

Tokyo Art Beat : Artist Interview

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Interview with Yuya Hashizume: aesthetic of “casualness” and respect for Fujiko F. Fujio

Self-taught artist Yuya Hashizume has gained popularity with his “eyewater” series and is now holding two solo exhibitions at Yutaka Kikutake Gallery and Spiral. (Translation: Alena Prusakova)



Yuya Hashizume at the studio

Yuya Hashizume is a Tokyo-based artist born in Okayama Prefecture in 1983. His recent works include “eyewater,” a series of works in which portraits inspired by Fujiko F. Fujio's characters shed a single tear. His solo exhibition “eyewater -everybody feels the same-” is currently on view at Yutaka Kikutake Gallery (Tokyo) until September 17, and another solo exhibition, “eyewater,” opens at Spiral from September 2 to September 11. Although Hashizume has already gained popularity in the market, his background of working for an outdoor brand before becoming a self-taught artist is unique to the world of contemporary art. Upon his second solo exhibition at Yutaka Kikutake Gallery, we interviewed Hashizume about his approach as an artist and his newest works. 【Tokyo Art Beat】



Yuya Hashizume eyewater animal ver. Manekineko -tokyo2022- 2022 acrylic on canvas 162x112 cm

Boundaries between original and copy

—You are known for a series of works that reference the style of manga artist Fujiko F. Fujio. Can you tell us how you started with this style?

It started with an exhibition called “Fujikogansakushi” (the Placebox3129) in my hometown of Okayama in 2017. In that exhibition, I wanted to think about the possibility that everything refers to something and is always an imitation of something else.

I’ve had this idea for a rather long time. However, people have never believed me much [laugh]. For example, if I drew Doraemon in school and the teacher said, “You are good at that, maybe you will be an artist in the future,” and I actually became an artist, then part of my life as an artist began with my imitation of Fujiko. I believe that everything is based on such “imitation” and “emulation.”

On the other hand, sometime before this exhibition, a controversy regarding plagiarism of the emblems of the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics broke out, and there was a lot of discussion about original and copying. What struck me as I listened to this discussion was that many people in society seem to think there is a “perfect original.” But are the boundaries between original and copy so clear?

Before I became an artist, I worked in PR for an outdoor brand, and it was not uncommon in the fashion world for one brand's product or advertisement to be referenced elsewhere. In addition, I have imitated my successful colleagues’ work styles and sometimes felt that it was indeed plagiarism. But people are obsessed with the “original.” Why is that? The exhibition in Okayama dealt with this personal question, incorporating the works of Fujiko, whom I have admired for a long time, as a motif.

—Your work also hints at pop art. Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein took existing advertising and comic book images and applied them to their work. In this sense, the boundary between an original and a copy in art is not so self-evident. At the same time, however, it is also true that your works and methods have been criticized in the past.

That’s right. I think the major difference between the pop art era and now is the existence of social media. My works used to receive a lot of negative attention online. It was quite hard for me at the time, but on the other hand, people got to know my name, and some said that my works were good. In that sense, this experience was both negative and positive for me.

—Did you expect it to blow up like that?

No, it was held in Okayama, and I did not anticipate that level of response.

However, in terms of public reaction, since I used to work in PR, I am very conscious of image trends. When I started referencing Fujiko's style, the female bust-up portraits were just gaining popularity. For example, I think Kyne's breakthrough was part of this trend, and when I tried to create my pieces, I consciously chose to use female images. I didn't expect that amount of negative feedback, but the choice of motif was intentional, and I was hoping it would all work out.

At the time, however, I was more conscious that my works looked more like fashionable illustrations than works of art, and I thought it would be exciting if they were made into T-shirts or other products. In fact, at the time, I created most of my work digitally and released it as reproducible prints. I started calling myself an artist because of that, and at first, I thought of painting at other people's request. And I simply didn't have the money, so I had to make it count. Simply put, I was thinking of "selling my soul."

Paintings and the aesthetics of "casualness"

—How was your signature series, "eyewater," in which a character sheds a single tear, created?

The works did not sell at the "Fujikogansakushi" exhibition. Still, I was approached by a fashion brand, and I decided to participate in the upcoming exhibition under the name "Fujikogansakushi" (Fujiko's counterfeiter). But again, my artwork caused issues, and, as a result, I could not exhibit it. Reactions were mixed, with some saying that "it was risky and compromised" and others saying that the controversy was "fashion-like." Around that time, someone said to me, "Why don't you add one thing that is unique to you and try making a solid painting piece instead?" And this led to the "eyewater" series.

Although some of Fujiko's works are for adult audiences, most feature children, and crying scenes are rather common among them. Thus, tears are a Fujiko-like motif, but I decided to present them as a painting rather than a print. Tears do not have a particular limiting meaning. I see the canvas as a comic frame disconnected from the narrative above and below. It can be taken negatively or positively, there may be a story to follow, or this frame may be the last. In fact, I find it interesting that the viewer's perspectives and reactions are so different, and I think it is best to leave the interpretation to them.

