



Keiichi Tanaami
Noburo Aihara
Scrap Diary (2002)
Inch High Samurai (2007)
for turtRed36

style 119,-



Psycho, Psycho

by Per Platou



Tokyo's experimental film institute Image Forum is located in a backstreet in Shibuya, the bustling westside area with colourful neonlights, an incredible number of tourists and the notorious zebra crossing which has probably been subjected to more timelapse video recordings than any other place in the world. However I was there on business, and didn't have time to fool around but worked my way up the hill to the discreet backstreet entrance of the institute, the purpose of my visit to find films and videos for a festival in Norway. After a long day at the forum, my notebook was almost full. I had just watched an extraordinary short film about a girl who killed her boyfriend, chopped him up into tiny pieces and then fed him to her owl! (The reason for killing him in the first place was that he didn't like sharing their flat with the bird). So after having eaten him the owl made a harsh sound and then vomited a condensed distillate of hair, bones and all - an owl pellet. The girl made the pellet into a piece of jewelry that she wore around her neck. The end. I was pondering upon the message of the film when I noticed a shiny and extremely colourful A4 flyer lying around the coffee machine. It was for an art opening the same evening in Harajuku, another popular area along the west side of the Yamanote line known for its Carnaby Street-inspired fashion shops. The narrow alleys and crammed warehouses are usually flooded with young hipsters with dr Martens boots, spiky blue hair and torn Sex Pistols t-shirts, along with asian Britney Spears-clones dressed up as weird and pretty sexy results of a morphing session between Dolly Parton and Captain Fantastic.

The artist featured on the flyer was Keiichi Tanaami, and before heading down to Harajuku I did some research and discovered that he is actually one of the most prolific experimental animators alive. Not only has he made a large number of psychedelic 16mm films since the mid-sixties, he is in fact more known in Japan as a graphic designer who has produced a substantial amount of silkscreen prints and posters, but also live performances, LP and CD-covers, designer toys, graphic books and even clothes. After graduating from art school he entered the big advertising agency Hakuholdo, only to quit shortly after to embark on his personal artistic journey. In 1975 he found himself working as the artistic director for the Japanese edition of Playboy magazine, the daring and challenging artistic content of which established his reputation as one of the major artists of the day. And, I was told just before leaving the safe haven of the Image Forum, after some relatively calm years as a professor at the Kyoto Plastic Arts School, Tanaami is now producing and performing again, more energetic than ever and often collaborating with selected young artists, musicians and publishers.

Like many addresses in Tokyo, the gallery was extremely hard to find. No other art galleries in the area had heard of it, neither had shop owners, policemen, or the info-servant at the metro station. Even if I had noticed the Yamaha logo at the bottom of the flyer, I thought that was just a sponsor logo, but it turned out to be the name of the basement where the exhibition was: From a modestly chic diner (american style) there was a glass door and a staircase leading down to a

basement owned by Yamaha Motorcycle Division. Filling half the room was a sitting group (sofa, table, two chairs, lamp) in cardboard, decorated with bright red, green, yellow and black intricate patterns. Even though the room was packed, no one sat there. They were part of Mr. Tanaami's art pieces. I was handed some fluorescent green (absinth?) drink and looked around in the black room: Posters, more furniture, paper lamps, monuments, and some rather large architectural constructions that I couldn't decipher – however from the appearance it was clear that they were part of the exhibition. A few words in Japanese by Mr. Yamaha, some clapping, and then a few words from Mr. Tanaami, more clapping, more drinks and some Japanese electro-rumba started playing over the speaker system. I ended up in the corner bar which doubled as a gallery shop, buying all the books and DVDs I could afford – and made an appointment with the gallery owner to meet Tanaami upstairs at the cafe.

Twenty minutes later I was gobbling some doughy things filled with bony little fish and thick brown soya when Tanaami suddenly appeared through the glass door – in great style with a bunch of giggling new wave girls (oops probably assistants) all around him who seemed to cater for the master any way he wanted. For a second I was totally star-struck so I instinctively swallowed all the remaining fish, blushed and then stood up to shake hands and present myself in English to everyone in the room. Probably because of the fact that all the remaining soya had stuck in the back of my throat, no one seemed to get who this weird gaijin with his strange behaviour was. Tanaami saved the situation by smiling and handing me a little present, a beautifully packaged little plastic toy figure. "Too expensive?" asked his translator. Absolutely not, I replied.

Sometimes known as the "Japanese Peter Max" in the western hemisphere, Keiichi Tanaami has been the major proponent of the psychedelic art school. His art is characterised by its sexy, colourful, pop-influenced designs infused with a playful, avant-garde sensibility. He has always refused to be framed into a particular section of the art market, thus there are many myths about his eccentric behaviour and drug-infused creation process. Like most myths these are totally untrue of course; Tanaami has for instance never even met the Beatles or Pink Floyd, and his vivid and highly surreal animations do not stem from the use of psychedelic drugs, but from recurring dreams and nightmares after having experienced severe sleep deprivation and angst attacks in his childhood during the nightly bombing of Japan by the allied forces in 1945.

Screening Tanaami's animation films in their original 16mm format has proven to be very difficult. Not only have the colours faded and the material degraded considerably, some titles are now simply lost or, at best, hidden away in a vault somewhere. However the last one to worry is Tanaami himself, who, unlike most avant-garde film artists from that generation, has a very pragmatic approach to screening formats. In 2003 he managed to digitize a substantial number of works from 1975 and onwards, most of which are released on

DVD in re-mastered versions with sparkling colour and brightness which he is very happy about. As bonus material he has even added a number of documentations of live spray can performances that he has done together with longtime friend and collaborator Nobuhiro Aihara - animation battles as they call them. The vibrant, youthful spirit of their work make them very popular among the new generation of artists in Japan.

Despite the will to traverse artistic boundaries, Tanaami is still best known for his graphic works. They are often characterized by a precise and elegant raster technique, tight and bright colours, high contrast and black outlines. Western eyes often perceive his works as very neo-oriental in style, while in Japan they are considered as a unique mixture between pop art and surrealism, with an extremely sensitive touch of the pencil and extreme attention to detail. As in the animation films, one shouldn't look for simple explanations of the works as they are often dominated by pretty women with abnormal limbs, Freudian symbols floating around, as do fish and planes and scary creatures that are something in between all of the above.

An interesting detail is that while Tanaami's graphic works have kept the same explosive expression throughout his career, the animation films have changed a great deal. The links to pop culture that were so prominent in the works from the seventies have now been replaced with pencil animations that are highly expressive in style, yet extremely fragile and sensitive – dare I say darker?

My meeting with Keiichi Tanaami has been an extraordinary one. When I finally managed to convince him to make the long travel from Japan to Norway a few years ago to screen his animations at the short film festival and set up a small exhibition in Oslo in collaboration with HotRod, I was in desperate need for a title for the show. I remembered a somehow traumatic episode from my first visit to Tokyo some years before, where one late night I ended up with a prominent gallery owner and his crew in a karaoke bar. My only entry onto the stage was with a crooked and probably much too extrovert version of Cher's Believe. When stepping down, one very drunk and apparently very famous artist approached me repeating the words "Psycho! Psycho! Psycho!" while pointing at me and looking pretty angry (I thought). I was depressed for several days, until I told a Japanese friend about the incident and he smiled and said that "Saiko" means "awesome!" in Japanese. Not only did my self-confidence come back in a flash, the double-tongued expression also became the title for the show (and subsequently in Japan) and featured on a big silkscreen poster commissioned especially for his visit: Tanaami Psycho Experience!