aliens," 404.

[146]Elisabeth Young-Bruehl and Laura Wexler, "On 'Psychoanalysis and Feminism,'" *Social Research* 59, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 463. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970700.

[147]Helen Kilpatrick, "Envisioning the shôjo Aesthetic in Miyazawa Kenji's 'The Twin Stars' and 'Night of the Milky Way Railway'," *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 9, no. 3 (November 2012): 1.

psychological forces may evoke certain cultural resonance among modern day Japanese people amid political, social, and economic instability in Japan.[148]

Yōkai Figures

The central figure in *Strawberry Fields* is not an average human shōjo but a *kemonomimi* (獣耳). A kemonomimi is a zoomorphic humanoid character with animal ears or tail, common in Japanese manga and anime. The figure has a pair of distinctive rabbit ears, red eyes resembling that of a rabbit, and a fluffy tail. Kemonomimi-like figures also appear in other works by Aoshima, including *Fish MoiMoi* (Fig. 2, 2009), *Little Hope the Chicken Girl* (Fig. 3, 2008), and *Rabbit Girl* (Fig. 4, 2009). These figures created by Aoshima have the common features of being adolescent girls with animal features, such as ears, tail, fins, etc.; mostly nude; and angled or postured such that the breasts and genitals are hidden from view. Aoshima's kemonomimi figures deviate from the manga norm in that they do not have overly large human eyes, but rather, invariably take on the eyes of the animals into which the humans have been partially transformed. This makes the figures less manga and anime like and more yōkai-ish. Sabine Frühstück believes that animal ears and tails enhance an anime character's feminine and yet infantile cuteness, at the same time, they indicate that the character possesses magical powers and is capable of combat[149]. Shōjo with superhuman capabilities signifies the unease that women feel in the real world[150], as well as an avenue of release of female oppression and anger.[151] Supernaturally gifted shōjo have the potential ability to transcend the limitations and boundaries to which a grown woman is subject.

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[148]Napier, "Matter Out of Place," 297.

[149] Sabine Frühstück, "'. . . And My Heart Screams': Children and the War of Emotions," in *Child's Play: Multi-Sensory Histories of Children and Childhood in Japan*, ed. Sabine Frühstück and Anne Walthall, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 198. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1w8h25q.14.

[150]Mari and Nakamura, "Space, Body, and Aliens," 407.

[151]Mari and Nakamura, "Space, Body, and Aliens," 406.

Kenomimi have roots in traditional Japanese yōkai. A traditional Japanese woodblock print by Toyohara Kunichika (1835–1900) completed in 1870 depicts a yōkai known as a *bakeneko* (supernatural cat) having mostly human features but cat ears and paws (Fig. 5). A handscroll from the 1700s shows another yōkai, the *nekomata* (cat ghost), playing the samisen (Fig. 6). The creature appears mostly human, except for the cat tail peeking out from under its robes. The similarities between these yōkai and the kemonomimi and, hence, the evolutionary relationship between them, is undeniable. Michael Dylan Foster believes that yōkai continually changes its form, from place to place and from generation to generation, and since yōkai motifs are communal intellectual properties, they can be modified, used, and shared by anyone.[152] The kenomimi is, therefore, a transmuted, modernized, infantilized form of the traditional bakemono or nekomata, that has been aestheticized based on kawaii aesthetics in Japanese pop culture. Like its predecessors in traditional folklore, kemonomimi is a "betwixt and between the human and the natural worlds"[153]. Just as how yōkai visualizes human fears and anxieties[154], projects human thoughts and actions onto a non-human creatures[155], and questions human identity[156], kemonomimi plays the same role in modern Japan.

The kemonomimi in *Strawberry Fields*, however, deviates from the most common *kemonomimi* form of a shōjo with cat or fox ears and tail. Comparing this figure with the rabbit-human in Aoshima's *Rabbit Girl*, the kemonomimi in *Strawberry Fields* is less

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[152] Michael Dylan Foster, *The Book of Yōkai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 29.

[153]Foster, *The Book of Yōkai*, 214.

[154]Zilia Papp, *Anime and its Roots in Early Japanese Monster Art* (Netherlands: Brill, 2010), 12.

[155] Foster, The Book of Yokai, 86.

