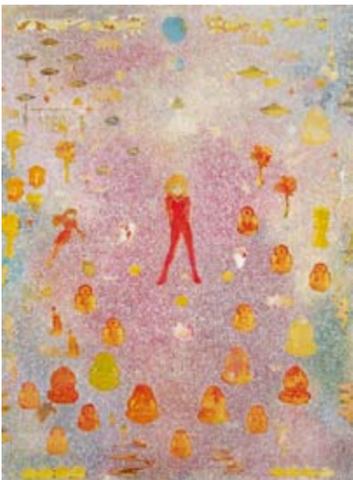


# BLAST!



Tim Johnson *Manga Girl* oil on canvas  
courtesy of the artist

Astro Boy created by Mr Osamu Tezuka blasted onto Brisbane television each afternoon at 4 o'clock in 1966 and became part of the collective sub-consciousness of the 1960's generation. Since then Astro Boy along with many new Japanese animations, anime and comics, manga have entertained young Australian audiences.

BLAST! The influence of manga and contemporary Japanese popular culture on Australian Artists brings together a number of artists living and producing artwork in Australia, all of whom have been influenced by this dynamic art form. This influence and fascination is also reflected by the growing sales of manga and anime in Australia.

Its influence can be seen not only in the artwork of emerging artists, it can be seen in the everyday doodles of school age youth. Its appeal crosses divides and allows young people and adults alike to develop a contemporary visual vocabulary that expresses their thoughts and ideas in the 21st century.

**Tim Lynch** – Coordinator Art Gallery, Redcliffe City Gallery  
**Annette Turner** – Visual Arts Program Coordinator, Logan Art Gallery

Cover image: Michael Doolan *Big Boo Hoo* ceramic 2005 courtesy of of the artist and Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne

**27 June - 21 July 2007**

**Redcliffe City Council Library / Gallery Complex**

Oxley Avenue, Redcliffe

Monday to Saturday 10am - 4pm

Phone: 07 3283 0415 Fax: 07 3883 2017

Email: [RCC@redcliffe.qld.gov.au](mailto:RCC@redcliffe.qld.gov.au)

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**10 August - 15 September 2007**

**Logan Art Gallery**

Cnr Wembley Road and Jacaranda Ave, Logan Central Q 4114

Open 10am to 5pm Tuesday to Saturday

Phone: (07) 3412 5519 Email: [artgallery@logan.qld.gov.au](mailto:artgallery@logan.qld.gov.au)

[www.logan.qld.gov.au/artgallery](http://www.logan.qld.gov.au/artgallery)



This is a joint exhibition developed by Redcliffe City Gallery and Logan Art Gallery

# BLAST!

The influence of manga  
and contemporary Japanese culture on Australian artists



**When I consider what Japanese culture is like, the answer is that it all is subculture. Therefore, art is unnecessary."** - **Takashi Murakami**

When Pop Art first exploded onto the art world in the late 1950s, America was seen optimistically as the epitome for all that was technological advanced and mass produced – signifying their position in the post World War 2 climate as the worlds leading superpower. Australia has taken on so many elements of American popular culture that increasingly we resemble, in the words of TheThe's 1986 song Heartland, 'the 51st state of the USA'.

Yet is this still the case? Does America today still represent those same qualities that were expressed by the artists of the 1960s? I doubt it. Maybe we are tired of the American cultural juggernaut and are seeking something from a perspective outside our western frame of reference.

Mira Kamdar argues, in her 2007 book Planet India: How the World's Fastest Growing Democracy Is Transforming America And the World, that the 21st century will be the 'Asian Century'. Indeed it is impossible to ignore the importance of Asia both in economic and cultural terms. Queensland Art Gallery recognized this long ago with the creation of the Asia Pacific Triennial in 1993.

BLAST! seeks to draw out how an Asian influence has manifested itself on Australian artists, specifically the popular culture of Japan. As the foremost Asian economy, Japan has exerted a strong influence over the cultural landscape of Australia through its technology, electronics, gaming and animation. It is these elements that many artists in this exhibition represent.

However, whilst the argument that the artists in this exhibition are seeking to identify with a culture unlike the dominant American culture has some validity, we have to acknowledge that what we understand as contemporary Japanese culture has in itself developed out the influence of America. Once America started trading with Japan in the latter half of the 19th century, western artists were brought to Japan to teach different styles and elements. Furthermore, with the occupation of Japan following WWII from 1945 – 1952, a whole new set of approaches and influences permeated through to Japanese artists.

