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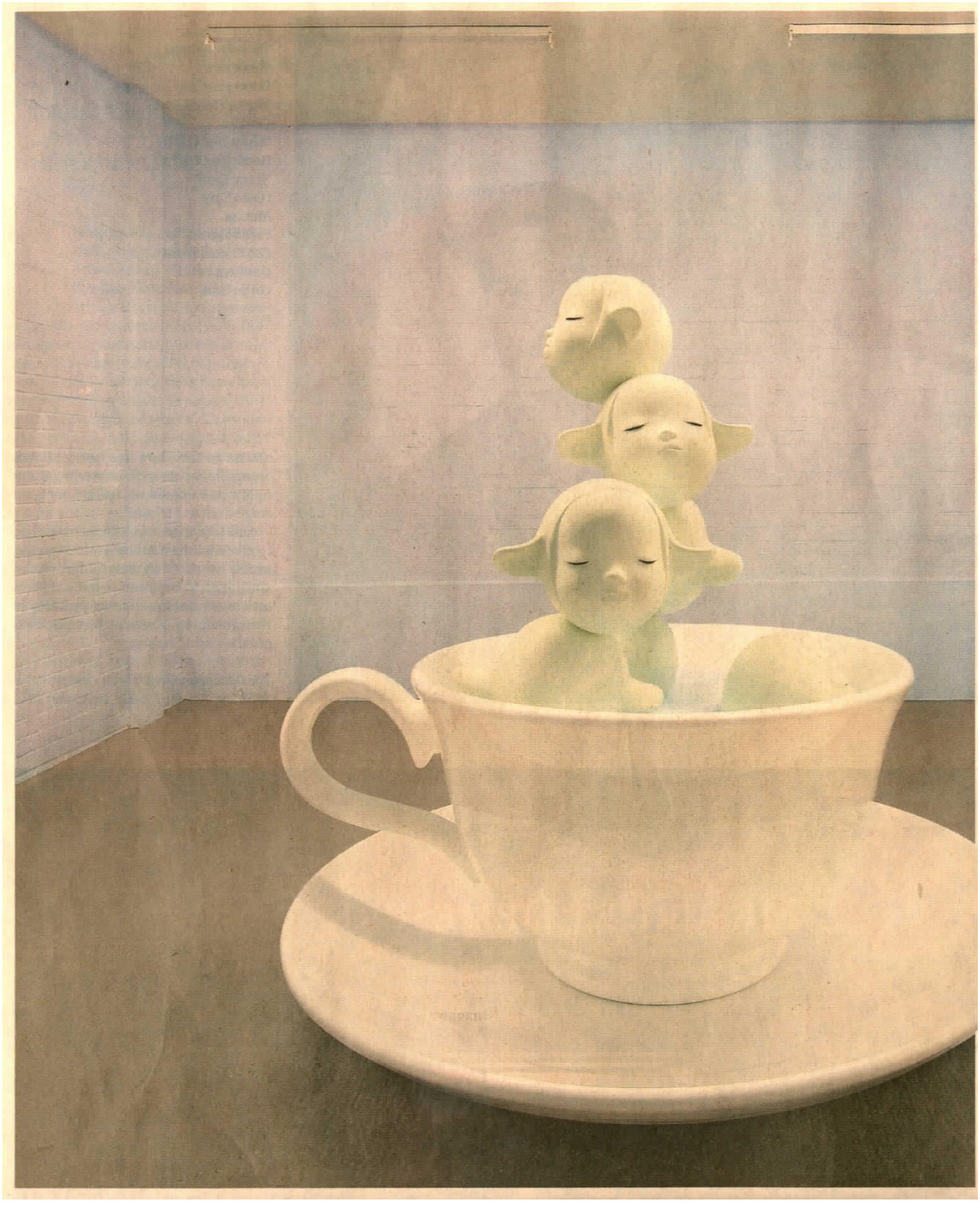
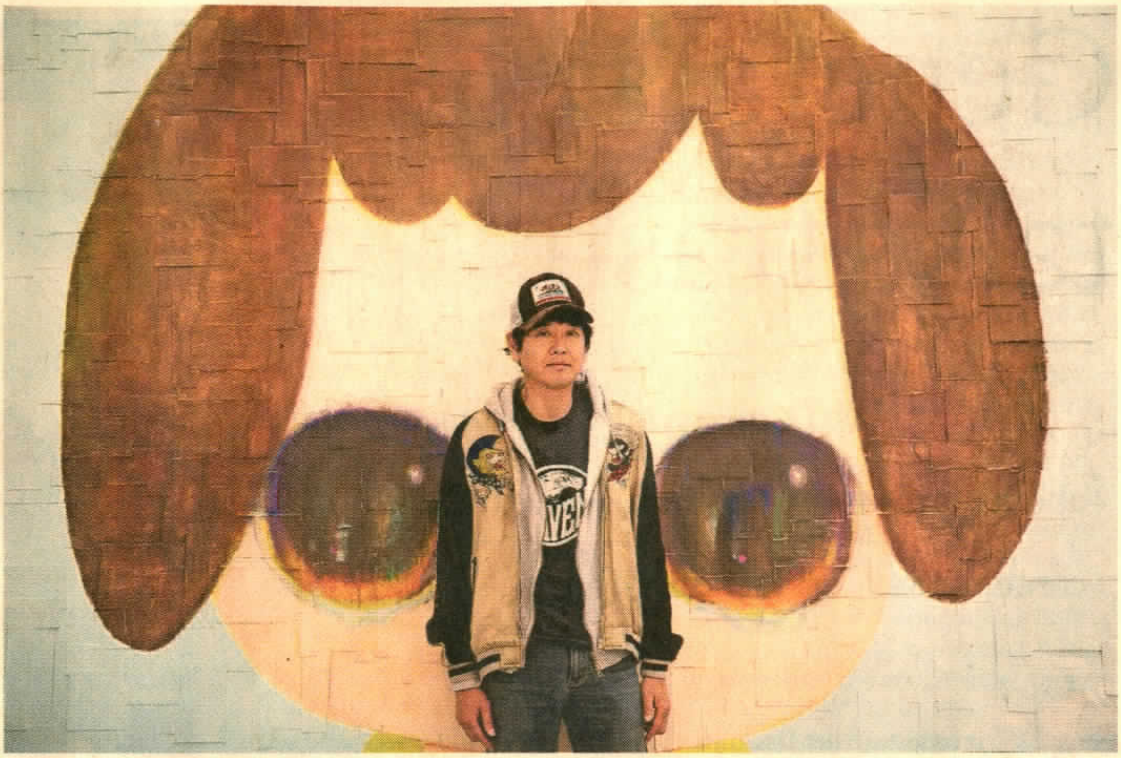