[156]Melek Ortabasi, "(Re)animating Folklore: Raccoon Dogs, Foxes, and other Supernatural Japanese Citizens in Takahata Isao's Heisei Tanuki Gassen Pompoko," Marvels & Tales 27, no. 2 (2013): 255. https://doi.org/10.13110/marvelstales.27.2.0254.

infantile and kawaii. It bears strong semblance to Kaneko Kuniyoshi's lithograph *Alice Disguised as a Rabbit* (Fig. 7). The lithograph, in turn, "resonates powerfully" with the protagonist in the well-known, award-winning, horrific tale of *Usagi* (Rabbits) by Kanai Mieko[157]. In the story, a young girl, dressed in nothing but a white rabbit suit made from real rabbit hide and fur, was found wandering about alone in the woods. Upon probing, the young girl recounted that she lived with her father on a farm where they reared rabbits for food. The father and daughter had an unnaturally strong taste for rabbit meat and would slaughter the animals daily. With time, the girl came to enjoy brutally slaughtering the rabbits and would kill the creatures for mere pleasure. When the father fell ill, the girl sewed a suit made completely of pelt from the rabbits she had killed and attempted to cheer her father up by presenting herself as a gift in the form of a giant rabbit. The shock eventually killed the man. and the girl, unable to fit into the world any longer, roamed the woods alone. The girl was found again many days later, but she lay dead on the ground still wearing the rabbit suit. The story, strongly suggestive of murder, incest, sexual pleasure, and sexual desires, is a dark one that makes the viewer generally uncomfortable. Given that Kanai's bizarre tale is well known in Japan, an average Japanese viewer would relate the kemonomimi figure in *Strawberry Fields* to the disturbed girl in *Usagi*.

The significance of rabbits in the gruesome tale and in this painting lies in the association between female sexuality and the animal. Hannah Osborne claims that "women, defined by their bodies and their sexual attributes more often than men, are stereotypically depicted in metaphors and image as sexualized cats or rabbits."[158] However, the kemonomimi in *Strawberry Fields* is not intended to offer any voyeurism pleasure to the male viewer

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[157]Knighton, "Down the Rabbit Hole," 88.

[158]Mary A. Knighton, "Down the Rabbit Hole: In Pursuit of Shōjo Alices, from Lewis Carroll to Kanai Mieko," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, no. 40 (2011): 66. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42772306.

despite being nude. The figure is postured such that her breasts and vulva are hidden from view, and she brings to mind a gruesome tale. The kemonomimi in *Strawberry Fields* is subversive and her nudity signifies the freedom from bondage. As a child, the artist made secret drawings of strange, intimate, and sexual nature, which she would discard or hide upon completion.[159] When her drawings were eventually discovered, Aoshima stopped drawing completely out of embarrassment and to put on an external facade of normality, only to pick up drawing again as an adult under the encouragement of her mentor and future husband Takashi Murakami. The body language of the kemonomimi suggests she is at ease with her environment and unabashed about being unclothed. In this case, clothes symbolize the rules and restrictions imposed by society, and nudity the freedom and escape from social constraints. The act of not only creating, but boldly presenting her subjects, which used to be indications of social misfit and peculiarity, is in itself symbolic of self-actualization and self-fulfillment and an expression of dissent and protest against societal norms.

In addition to the kemonomimi, another human-like creature is present in the painting – the female figure with elongated neck swinging from a tree on the right half. The figure is nude and takes a form that mostly resembles a human female except for the serpentine neck. The figure exhibits well-developed breasts but no genitalia where it should appear on a female human body. A mysterious bluish mass is present between the figure's breasts. This figure is likely to be a mature woman instead of an adolescent girl due to the clear presence of developed breasts. Moreover, the figure does not attempt to hide her breasts like the shōjo in this and other works by the artist, but rather, faces the viewer frontally. This motif of a female figure with unhidden breasts and hanging from or bound to a tree is seen in Aoshima's other works, such as *Japanese Apricot 2* (Fig. 8) and *Japanese Apricot 3* (Fig. 9).

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[159]Martyn, "Cute and Dark."