In terms of a visible marker for Japanese popular culture, manga is one of the most evident. Representing an astonishing 37% of all publications sold in Japan in 2004 , manga is read across all sections of the population due to its wide themes and subject matter. It is unsurprising then that for artists interested in Japan and its ebullient popular culture that manga plays a central role.

Marcel Cousins is an artist who has immersed himself in Japan both artistically and, since first studying printmaking in Tokyo in 1997, physically. As an outsider with a keen understanding of the foreign locale in which he finds himself, Cousins work explores the many complex layers of contemporary Japan, notably its ability to seamlessly embrace ancient traditions and motifs with that of an advanced technologically literate society. Manga itself can be seen as an art form that straddles the old with the new, as its earliest manifestations date back to 18th century woodblock prints. Extensive western interest in Japanese woodblock printing emerged in the 1870s, when the term japonisme was coined. Impressionist and post-Impressionist artists such as Van Gogh, Monet, Degas and Gauguin embraced this exotic style that offered a fresh perspective to their western eyes. This interest in the 'other' is still evident today, with artists such as Cousins immersing themselves in a cultural alternative.

Cousins work *Frame 2* exhibits the confluence of classic and mannerly woodblock styles with that of more contemporary manga imagery, often incorporating sexually explicit material, something that is common in manga and one of its attributes that confirms its difference to the western comic strip.

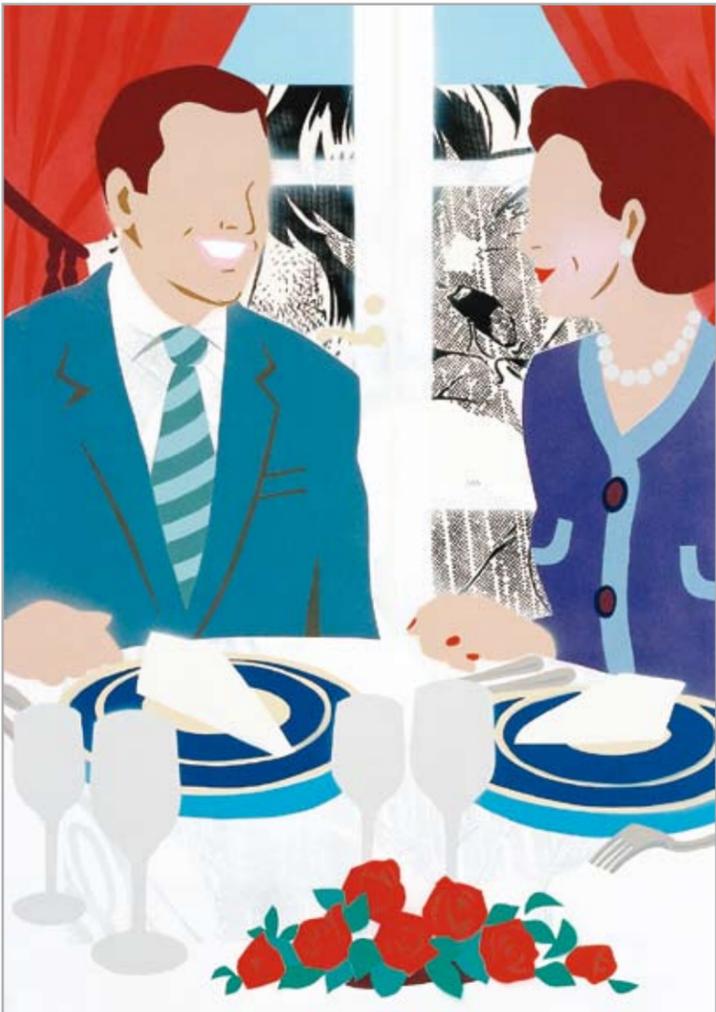
Adelaide based artist James Dodd, in one of his logo based works, looks to the graphic qualities of text expressed in manga. By placing the object in a western context the viewer is left unclear as to the reading of the piece, thereby heightening its sculptural qualities and ambiguities. The artist is interested in presenting some future signage that could be a logo for any mass produced product. The foreignness of text is also evident in David Wadeldon's *Coming attraction*, a highly stylised work that borrows from a range of cultural sources.