A house for the rising sun

Japanese art | The revival of this long-stagnant market is being marked by the opening of a Mayfair gallery. By *Georgina Adam*

This month, a new gallery is opening in London's Fitzrovia, devoted to contemporary art. Nothing new, you might think: there are plenty of those opening at the moment. But this one is different – it is presenting Japanese contemporary art, and is the first gallery of its kind to do so in London.

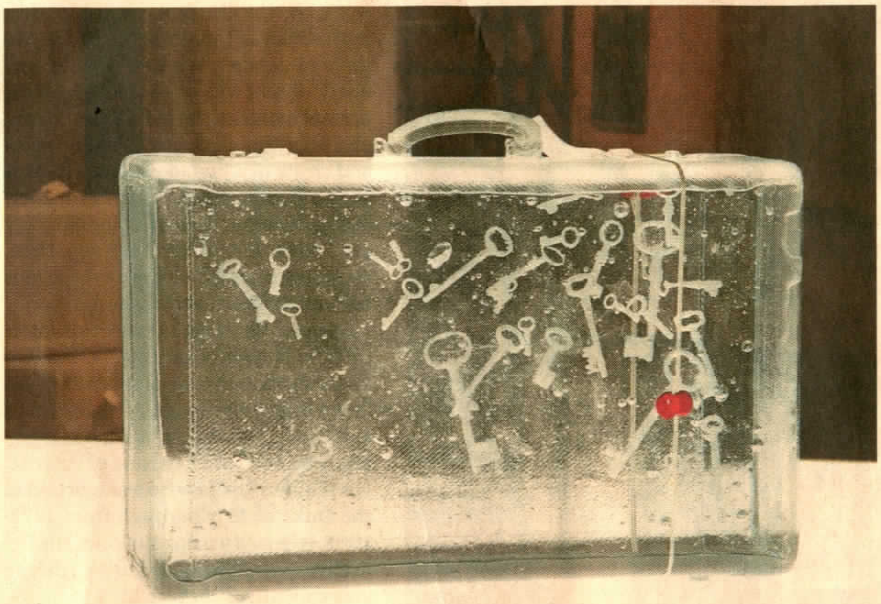
Behind White Rainbow, as it is called, is the London-based Japanese financier and collector Yukiko Ito Pajot. She says she decided to open the space because "Japanese artists have been underrepresented in London compared to, say, New York, Los Angeles or Europe, where postwar avant-garde artists have had stronger connections".

There are, of course, a number of well-known Japanese artists on the international circuit – among them Takashi Murakami, who likes being called the "Damien Hirst of Japan"; Yoshitomo Nara (the subject of a major show at the Dairy Art Centre in London at the moment), Yayoi Kusama, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Nobuyoshi Araki, and the Kaikai Kiki stable, which includes Mr, Aya Takano and Chiho Aoshima.