In *Japanese Apricot 2* and *Japanese Apricot 3*, the female figures do not have elongated necks and are bound or hung from the trees with ropes. In *Japanese Apricot 3*, the numerous skulls under the tree appear to suggest the inevitable and ominous fate of the women on the trees. The snowy mountains with unnaturally sharp peaks resembling the blades of daggers add to the sense of threat. In both *Japanese Apricot 2* and *Japanese Apricot 3*, cherry blossoms, the flower symbolic of Japan, grow on the trees on which the women are tied. These women appear helpless and unable to escape from their predicament. Comparing the shōjo and adult women figures in the artists' works, the shōjo are free while the adult women are tied, much like how the shōjo is not yet constrained by obligations of an adult woman and not yet subject to the inequalities that exist between the genders. In Japan, in particular, there is "irreducible inequality" between the sexes.[160] Men and women have strict gender-specific responsibilities and the woman's function is to provide "private, domestic support that enables men to make their way in the public world of affairs".[161] Japanese women, therefore, have limited opportunities and face discrimination in education and employment as they are expected to eventually get married and then resign from their positions.[162] The ultimate goal of marriage is motherhood, and the responsibilities for domestic affairs and rearing children lie almost entirely on women[163]. The Japanese woman, therefore, has limited life options and freedom. The trees in *Japanese Apricot 2* and *3* symbolize the Japanese patriarchal system, and the ropes that bind the women the social obligations and restrictions that are unique to the country. Further, the way in which the women are tied up in the trees brings to mind sexual bondages, and apricots extend the sexual

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[160]Robert J. Smith, "Inequality in Contemporary Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studie*s 13, no. 1 (1987): 4. https://doi.org/10.2307/132584.

[161]Smith, "Inequality," 3.

[162]Smith, "Inequality," 11-14.

[163]Smith, "Inequality," 22.

metaphor of fruits. Overall, these works illustrate how the modern Japanese woman is trapped in predetermined roles specific to her gender, one of which is to serve as a passive sexual object. The titles of the works mention Japan, suggesting that they are illustrating the predicaments of women in Japan.

In contrast to the woman figures in *Japanese Apricot 2* and *3*, the woman in *Strawberry Fields* is free. Not only is she untethered by ropes and twines, but she also appears to be swinging leisurely. The price of freedom from and defiance against social rules is suggested by her monstrosity accorded by the uncanny, long neck. According to Mari and Nakamura, one of the reasons for the recurrence of the theme of "transformation of women into monsters" in Japanese women science fiction is that "women who resist the patriarchal system are often viewed as monsters."[164] Monster metaphors in literature are tools that women science fiction writers use to express their defiance and frustrations towards society, women's call for reform, and their anguish at their helplessness against the system that have forced them to turn into monsters.[165] In *Strawberry Fields*, the artist references the visual database common to those familiar with the Japanese culture in depicting this monstrosity as a well-known yōkai – the *rokurokubi* (pulley-neck). Aoshima named Katsushika Hokusai (1760 – 1849), an ukiyo-e artist from the Edo period, and especially his yōkai art, as her main source of influence from the Japanese culture.[166] A woodblock print by Hokusai shows a female rokurokubi with a neck that stretches and swirls in snakelike fashion and a woman's head in traditional Japanese hairstyle (Fig. 10). Foster describes this imagery of a phallic and extendable long neck as "simultaneously comical, suggestive, and creepy".[167]

[164] Mari and Nakamura, "Space, Body, and Aliens," 405.

[165] Mari and Nakamura, "Space, Body, and Aliens," 405.

[166] Huysal and Saarinen, "Interview: Chiho Aoshima."

[167] Foster, The Book of Yokai, 142.

Snakes, Reptiles and Fungi

There are many snake-like forms in *Strawberry Fields*, from the rokurokubi on the tree, the small white snake in the foreground, the spotted python hanging on the branches of a tree on the right of the painting, to the curling and twisting branches and vines on the trees and on the ground. In his study of snake and dragon lore of Japan, F. J. Daniels notes that many ancient Japanese deities took the form of a snake, and these deities are often associated with water, trees, mountains, thunder, and rice wine.[168] Many scholars believe the yōkai as a "lower-order" or "unofficial" kami.[169] The difference between yōkai and kami is indistinct and depends on the degree of benevolence or malevolence towards humans in the encounter. The rokurokubi figure in *Strawberry Fields* may be interpreted as a protective figure—the kami or deity involved in this kamikakushi. She hides and protects the main protagonist of the kemonomimi shōjo in this isolated fantasy world. The neck of the rokurokubi and snakes are formally repeated in the curling vines of the tree and strawberries. This appear to symbolize the extension of power of the kami.