—You have mentioned in the past interviews your fondness for similar products lined up inorganically, like at IKEA and Muji stores. While working with the emotional

motif of tears, the structure of the work, in which the motifs are replicated in different colors, is also very pop art-like.

Many of the reactions to “eyewater” were negative, saying that it looked “sad” or “painful” rather than positive. Focusing too much on the negative aspects didn't feel right, so I tried to include more pop elements, which led to repeated patterns and bright colors.

I also like the industrial texture of the works of Julian Opie and groovisions, and have been influenced by the works of Designers Republic, a British design studio that has created covers for Aphex Twin and many others. Besides, I am from a generation inspired by cultural magazines such as “relax” and the rise of KAWS. So I wanted to express my sense of “cool” by giving it a form in my works and making it understandable to those around me.

This is because, at that time, my boss often dismissed my idea of “coolness.” Hence, I decided to “push” my senses and thoughts when I started expressing myself as an artist. This is also why I was focused on creating prints and mass-marketed products like T-shirts when I started my journey. I thought that if prints could reach the houses as works of art, it would make “art” more fashionable for the Japanese people rather than something incomprehensible and unfamiliar.

But I also became a little greedy [laugh] and heard people say, “If you paint by hand, it would be more valuable,” and that's partially why I shifted to painting. This attitude may be criticized as “having no core as a creator,” but I think this looseness is fashionable and a way of living I have learned through my past working experience.

—It seems you possess a sort of “casualness,” but in a way that is not necessarily bad. The idea that “there is no such thing as an original, copy is fine” is very “casual,” and the direction of your activities also changes in response to the opinions of others and the current trends. The way you approach the world is very “casual.” Perhaps it is a unique aesthetic you formed from many cultural influences and working experiences in the fashion world.

I am very flattered you see it this way. I am often told that I am being “cheeky” or that “that is not what art is about,” but in a way, I am very sincere and serious, and doing this as my way of living.

—You also have deformed canvas works in which several characters are entangled with each other. How did you come up with this idea?

This type of work references the emotions found in Fujiko, and Osamu Tezuka's works, among others. The interesting thing is that there are some gymnastics elements in them. In many of my works, I include puzzle-like elements that give viewers a sense of such visual pleasures.

—The richness of the Japanese manga vocabulary could indeed be given more attention in the art world.

Someone once told me about working with Fujiko's motifs, "It's Pandora's box. Everyone knows it is good, and if you put a little fashionable element in it, it is guaranteed to sell. No one uses it because they know it's Pandora's box."

I couldn't say anything at the time, but I think things like Fujiko's works have become so familiar and ordinary to the Japanese that many people are oblivious to the details. In this sense, I also hope that people who like my work will look more closely at the details of expression in its origins.

—At one point, you also compared the relationship between Fujiko's works and yours to classical rakugo.

Indeed. In rakugo a story is passed on to later generations while slightly changing it and making it more modern. I believe that my activities also possess such elements.

Showing "universal beliefs"



Yuya Hashizume eyewater -everybody feels the same- / about death and resurrection 2022 silkscreen and acrylic canvas 116,7×91 cm

—In the new works exhibited at the upcoming solo exhibition at Yutaka Kikutake Gallery, the figures face forward instead of the usual diagonal angle. Instead of neutral clothing, they wear clothes and items that reveal their location. Also, some of the works show a shift from the flat surface we have seen before, emphasizing brushstrokes in the backgrounds of the figures. Tell us about these new developments and experimentations.

Like many of my activities, it is a mixture of two motives, serious and, in a way, unserious.

On a serious note, I think the past few years have been too eventful, like the pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Plus, I have a cat, and the issue of animal protection in the

wake of the war was also a big concern for me. Amid such major issues, one thing I decided to do, as someone who is now recognized by name a little, was to try to create a work with a pinpoint theme.

It's pretty natural to say, "I don't like war," and many people feel the same. The exhibition's subtitle, "everybody feels the same," represents this feeling. I wanted to show this obvious feeling.

Other characters, for instance, have newspaper helmets on their heads and carry chopstick guns. Given the state of the world today, this might lead one to wonder how much happier the world would be with chopsticks guns instead of real guns. It is embarrassing to talk about "love" directly, so I try to express it in a slightly pop-like form.

Some of the characters remind us of "environmental issues" with their hair made from gas emissions and windmill earrings, while others are dressed like Frida Kahlo at the Mexican Festival of the Dead, reminding us of "religion" and "death" issues. As you said, the paintings have more clearly defined regional and thematic concepts than before.

As for the unserious motive, I've recently noticed that many people desire to see the traces of my technique and strokes. I prefer flat textures, but I realized that the artist's mark is important in the art world. It is illuminating, but at the same time, I sometimes feel that art loses flexibility due to such obsession. So, in a sense, there is an irony in these brushstrokes, or perhaps I feel that if I did this, it would add more complexity to work.



At the studio. Cats in Hashizume's works are modeled after his beloved cat.

—Although, at first glance, it can be divided into serious and unserious motives, there is a connection between presenting what “everyone must be thinking” and changing one's style based on the opinions of others. I think your basic stance is to change what you offer in response to what is required of you.

