

# At once childlike and monstrous

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT  
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Nature is almost always described with feminine attributes, starting with motherhood. Perhaps that's also why women are regularly assigned the role of civilizing agent for society's brutal and authoritarian play of power. Tokyo-based artist **Chiho Aoshima** collapses these contradictory characterizations of nature and culture in her work, which is the subject of a marvelous solo exhibition at Blum & Poe Gallery (her second). The tensions between them develop within an apocalyptic narrative that, like all good fairy tales, is at once childlike and monstrous, innocent and grotesque.

The ambitious exhibition centers on a sculpture that is a life-size doll, an environmental mural that wraps around four gallery walls and runs underfoot on the floor and — most impressively — a seven-minute digital animation. The video is shown on five flat-screen televisions placed side by side (call it Tele-Scope, in honor of its Cinema-Scope roots). The wide, narrow row of TVs creates a postmodern Japanese screen painting.

Also included are seven glossy computer graphic prints, most related to the digital animation, which are sandwiched between large sheets of clear and white plexiglass. The format emphasizes their synthetic quality. Together these works form an epic that might be called "Revenge of the Vivian Girls," in memory of those pre-adolescent waifs in the obsessive, phantasmagoric drawings of the late outsider-artist Henry Danger.

"City Glow," the video animation, was produced with film director Bruce Ferguson. The story begins from the viewpoint of a worm — not unlike "Dialogue of Insects" (1924-25), a dazzling transitional work by Joan Miró with one foot in the decorative manner of Catalan folk art and the other in the Parisian dream-world of Surrealism.

Likewise, Aoshima shifts our perspective by collapsing genres high and low. Pop art fuses with *kawaii*, the "cute" imagery that virtually defines contemporary Japanese pop culture. ("Hello Kitty" was an early example exported to America.) As "City Glow" begins, you are down with the other bugs crawling around in the underbrush, looking up at a looming urban world that is at once mesmerizing in its enchantment and ominous in its capacity to destroy.

In the background, tall, organic structures wave slowly in the breeze, wrapped in illuminated checkerboard patterns and with faces dominated by big round eyes. Each one looks like a fusion of skyscraper, glowworm and young girl. The soundtrack mixes electronic music with ocean waves, like a new wave Genesis. The tale that unfolds is a simple life cycle, all dressed up in flat, vivid colors and dominated by sensuous, neo-Art Nouveau linearity.

The scene begins with an awakening down in the grass. Then it rains. Lush blossoms erupt. Cocoons open into butterflies. Night descends and plants begin to glow in unearthly hues of violet, red and magenta, as if

irradiated. A cemetery suddenly appears in the forest, populated by death-heads. Fairies arrive — and a rainbow, which rises toward a blue sky that fades to black.

The End.

The beautifully crafted animation derives from an ancient Shinto mixture of nature worship, prophecy, fertility cults and shamanism. Aoshima takes this tradition for a dizzyingly contemporary spin.

Self-taught as an artist — she studied economics in college — Aoshima has been an in-house computer technician for Takashi Murakami, the progenitor of the art movement called Superflat, and she's a whiz with the Macintosh. Her pretty, round-eyed girls with flowing hair are stereotypical

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**CHIHO AOSHIMA:** Multiple art forms, from present-day animation to traditional Japanese art, can be seen in "Sky."

typical ingénues in Japanese animation, and the rest of her visual vocabulary is drawn from similar sources, as well as from traditional Japanese art.

Aoshima layers the flat imagery so that movement on each plane occurs at different rates of speed across the field of vision. Without employing Western conventions of perspective and shading, this perpetual slipping and sliding suggests a floating world of three-dimensional space. It also adds to the dreamy, hypnotic quality of the video.

The wall-mounted individual prints are like outtakes from the story. The walk-in mural, composed from giant inkjet prints on paper and vinyl, is similar in theme to the video — except here you move around within it, examining the action, rather than [Galleries, from Page E28] events unfolding before your eyes. (Don't miss the "gushing zombies" that erupt on the floor.) And then there is the life-size doll — the one element that doesn't quite work.

Reminiscent of Murakami's sculptures, the life-size female figure sits atop a "glow city" pedestal that is illuminated from

within. Clad in a buckskin loincloth, crowned with blue and pink synthetic hair and adorned with strands of shells, beads and feathers, it's a post-Pop hippie-chick fetish-object. It is also inert. The sculpture deadens the magical, abstract spirit of Aoshima's other delightful work.

**Blum & Poe**, 2754 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A., (310) 836-2062, blumandpoe.com; through July 2. Closed Sundays and Mondays.