In addition to the snakes, there are other creatures and plants in the picture that are not typically associated with a paradisical world, such as the crocodile, lizard, luminous fungi, blood-red frog, etc. Interestingly, snakes, curling vines, fluttering butterflies, reptiles, and poisonous-looking mushrooms are also common in paintings by Dutch-born painter Otto Marseus Van Schrieck (1613-1678) (Fig. 11). In his paintings, the reptilian creatures appear to symbolize evil and death.[170] However, the similarities between Otto Marseus Van Schrieck's works and Aoshima's *Strawberry Fields* do not seem to extend to the meanings of

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[168] F. J. Daniel, "Snake and Dragon Lore of Japan," *Folklore* 71, no. 3 (1960): 155. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1258001.

[169] Foster, The Book of Yokai, 19; Ryūhei Hirota, "Traversing the Natural, Supernatural, and Paranormal: Yōkai in Postwar Japan," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 48, no. 2 (2021): 322. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48686684.

[170] "Still Life with Mushrooms, Lizard and Insects," Musée des Beaux-arts, accessed December 1, 2023, https://mbarouen.fr/en/oeuvres/still-life-with-mushrooms-lizard-and-insects.

the images. In contrast to Otto Marseus Van Schrieck's paintings, the reptilian creatures and snakes in *Strawberry Fields* do not appear threatening or menacing in anyway to the other creatures in the picture. Instead, everything coexists in harmony in Aoshima's picture. The "evil" that has been driven from *Strawberry Fields* seems to be men.

Monstrous Metamorphosis

There are two metamorphosized female figures in *Strawberry* Fields, namely, the kemonomimi with her rabbit ears, tail, and eyes and the rokurokubi with its elongated neck. The significance of the transformation of a woman's body in Aoshima's art has not been discussed in current scholarship. However, studies on transformed female bodies in Japanese woman science fiction provide insights to analyzing similar figures Aoshima's works. If science fiction by Japanese woman writers reflects "their sensitivity and open mindedness towards the transformation of their own bodies,"[171] then the same applies to fantasy art created by Japanese woman artists. The difference lies in the exact form of transformation; the former involves metamorphosis into cyborgs, while the latter is also associated with changing into yōkai. It is lamentable, however, that female survival or dignity can only be preserved through such transformations.

Monstrosity is increasingly celebrated in Japanese postwar fiction.[172] Napier claims that the problem resides in the core of modern Japanese society, one in which the fantasies of both men and women lacked any form of connection to others or sense of community.[173] Napier observes that this a trend in both the writings of both male and female Japanese fantasy writers, but male characters who are isolated from society are often enraged or

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[171]Mari and Nakamura, "Alien Spaces and Alien Bodies," 70.

[172]Napier, *The Fantastic*, 133.

[173]Napier, *The Fantastic*, 90.

agonized by their plights, while female characters revel in being left alone.[174] The kemonomimi and rokurokubi figures in *Strawberry Fields* certainly appear to be at ease and carefree in the absence of men. Like Japanese fantasy fiction, Aoshima's *Strawberry Fields* reflect women's reluctance to "subdue their 'strong egos' in deference to men"[175] and their resistance to constantly attend to men's dependence and demands on women. In *Strawberry Fields*, the rokurokubi figure is an avatar of the artist herself as an adult who has been forced to behave out of her nature to conform to societal demands. The rokurokubi symbolizes her intrinsic, albeit repressed, desire to rebel against the patriarchal society that imposes the restraining bonds that chain the women in the artist's *Apricot* series to the metaphorical trees. The kemonomimi visualizes the artist's reminiscence for a more carefree time of her life and the yearning for the power to stand up against the demands associated with being a woman in Japan. The internal alienation and transformative powers of the yōkai figures suggest the ability to subvert hierarchical boundaries that persist in Japanese society.

In contrast to the metamorphosized kemonomimi, which is generally regarded as cute in Japanese popular culture, the rokurokubi is in no way endearing. The creature has unnaturally large blue eyes that stare straight out at the viewer. Her arms are unnaturally slim and angled in such a way that suggests that the creature is moving her body freely, instead of hanging limp. Her head is elevated and supported by the serpentine neck, but the angle that it makes to face the viewer directly makes the neck appear unnaturally contorted at the joint between the neck and the head. The overall unnaturalness gives the figure an uncanny feel. To add to the grotesqueness, a light-bluish mass of unknown substance appears to be latched on or oozing out from the figure's body in between her breasts. Frederik Bryn Køhlert claims

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[174]Napier, *The Fantastic*, 93.