Another enduring theme within manga is the relationship between artifice and nature. Tezuka Osamu's post-WWII allegorical tale *Astro Boy* personifies this relationship. A number of works in this exhibition, such as Patricia Piccinini's *Cyclepups: Mantis*, speak of this confluence between artifice/nature and man/machine. Cousins also explores this in his works *Indoor plant* and *Outdoor plant*. Individually the works read as simple landscapes, yet when viewed together we see the artist reflecting on man made limits imposed on nature.

Merric Brettle also speaks of this idea through his work *Tennensui*, produced by the artist whilst completing his masters in sculpture at the Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music. The piece is one from a series of works that recreated natural elements with highly artificial materials, in this case resin and polyurethane paint used to identify water. The title of the work is the name of a popular commercially available spring water in Japan. Mount Franklin could be an alternate Australian

title, however when you translate from the Japanese characters central meaning, *Tennensui* can be read as 'water from a heavenly place', thereby elucidating Brettle's concern of the futile search for perfection. To Australian audiences unaware of the titles associations, the barcode located on the edge of the work assists us in decoding this commodified natural element.

Also speaking of issues surrounding the natural world, albeit through a more politicised approach, is Thierry Auriac's *Loved to Death* that looks to the human consumption of nature. Whilst it is a global problem, Japan is primarily seen as contributing the most to overfishing of the worlds oceans. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates Japan consumes 30 per cent of the world's fresh fish. Auriac's critique of this is presented through the installation of consumed sardine tins, presented in a fashion that owes a debt to the naïve and cute graphic qualities inherent in Japanese advertising characters such as Hello Kitty and Pokemon. And where have these tins of sardines come from? The artist himself has consumed them, thereby acknowledging himself as contributor to the problem.



Marcel Cousins *Dinner for two spray* paint on canvas 2001

Cute, as mentioned above, plays an intriguing role in Japanese culture and is an advertising phenomenon within Japan and increasingly in the West. The childlike facial features of manga characters – large eyes, mouth and head and small nose, also utilise these characteristics. In Japan the term *kawaii* is used to describe this idea of cuteness. The Japanese teen magazine *CREA* said that *kawaii* was, "the most widely used, widely loved, habitual word in modern living Japanese". It is surprising to learn then that the pervasive influence of *kawaii* on fashion, advertising characters (Hello Kitty etc.) and gaming to name but a few, stems from a style of teen handwriting that emerged in the early 1970s that embraced large rounded characters. These large rounded Japanese text characters slowly morphed into something that advertisers appropriated wholeheartedly.

A number of artists in this exhibition quote an influence of *kawaii* on their work. Through the use of a cat-like character (shades of Hello Kitty and Doraemon) recently announced Samstag scholar Sarah CrowEST plays with the idea of the search for an unattainable level of cuteness. She dramatically and frantically morphs her own body into something otherworldly. The use of the large head with an emphasis on attempting to be cute and beautiful renders her efforts as almost heartbreaking.

Michael Doolan, a lecturer at Monash University, Faculty of Art & Design, is interested in childhood and the disposable nature the objects that children consume. In many ways the culture of the place of inception of these objects, be they American Disneyfied characters or Japanese Pokemon references is not the prime interest of the artist. He is more interested in how we as adults ponder our own childhood, and in effect, our own mortality through these cute objects.

Doolan's works in this exhibition have been realised in various ways. *Big Boo Who* displays a fusion of influences from different sources, whilst *Pikar* was heavily influenced by Pokemon. *Galaxy Boy*, meanwhile, is slightly truer to the original object which is the mascot to the 1993 World Expo in South Korea. Like CrowEST, these works use the motif of the large head to signify the objects cute aspirations. The platinum shine makes the works seem almost mass produced – like their inspirations – however with the hand of the artist being evident in the underlying ceramic construction of the piece, we are left in no doubt that this is a unique object we are looking at.

A western response to *kawaii* is seen through the work of Matthew Sleeth. Produced whilst he was living in Japan with his partner and young baby, he was challenged by the level of public interest in his child. Sleeth "began to think about the long tradition of how the West has exoticised the oriental and how strange it felt to have this reversed". By placing his concentration on the Japanese subjects, Sleeth places us, the viewer, as the recipients of this interest. We are the 'other'.

