

Kawaii & Queer World Making in Japanese Contemporary Art

Lesson Plan: Kawaii & Queer World Making in Japanese Contemporary Art

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Keywords: Anime, Queer Studies, Contemporary Art, Gender, Cuteness



Target Audience:

Undergraduate students

Duration:

3 class sessions, 50-60 minutes long

Potential Courses to Include this Lesson in:

- Japanese Studies courses
- East Asian Studies courses
- Popular Culture courses

- Media Studies courses
- Art Theory courses

Background:

In these lessons we explore how artists use the *kawaii* and girlish ("*shōjo*") expression to comment on fourth wave feminist concerns in Japan. As a form of "queer world-making" this artistic practice does not operate "from or outside of heteronormative realit[y]" but rather as an "imaginary inversion of those realities, utopian representations bearing the imprint (*en creux*) of things the dominant culture lacks or suppresses" (Latimer 2019, p. 389). Wakeling (2011, p. 142) reflects on the ways in which artists in Japan with an interest in *kawaii* have sought to "defend themselves" through adopting the values and aesthetics of society, while "reject[ing] those values and seek[ing] a haven within a tiny world of their own." Taking a queer feminist perspective, students explore the potential and limitations of cute aesthetics for this purpose and are encouraged to research and analyze the work of an artist of their own choosing.

Learning Objectives:

To explore the aesthetic qualities, conceptual meanings, and practices behind girlish cuteness in contemporary Japanese art.

Core Reading:

Wakeling, Emily Jane. "Girls are dancin': *shōjo* culture and feminism in contemporary Japanese art." *New Voices in Japanese Studies* 5 (Dec 2011): pp. 130–146, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21159/nv.05.06>.

Assigned Materials:

Chiho Aoshima, Portfolio:

https://www.perrotin.com/artists/Chiho_Aoshima/14

Saeborg, Official Website:

<https://saeborg.com/>

Sebastian Masuda, Official Website:

<https://sebastianmasuda.com/works/art/>

Yoshitomo Nara, Official Website:

<https://www.yoshitomonara.org/en/>

Yoshitomo Nara, Artist Introduction:

<https://youtu.be/qpnrG0ahWMQ?feature=shared>

Adesina, Precious. "Yoshitomo Nara and the dark side of Japanese Cuteness." *BBC Culture*, August 14, 2024.

<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20240813-yoshitomo-nara-and-the-dark-side-of-japanese-cuteness>

Tomorrow Girls Troop Projects:

Pink Mask: <https://tomorrowgirlstroop.com/mask-1>

Power Parade: <https://tomorrowgirlstroop.com/power-parade>

Happy Girlfriend: <https://tomorrowgirlstroop.com/happy-girlfriend-2>

"'Beyond Binary' TGT & Tsukuru Fors TALK 04 November 2023." Posted August 20, 2024, by Tomorrow Girls Troop. YouTube, 47 min., 55 sec., <https://youtu.be/meFLL52EicQ>

Optional Assigned Materials:

Hasegawa, Yuko. "Post-identity kawaii: Commerce, gender and contemporary Japanese Art." In *Consuming Bodies: Sex and Contemporary Japanese Art*, edited by Fran Loyd, pp. 127-141. London: Reaktion Books, 2002.

Latimer, Tirza. "Dear World: Arts and Theories of Queer Feminism." In *A Companion to Feminist Art*, edited by Hilary Robinson and Maria Elena

Buszek, pp. 389–404. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, 2019, doi:
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118929179.ch22>

Pan, Mengfei. "Murakami Takashi: Superflat. *Japanese and Popular Culture*, April 20, 2020. <https://jmpc-utokyo.com/keyword/superflat/>

Vartanian, Ivan. *Drop dead cute : the new generation of women artists in Japan*. San Francisco: ChronicleBooks LLC, 2005.

Activity/Procedure & Discussion Questions:

Lesson 1:

Students work in groups to research analyze the practice of one of the following artists:

- Chiho Aoshima: https://www.perrotin.com/artists/Chiho_Aoshima/14
- Saeborg: <https://saeborg.com/>
- Sebastian Masuda: <https://sebastianmasuda.com/works/art/>

1. What subjective experiences is the artist trying to convey? What is your experience of their practice?
2. What are the conceptual motivations of the artist?
3. What materials and *kawaii* media does this artist use, and how does this link to their conceptual motivations? Consider if any of the following apply:
 - Color
 - Form/shape/morphologies
 - Textures
 - Use of found objects
 - Symbolism
4. In the set reading, Wakeling (2011, p. 132) observes the ways in which girlishness is stereotyped by "individual fulfillment, decadence,

consumption and play." In what ways are these cultural forms reproduced in these artists' practice?

5. How would you describe the "queer world" these artists have sought to convey? In what way do they reflect and subvert heteronormative girliness? (See Wakeling 2011, pp. 134–141.)

Lesson 2:

1. Review a sample of Yoshitomo Nara's portfolio (<https://www.yoshitomonara.org/en/>)
 1. What are the stylistic features of his figures? What do they represent?
 2. As a class, listen the following artist's statement by Yoshitomo Nara:

<https://youtu.be/qpnrG0ahWMQ>.

1. What subjective experiences does Nara aim to convey through his practice?
2. In what ways does his latest work form dialogues and dissonances with the natural landscape?
3. Review the following feature article about Nara's practice: <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20240813-yoshitomo-nara-and-the-dark-side-of-japanese-cuteness>.
 1. In what ways does this conceptual framing reflect Wakeling's (2011, p. 134) discussion of cuteness and darkness?
 4. How would you describe the "queer world" that Nara has sought to convey? In what way does he reflect and subvert heteronormative girliness? (See Wakeling 2011, pp. 134–141.)

Lesson 3:

1. In small groups, analyze one of the following projects by Tomorrow Girls Troop:

1. Pink Mask: <https://tomorrowgirlstroop.com/mask-1>
 2. Power Parade: <https://tomorrowgirlstroop.com/power-parade>
 3. Happy Girlfriend: <https://tomorrowgirlstroop.com/happy-girlfriend-2>
2. In what ways does Tomorrow Girls Troop reproduce and subvert the *kawaii* aesthetics evident in the practices of the artists discussed in lessons 1-2?
 3. As a class, review and discuss Tomorrow Girl Troop's panel on their "Beyond the Binary" performance piece: <https://youtu.be/meFLL52EicQ>. In what ways does a gender diversity lens enhance and complicate discussions of *kawaii* and girliness in Contemporary Japanese Art?

Evaluation:

Students choose an artist who responds to *kawaii* aesthetics and discuss the strategies they use to co-participate in "queer world-building."

Instructor Reference Materials:

Jerrat-Poole Adan and Sarah Brophy. "Encounters with Kusama: disability, feminism and the mediated Mad art of #InfiniteKusama." *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 6 (Jun 2020): pp. 905–922, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1770313>

Tan, Chang, Laura Kina, and Tina Chen. "Remapping Asian and Asian Diasporic Art: Identity, Intervention, and Care." *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 8, no. 2 (Fall 2022): pp. vi–xx, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1353/vrg.2022.0021>

Nara, Yoshitomo. *Slash with a knife*. Tokyo: Little More, 1998.

Nara, Yoshitomo. *Nobody knows: Yoshitomo Nara drawings*. Tokyo, Little More, 2001.

Nara, Yoshitomo et al. *Yoshitomo Nara : nobody's fool*. New York & London:

Abrams, 2010.