[175]Napier, *The Fantastic*, 83.

that the grotesque body "challenges cultural norms,"[176] while Shanti Elliot believers that grotesque "expresses a pointed reversal of moral and logical explanations."[177] Defiance of cultural norm is evident in Aoshima's *Strawberry Fields* as the two female humanoid figures are unclothed despite the Japanese culture requiring women to be decently dressed. Not only is the rokurokubi nude, she faces her torso boldly and directly at the viewer. However, the average Japanese viewer is unlikely to derive any any pleasure from viewing her fully exposed body as the creature defies the conventional aesthetics of Japanese pop culture by having a hideous mass perched in between her breasts and a snake-like neck. The female nude body is an enduring subject in the long history of Western art and Japanese art. Typical depictions of the female form and sexuality by male artists objectify women as passive subjects to sexually gratify the male viewer. The woman's body is likewise objectified in Japanese art. By depicting the rokurokubi, an avatar of herself as an adult woman, as a grotesque figure, Aoshima reclaims the female body from hegemony of the male gaze.

Polarized Vision of Woman

As in postwar shōjoron, the figures of the kemonomimi and rokurokubi in *Strawberry Fields* and the disguised Alice in Kaneko Kuniyoshi's lithograph engage in a discourse about the polarized vision of the woman. Feminist critics debate "about the innocent and essential girlness versus subversive, emancipatory agency in the girl-child/shōjo".[178] The division of *Strawberry Fields* illustrates a bipolarity in modern Japanese woman, with the left side and the kemonomimi representing child-like sweetness and innocence, and the right side and the rokurokubi suggesting insubordination and defiance towards patriarchal dominance.

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[176]Frederik Bryn Køhlert, "Female grotesques: carnivalesque subversion in the comics of Julie Doucet," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 3, no. 1 (June 2012): 20.

[177]Shanti Elliot, "Carnival and Dialogue in Bakhtin's Poetics of Folklore," *Folklore Forum* 30 (1/2): 130.

[178]Knighton, "Down the Rabbit Hole," 78.

However, the tree in the middle of the painting connects, rather than divides, the two halves. Besides the separation by colors of the sky, ground, and streams, there is no physical separation barrier. This potential freedom for any of the creatures to cross between the two halves suggests a state of liminality. Liminality is a characteristic common to yōkai.[179] According to Napier, with the growing important of the shōjo figure in the Japanese culture, the idea of the female, rather than a male, being a channel into liminality has become more pervasive[180] as the shōjo is in a "liminal stage".[181] Kilpatrick claims that when a woman is torn between yearning for womanhood and her resistance against the constraints therefrom, adolescence, the period between womanhood and childhood, is rendered by her imagination into a liminal realm in which she is free from the societal constraints and can dream freely.[182] *Strawberry Fields* is illustration of this realm.

Female-Oriented Code and Girl Consciousness

Mari and Nakamura claim that science fiction shōjo comics and shōjo novels are written with female readers in mind and "establish a female-oriented consumer code."[183] The shōjo is a culture founded upon experiences and fantasies common to Japanese women[184] and, according to Mari and Nakamura, creates the "the 'shōjo aesthetics"[185]. The same can be said of shōjo-centered works of art. Like science fiction shōjo literature, Aoshima's *Strawberry Fields* modifies the stereotypical female images rooted in patriarchal ideologies

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[179]Foster, *The Book of Yōkai*, 5.

[180]Napier, "Matter Out of Place," 285.

[181]Napier, "Matter Out of Place", 296.

[182]Kilpatrick, "Envisioning the shôjo Aesthetic," 3.

[183]Mari and Nakamura, "Space, Body, and Aliens," 398.

[184]Mari and Nakamura, "Space, Body, and Aliens," 403.