A reversal of this focus on the other is Anne Zahalka's works that picture Japanese subjects in slightly incongruous settings. The *Surfer* is from her 1989 series produced at Bondi that acknowledge Australia's multicultural reality, subsequently subverting the perceived notion about 'Australianness'. She also reflects upon the varied users of the beach, and in this case looks to a group of Japanese surfers, by now a common observation on the Australian beach landscape. A later work, *Strangers in a Strange Land*, places figures clad in traditional Japanese kimono's in a real setting, this time the Australian desert. The sheer implausible nature of the image again brings up the question of artifice and nature as discussed earlier.

Selina Ou's Japanese *Honeymooners* also explores this relationship between Japan and Australia by documenting a couple who are also documenting themselves, witnessed by the small tripod and digital camera. Australia has long been a destination for both weddings and honeymoons for Japanese couples, thereby creating a large industry of businesses that rely on this market. Mari Hirata was born in Japan and worked on the Gold Coast as a translator to for Japanese weddings. The surreal nature of these weddings, essentially carried out just to produce the photographic record, have led the artist to an extended body of work that utilises the white shoe as worn by the bride, (also, as a Gold Coast resident, links with the 'white shoe brigade' are hard to escape).

Her latest series *Sacred Ties* looks to the ongoing cycle of life through the imaging of varies stages of a female's life. The use of the shoe clad in Japanese material is a metaphor for the artist and her antecedents with the simple colour scheme and refined use of objects conveying the aesthetics of traditional Japanese imagery.

The figurative elements of manga also bear a similarity to the aesthetics of *kawaii*, and indicate the resonance that people have with aspects of cuteness. Yet whilst the plethora of 'how to draw manga' books tends to illustrate the restrictions of the figure in manga, the variations in approach to the figure can sometimes be striking.

Outside of Japan, the word *hentai* refers to manga style drawing and anime with sexually explicit content. Typically portraying unrealistic bodies in a pornographic setting, *hentai*'s origins can be traced back to sexual fantasy imagery as seen in *ukiyo-e* wood block prints of the 19th century. Sangeeta Sandrasegar, currently based in London, uses *hentai* as a basis to explore her interest in the intersection of cultures and the narratives of sexuality. The paper cut-out works in this exhibition are informed by a tale contained in *The Arabian Nights: Tales from A Thousand and One Nights* about a Persian prince Gámar-al-Zaman, and the Chinese Princess Budur. The artist says that she "was particularly interested with the doubled Orientalism invested within this particular story". Whilst the artist says that she uses *hentai* as a reference point for her work, she presents the figures in a much more sympathetic way than we see in explicit *hentai* material. By investing the works with a literary context, we knowingly understand the consensual act that is taking place.

Tim Johnson is primarily known for infusing elements of Eastern religions and mythologies in his work, speaking of the commonalities of religion and belief. The pieces in this exhibition layer seemingly more contemporary icons such as manga characters and figures reminiscent of the Japanese inspired *Power Rangers* whilst still addressing the same core concerns. These characters inhabit a space along with UFOs and act as conduits between the celestial and earthly worlds.

Johnson cites the potent Studio Ghibli anti-war film *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) as his favourite film of all time, with the artist utilising a number of animation cells from this film in his paintings. Alasdair Macintyre also cites the films of Studio Ghibli as being a powerful influence in his work, in particular those of Hayao Miyazaki (*My Neighbor Totoro*, 1988; *Princess Mononoke*, 1997 and *Howl's Moving Castle*, 2004). Primarily Macintyre is interested in the teachings of Joseph Campbell, who spoke of the common threads in the worlds religions and that these religions 'masked' the same spiritual truths. Campbell also wrote about ideas associated with the archetypal patterns of the 'hero'. Cinematically, these ideas have been seen in the films of Miyazaki with perhaps George Lucas' *Star Wars* series as being the most widely attributed to the writings of Campbell. Macintyre's *Rebuilding the Babylonian Edifice* takes arguably the most famous anti-war painting ever, Picasso's *Guernica*, and places it in-situ with inquiring *Star Wars* storm troopers – perhaps seeking to understand the complexity of war and religion.

Themes of humanity echo throughout the work of *Astro Boy* creator Tezuka Osamu. Working as he did in a country devastated by the effects of World War 2, it is unsurprising that he sought in his work a clearer respect for life. His mantra: "Love all the creatures! Love everything that has life!"; resonates with us today.

**Brett Adlington**