This may be because I felt difficulty earning money as an artist when I started. I don't want to be an artist at the expense of those around me. I don't want it to be all business, but I also don't want poverty. Perhaps people in the art world know how to make their works sell better, but they are not comfortable doing so. But I figured I would take advantage of my PR experience and do it. I consider my activities to be “Yuya Hashizume's promotion.”

I also organize a “Tokyo Motorpool” group exhibition and often meet with artists. Sometimes, when I say, “I want to buy this work,” the artist responds, “Oh, you're going to buy it?” and looks surprised. And I just wonder, “Are you making them expecting that they won't be sold?” [laugh]. Or was the idea of selling never there in the first place?

There is a tendency in the art world to view buying and selling as bad things. I have a certain admiration for art that has nothing to do with the economy, but I have doubts and concerns about it as an ex-salesperson. These thoughts are also included in the strokes.

—I heard that you used recycled paints to create the works for this exhibition.

That's right. I mostly used to create digital works, so I didn't care about it then, but when I switched to analog and started using paint, there was just so much garbage. And I was uncomfortable with it. Then I thought that since people like the “pattern” of my works, the colors could be anything. Of course, I consider the quality of the work, but then I store the leftover paint of the same color scheme and use the colors that mix naturally with it in the next piece. I think it is also good for the buyers because they can help reduce environmental impact rather than exaggerate it.

—Why did you make the characters face forward?

I had done a similar style before under the theme of “mirrors.” It was after all that negative experience, so I wanted to make viewers face the painting as if it were a mirror and ask, “Is this just plagiarism?”. This exhibition is an extension of this idea, and since many of the works address major social themes, I made them face the front again so that the message would not be distorted or lost.

Another experimental element of this exhibition was using the silkscreening technique to print bumpy letters on the canvas. I feel that nowadays, many people think they have seen everything just by looking at images on Instagram or other social media, so I included this element because it is something that can only be experienced on-site. Thus, this time I also focused on the element of firsthand experience.

Artist loved for “personality”

—Earlier, you referred to your activities as “Yuya Hashizume's promotion,” but besides the “eyewater” series, you have also created works in a completely different genre. For example, “Henna Vender,” a portrait vending machine-like device, or video works featuring botanical surveys. What motivates these activities? Does it depend on whether you find it interesting and fun?

Yes, I call it the “Beat Takeshi theory.” Among my creative activities, “eyewater” is the coolest one, so it is similar to when Takeshi writes his name in kanji as “Takeshi Kitano.”

And other works with stronger comedic tone are similar to his comedian name “Beat Takeshi.” That’s how I roughly separate them.

—Including “eyewater” series, what do you plan to do in the future as “artist Yuya Hashizume”?

I’m not sure. When I was younger, I wanted to confront the world with some sort of antithesis, but recently, as I have gotten older, I have been enjoying riding motorcycles and fishing, and I am moving more and more toward the "individual" direction. Of course, I take “eyewater” seriously, but at the same time, I feel that I am creating something that people asked for, and I hope that in the end, everyone will be able to find what they enjoy doing and express that in their way.

On the other hand, regarding “eyewater,” Japanese people should talk more about the works of “Fujiko Fujio” and consider their good qualities. I think they should be valued more. Fujiko Fujio’s position is hard to see since Osamu Tezuka is a significant figure in his origin, but many people in the art field like the more avant-garde Fujio Akatsuka. However, I think Fujiko Fujio's style is very Japanese in the way he successfully incorporates various elements, including those from foreign cultures, to create works that everyone can enjoy. I hope people will recognize this more, and I would like to become a small spark that creates that atmosphere.

—These solo exhibitions are likely to become a turning point for your future career.

I hope people will enjoy the works, as they are carefully selected to convey a message more than ever. In addition, through collaboration with gallerist Yutaka Kikutake, I am learning about the ways and values of art I have lacked. I hope that the visitors will be able to appreciate the results of these efforts too.

I am grateful that people are somewhat interested in my work now, but I am sure that in a while, my current style will be called “lame.” I am trying different approaches so that when that happens, I won’t have anything to do and won’t be left with nothing. I hope that the many seeds I planted will eventually grow and be appreciated again in the future. Like a comedian, I hope to have a “breakthrough twice.”

—It is funny that you think about your own revival [laugh]. Listening to you today, I felt your previous PR experience is very significant. Your style changes flexibly, and

you trust the world's atmosphere rather than your identity. This is rather unusual among artists.

I am the second son, so I read between the lines very well [laugh]. I also want to keep going as long as I can. It is important and fashionable to sell fast and make money quickly, but since I am an artist, I want to continue even after I am seventy. I don't want to become a pompous "teacher" but rather to maintain a little cheekiness by saying, "Please buy my works!".

I am more interested in making the life of "Yuya Hashizume" interesting and turning it into money rather than the individual series or works themselves. Until not so long ago, many artists attracted the public's interest and were loved for their "personality." I hope to become that kind of artist.