[185]Mari and Nakamura, "Space, Body, and Aliens," 405.

and creates a world in which the shōjo defies the limitations to which she is otherwise subject in conventional society. However, as cited by Kilpatrick, Takahara Eiri argues that shōjo aesthetics appeal not only to women but to a person of any gender who possesses what he terms "girl consciousness".[186] According to Takahara, "girl consciousness" subverts the dominant, i.e. patriarchal, view of the world and readers who reads shōjo fiction with this consciousness are expressing critical and creative resistance towards the societal confines through an "escape" effected by the imagination.[187] *Strawberry Fields* is subversive despite Aoshima's denial of any feminist motivation. The reluctance to be associated with feminism is common among Japanese due to the mass media's distortion of feminism as an "obscene mode of thought imported from the outside."[188] Nonetheless, it is undeniable that Aoshima has employed a feminist rhetoric in *Strawberry Fields*.

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[186]Kilpatrick, "Envisioning the shôjo Aesthetic," 2.

[187]Kilpatrick, "Envisioning the shôjo Aesthetic," 2.

[188] Mari and Nakamura, "Space, Body, and Aliens," 397.

Conclusion

Chiho Aoshima's *Strawberry Fields* bears the artist's distinctive characteristic of being cute and dark. As Christopher Knight describes, Aoshima's paintings are "at once childlike and monstrous, innocent and grotesque."[189] *Strawberry Fields* is no different. At first glance, the painting brings to mind kawaii shōjo manga and anime illustrations, but like many of the artist's works, *Strawberry Fields* is subversive rather than simply passively aesthetically pleasing. As highlighted by Kotani Mari, Superflat is a "spatial concept" that refers to an imagined space devoid of depth or thickness and in which the eye of the camera is absent;[190] instead, Superflat art focuses on "layered context".[191] *Strawberry Fields*, similarly, is laden with layers of meanings. While reminiscing about the innocence and freedom of adolescence, it also critiques the prominent gender dynamics in modern Japan and protests the unequal, rigid, and highly restrictive gender roles dictated by the Japanese patriarchal system.

Like the song *Strawberry Fields Forever* from which it is likely to have derived its name, the painting has a fantasy and remembrance theme. It depicts a largely solitary adolescent female or shōjo at ease in a world devoid of any male figure. The shōjo is readily identifiable as a kemonomimi, a popular kawaii motif in Japanese pop culture. Together with the large, brightly colored strawberries scattered across the ground and the myriad of butterflies and fishes, the figure recalls the relatively carefree period of adolescence and childhood in one's life. However, even this childhood hints of darkness and melancholy, for the kemonomimi is alone in the woods, and accompanied by a lizard, snakes, spotted fungi,

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[189]Christopher Knight, "At Once Childlike and Monstrous," *Los Angeles Times*, June 10, 2005, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2005-jun-10-et-galleries10-story.html.

[190]Kotani Mari, "Otaku Sexuality," in *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams: Japanese Science Fiction from Origins to Anime*, ed. Christopher Bolton, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, and Takayuki Tatsumi, NED-New ed., (Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 241. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.cttttc8f.6.

[191]Mari, "Otaku Sexuality," 242.

and most of all, an ominous, monstrous woman hanging from a tree. The form of the kemonomimi references the horrifying tale of *Usagi*, in which the young protagonist's attempt at escaping patriarchal control has resulted in her brutality, social misfit, and madness.

The distinct two halves of *Strawberry Fields* depict the dichotomous vision of Japanese women—innocent and girly versus defiant and subversive. While the kemonomimi on the left appears docile, the rokurokubi on the right, with her monstrous serpentine neck and the grotesque mass between her breasts, challenges patriarchal restrictions and the male gaze. However, these are not two separate stages of a woman's life, but rather, the entire painting suggests liminality between the two states. The artist defies societal norms and the duties imposed upon the Japanese woman to be sexually attractive and maternally protective. Aoshima rejects the role of women as sexual objects not only through the solidarity of the main protagonist, but also by denying any male voyeurism pleasure by shielding the breast and private area of the kemonomimi, placing a unsightly mass in between the breasts of the rokurokubi, and the absence of the private area on the rokurokubi. The female figures also do not offer any sense of maternal security since main figure has not reached sexual maturity and therefore cannot become a mother; the grotesque rokurokubi hanging defiantly and freely on the tree suggests threat to the male viewer. The painting celebrates a temporary freedom from established norms and order. It is, hence, less about the sexuality of women, but more about their desire to be independent of men and their resistance to the responsibilities forced upon them by the patriarchal society.

