

## Atsushi Kaga: Irrevocable Consequences

The otherworldly imaginative possibilities of science fiction and fantasy have become part of our everyday, commonplace idiom. From the slapstick mayhem of *Itchy and Scratchy* to the cacophonous carnivals of Mike Kelley, there is a familiarity and recognisable habit in the surreal hyperbole. It makes us buddy up to the risk of overdose and overwhelming glut, but not without their rewards; walking side by side with superabundance without the estrangement of disbelief opens its multiplicity to a choice of points of entry and engagement. From the vast scenery particular points pique, tangle, and draw in to varying degrees, leaving it solely to the viewer to fire the synapses that associate the disparate elements. Atsushi Kaga's minutely detailed exhibition 'Bunny's Darkness and Other Stories', consisting of six stacked televisions, three sculptures, two large-scale drawings and over one hundred small-scale drawings and paintings presents an insect-like compound view into the constantly re-imagined, contradictory and tender microcosm of Bunny. Its recurring scenes of casual symbolism and disarmingly cute anthropomorphism challenge the viewer to actively create some semblance of a coherent world.

Exploiting an easy acquaintance with the form of the talking 'funny animal' of comics and animation, the cast of characters includes the affable Bunny, as well as a panda, a perpetually crippled bear, a depressed lion, a cynical penguin, and a big-eared, gnome-like creature, all mixed in with a set of human princesses, schoolgirls, businessmen, geishas, monks and a failed superhero dressed in a sort of red-devil body-suit complete with pointy ears. While some of these figures seem to represent broad personality types, such as the mischievous red superhero, or the business-driven penguin, the use of anthropomorphism means that others function as a set of individual totems, or 'avatars' (in the contemporary internet use of the term), with which the artist explores a set of imaginary tragicomic situations involving himself as the hapless, love-stricken protagonist Bunny, his panda father and kangaroo mother, and a roll-call of friends and acquaintances.

Bunny walks into a room. Startled, he sees his father, the panda, in front of a full-length mirror trying on a pair of rabbit ears. In another scene, Bunny wakes up bewildered: in the bed next to him is a man in a suit wearing a pair of rabbit ears. This pretence to rabbit-dom highlights the conceit that Bunny is the only rabbit in this fantasy world, but also acknowledges the 'dressing up' of characters and questions their peculiar traits as humanoid animals. It provides an interesting parallel with the techniques used by Art Spiegelman in his graphic novel re-telling his father's experience of the Holocaust, *Maus* (1973–1991), in which characters are represented by animals along national and racial lines. Jews are portrayed as mice, Germans as cats, Americans as dogs, all the way to Swedes as reindeer. Spiegelman's metaphor carries throughout the historical narrative, even when in the present tense from where his father's reminiscences are being told. At points, however, Spiegelman addresses the reader from a meta-narrative present, depicting himself at the drawing board creating the comic; at these times, he is a human wearing the mask of a mouse. On one level, it foregrounds the *kunstlerroman* aspect of the work, acknowledging his own role in the active creation of these images and

interpretation of his father's memories. At the same time, Spiegelman draws attention to the animal device as a means of both psychological distancing and projection, but also to the implicit dangers involved in such religious and nationalistic stereotyping, having noted elsewhere that the animal metaphors in *Maus* "are meant to self-destruct".<sup>1</sup> Kaga's (Bunny's) world is a displaced anthropomorphism of animals and humans both wearing costumes. Take for example the penguin, wearing a brown tie and standing next to an office desk, stranded afloat on an iceberg. In the night sky above him, the word "Hope" drips red like a horror movie title. The penguin holds up a sign: "Save the earth. FUCK the polar bears!" Similar to *Maus*, there is an ironic consciousness of the unnatural, emblematic state of the narrative's allegories that unsettles its own representative images.

'Bunny's Darkness' also uses the same self-destructive racial potentialities. Taking on the Japanese 'kawaii' (cute) culture of Hello Kitty and *Pokémon*'s Pikachu character, Kaga employs a saccharine mixture of clear, rounded lines and warm colours to create images that seem pleasant, cartoonish and childish. Bunny and his loveable cast, however, do not face such comforting or fun adventures, but depression, desperation, perversion and loneliness. They queue uncomfortably for toilets, smoke joints, see prostitutes, wake up with the wrong partner and dream of escaping the emotional purgatory they occupy. Here, this typified Japanese culture encounters an equally typified Western idealism, embodied here by the princess in white, waiting for her prince to save her. She waits at her balcony edge, while Bunny looks up from below with a bouquet of red flowers. But this princess is a wide-eyed drooling idiot, her strings of spittle falling onto the still-smiling Bunny. Kaga pushes the confrontation of stereotype even further in the painting where the 'natives' of Bunny's world dance around a roaring fire in a forest clearing, lines of Japanese text issuing from each of their mouths. Mounted in the fire is a crucifix with a hamster tied to it, who is pleading in English, "Hey guys!! Don't you think this is a bit old fashioned? Hello!... hello... fucking Japs!" The subtitle to the painting reads, "Please bring a guidebook with you since miscommunication can cause irrevocable consequences."

The abjection and disaster these scenes portend, however, is never realised; there is no sad ending – and likewise no happy ending – because we are caught in an elastic, eternal present tense. Each painting and drawing is a different episode from a sprawling soap opera, all aired at the same time. This myriad of coexistent stories is an implicitly revisionist narrative, in which the same scene is played out in different ways, turned around and tried simultaneously another way. Thus, in another encounter with the princess, Bunny approaches her with the glass slipper only to find an anonymous Prince Charming has beaten him to her, giving her a pair of green Adidas trainers. In yet another, he happens upon her in forest, deep in sleep after biting the poisoned apple. Bunny takes this opportunity for a peek up her skirt: "The knickers are white too," he notes with a smile.

From these endless instalments, what came before and what might come after are entirely up to the viewer. But it is Bunny who is centre stage – in the case of the expansive wall drawing *Purgatory*, flying straight towards us in full Superman flight mode amid business people hanging by nooses and piles of panda heads relieving their weight.

Though he is not always explicitly present in each episode, it is clear he is the protagonist, narrator and, as Kaga's counterpart, omniscient creator. Like those trickster bunnies before him, the hare of southern-African and native-American folk tales, and their nineteenth and twentieth century manifestations Brer Rabbit and Bugs Bunny, he's more wily than he lets on. He knowingly breaks the rules, enabling a sort of time travel into coincidental realities and cheekily calling attention to his own timeless (self-)creation. And, like the lazy hare or the vain Brer Rabbit, Bunny also has his weaknesses, in this case becoming instantly enamoured of women with dark hair and glasses working as teachers or secretaries. This trickster, however, is plagued by morality and perhaps more earnest than his counterparts. His playful transgressions are enacted in this multifaceted role-play that explores the anxieties and tensions bouncing between modern recklessness and staunch traditional ethics. What emerges is an inward-looking universe that is vulnerable, flirtatious, cruel and delusional, and that – like all compelling science fiction and fantasy – reflects unwaveringly on our own.

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Text appears courtesy of mother's tankstation

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<sup>i</sup> Quoted in Edward A. Shannon, "'It's No More to Speak': Genre, the Insufficiency of Language, and the Improbability of Definition in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*," *Mid-Atlantic Almanack* 4, 1995.