A Japanese viewer or someone who is familiar with Japanese popular culture would immediately recognize the yōkai elements in this painting. The two female humanoid figures suggest powers beyond an average human. Therefore, although the kemonomimi may attract lingering male gazes with her kawaiisa (cuteness), the male viewer would be aware that she

possesses super-human powers and is therefore not the stereotypical meek and submissive Japanese woman. Further, the clearing is protected by the menacing rokurokubi, as well as snakes, reptiles, poisonous looking fungi, and sinister tree vines. Not only are men excluded from the sanctuary offered by the fantasy landscape in the painting, but they are also actively guarded against. This expresses strong sentiments against the dependence and dominance of men on women in Japanese society, much like how the male protagonists in Japanese science fiction stories actively seeks the lost women while the women resist being found. However, as Mari notes, the separation between fantasy and reality is always maintained.[192] The painting offers merely a window of escapism and solace from reality and its bonds to which both the artist and her viewers must return.

Strawberry Fields, imbued with Japanese popular cultural codes and folk beliefs, offers a uniquely Japanese experience. Much like how Japanese fantasy writers incorporate elements that are uniquely Japanese to address issues specific to modern Japan and yet their works attract non-Japanese as much as Japanese readers,[193] the same can be said of the works of Superflat artists like Aoshima. As indicated by how well her works have been received internationally, Aoshima's paintings, containing elements readily identifiable with Japanese popular and traditional culture, resonate with an international audience. Through her work, the artist engages in a discourse in gender related anxieties and feminism. Her works appeal to Japanese and non-Japanese, as well as male and female, viewers alike, as the sense of oppression and constraint under the patriarchal system, and the desire to free oneself from the binding social norms imposed by the system is universal across culture, gender, and nationality.

[192]Mari, "Otaku Sexuality," 247.

[193]Napier, *The Fantastic*, 2.

Figures

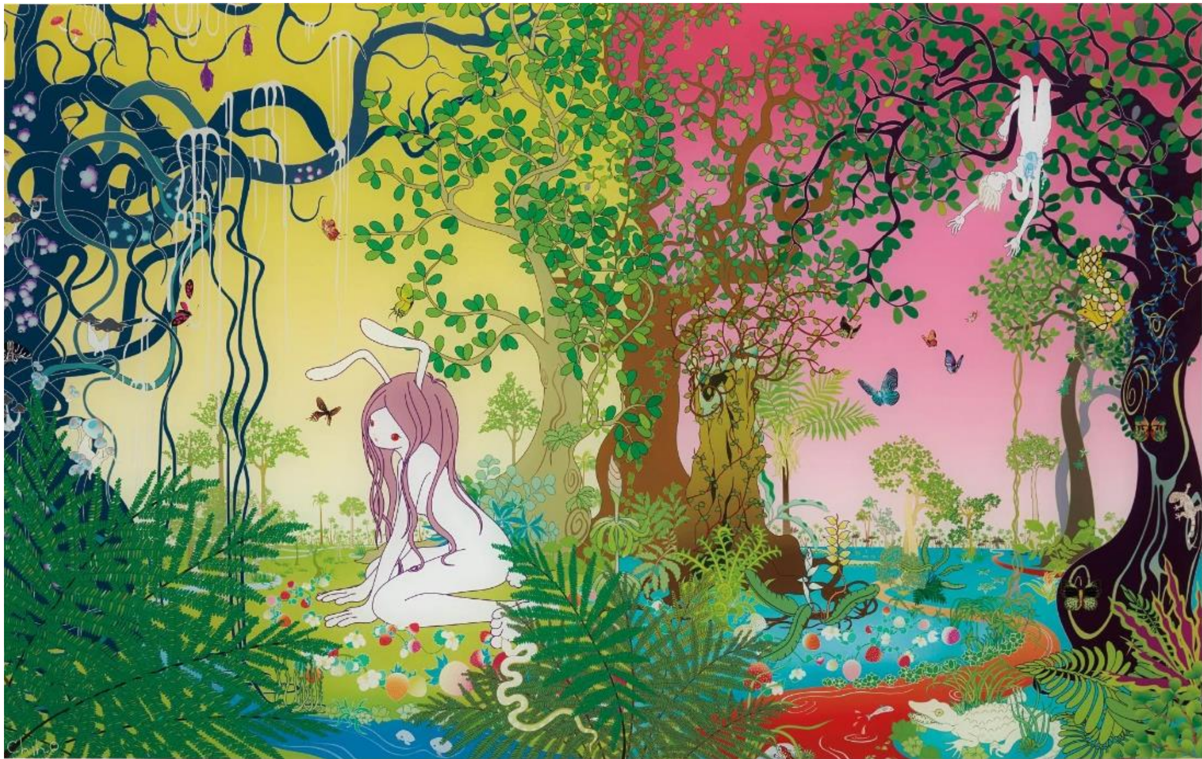

Figure 1. Chiho Aoshima, *Strawberry Fields*, 2003, digital chromogenic print face-mounted on Plexiglas, 85.1 x 134.6 cm, MutualArt, accessed September 1, 2003, https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Strawberry-Fields/BFD118022DB5212F?login=1.

Figure 2. Chiho Aoshima, *Fish Moimoi*, 2009, watercolor and color pencil on paper, 24 × 24.5 cm, Perrotin, New York, accessed October 1, 2023, https://leaflet.perrotin.com/view/56/artwork/53264/16798.

Figure 3. Chiho Aoshima, *Little Hope, the Chicken Girl*, 2008, fiber-reinforced plastic, 48.5 × 47.5 × 30 cm, Mutual Art, accessed October 1, 2023, https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Little-Hope--the-Chicken-Girl/1AC9CE742E94A66AF4C95C856CD18F7B.

Figure 4. Chiho Aoshima, *Rabbit Girl*, 2009, color on Japanese rice paper, 8 11/16 × 9 13/16 in., Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, accessed October 1, 2023, https://www.seattleartmuseum.org/chiho.

Figure 5. Toyohara Kunichika, Onoe Kikugorō V as Otowake Neko no ke (Right), Bandō Mitsugorō IV as Aishō Michinoku (Center), Onoe Kikugorō V as Isogai Mibunosuke (Left) in the Kabuki play Tōkai Kidan Nekomata Yashiki, 1870, triptych of woodblock prints, 24.8 x 35.6 cm, The Met, New York, accessed October 2, 2023, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/55921.

Figure 6. Artist unknown, *Picture of Monsters (Bakemono no e),* ca. 1700, handcroll, ink and color on paper, 44 x 152.5 cm, Ex coll. Jarry F. Bruning, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, accessed October 2, 2023, https://bakemono.lib.byu.edu/yokai/nekomata/.

Figure 7. Kaneko Kuniyoshi, *Alice Disguised as a Rabbit* (兎に扮するアリス), lithograph from the 1978 exhibition *Alice's Dream*, In *Kaneko Kuniyoshi: La Galerie d'Alice* (金子国義アリスの画廊), Takashi Mutsuo ed. (Tokyo: Bijutsu Publishers): 81.

Figure 8. Chiho Aoshima, *Japanese Apricot 2*, 2005, offset lithograph, 21 x 30 in., location unknown, accessed October 5, 2023, https://www.kumicontemporary.com/view/japanese-apricot-2-chiho-aoshima.html.

Figure 9. Chiho Aoshima, *Japanese Apricot 3*, 2008, offset lithograph, 68 × 81 cm, Artsy, accessed October 5, 2023, https://www.artsy.net/artwork/chiho-aoshima-japanese-apricot-3-1.

Figure 10. Katsushika Hokusai, *Transmitting the Spirit and Revealing the Form of Things, Hokusai's Random Sketches (Denshin Kaishu, Hokusai manga)* vol. 12, 1834, published by Eirakuya Tōshirō, woodblock printed book, ink on paper, ca. 22 x 28.3 cm, private collection, in Andreas Marks, *Japanese Yokai and Other Supernatural Beings – Authentic Paintings and Prints of 100 Ghosts, Demons, Monsters, and Magicians* (United States: Tuttle Publishing, 2023), 105.

Figure 11. Otto Marseus Van Schrieck, *Forest Floor Still Life with Three Snakes, Lizard and Toad*, 1663, oil on canvas, 61 × 51 cm, Wikimedia Commons, accessed December 1, 2023, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Otto_Marseus_van_Schrieck_-_Three_snakes,_lizard_and_toad_%281663%29.jpg.

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