But, says Ito: "Many of the artists we plan to present, from rising stars such as Aiko Miyanaga to well-established names such as Chu Enoki, will rarely if ever have been exhibited in the UK or Europe. We look forward to initiating new dialogues and a greater

From left: 'Fountain of Life, 2001/2013', by Yoshitomo Nara; the artist photographed by Alice Whitby

Yoshimoto Nara/Blum & Poe



understanding of the diverse Japanese art scene."

The name White Rainbow comes from a rare meteorological phenomenon, a rainbow in fog, and for Ito it also symbolises a bridge between Japan and the West: "The gallery will be a place where people who have interests in Japanese art can easily come and discover a part of what is happening in the Japanese art world," she says.

The first show features sculptures and ceramic pieces by Aiko Miyanaga, whose practice focuses on the transformation of materials and, by extension, the changes that time makes to everything. One of her favoured materials is naphthalene – the ingredient of mothballs – which she sculpts into clocks, keys and so on. The show also features newly fired ceramic bowls – Miyanaga is the third generation in a ceramicist family – giving rise to *kannyu*, the sound of metallic cracking of the glazes, which changes with temperature and humidity and can continue for years.

The opening of White Rainbow comes just when it seems that the long-underperforming Japanese market may be showing more signs of life. At a time when, elsewhere, the art market is booming, at the top end anyway, Japan is, and has been for decades, the major guest absent from the feast. Turnover in art at auction in the country came in at under $60m a year, according to figures for 2013 compiled by Artprice – the price of just one picture in a smart evening sale in New York.

Long gone are the days, in the late 1980s, when Japanese collectors were driving the prices of Impressionist and Modern art to stratospheric levels. That phenomenon collapsed like a soufflé in 1990, when the country's economy entered a long period of stagnation that impacted on its art market. Most traditional Japanese collectors have been sellers rather than buyers of art since then, gradually offloading, if they can, the intemperate purchases of the *baburu jidai*, or "bubble period".

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In the past two years there has been an upturn in interest in Japanese art, partly driven by the focus on the Gutai school (1954-72) and Mono-ha works from the 1960s and 1970s. Gutai is particularly well-known since it was featured last year in a Guggenheim exhibition, and because prices have soared in this field. According to Yuki Miyanaka of Yumiko Chiba, one of six exhibitors from Japan in this year's Frieze, the best known postwar Japanese art is the Gutai

Collecting

From top left: 'Letter (Hong Kong)' (2014, detail), by Aiko Miyanaga at White Rainbow; 'Still Life' (2013) by Motoyuki Daifu will be at Misako & Rosen at Frieze Focus

movement, and then the 1990s group with Nara, Murakami and so on: "But there was a gap in between," she says. The gallery is making a solo presentation at Frieze of work from that "gap" period – sculptures, photographs and drawings by Keiji Uematsu.

Nevertheless, as far as contemporary art is concerned, the market within Japan today "is virtually non-existent", says another Frieze exhibitor, Jeffrey Ian Rosen of the Tokyo-based Misako & Rosen – which is why he and his colleagues come to the London fair. "It is very important to show art works of the gallery artists outside of Japan – in a globalised market, it is essential to show them around the world," says Taka Ishii, also showing at Frieze.

Fellow exhibitor Atsuko Ninagawa of Take Ninagawa notes that artists and galleries have learnt to live with these local market conditions – and she points out an advantage: "We do enjoy freedom from things like speculative buying."

Japanese artists have also largely remained distant from the outsourcing of production, something that is such a characteristic of today's art world. The heritage of traditional craftsmanship is strongly alive, and apart from exceptions such as Murakami or Kusama, the artist still makes the work. "People value handmade work, not something made by assistants," says Ito. "And the craftsmanship is technically still extremely accomplished." Miyanaka also emphasises the importance of materials in Japanese art – "the focus on texture and techniques, and the artists are very careful in how to represent them aesthetically".

"In Japan, land is expensive and homes are small," she continues. "The average collector might shy away from big works – there is an interest in detailed looking, and intimacy, as well as tastes informed by traditional Japanese aesthetic values, such as an appreciation of subdued colour schemes. I think this affects more the kind of international artist a gallery would present in Japan than the kind of Japanese artist a gallery would show overseas."

"Audiences tend to prefer modern or traditional art forms, and despite the high level of museum attendance, many people in Japan find contemporary art very difficult," says Ito. "It's confusing, as they are far more accepting of change or challenges in other fields."

But while Japanese audiences may be conservative, the artists themselves are pushing the boundaries, particularly when showing abroad. An example is one project in Frieze's new Live section for performance and immersive projects, when the Green Tea Gallery offers visitors soup made with vegetables grown in the Fukushima region.

Green Tea is in fact two artists, Tomoo and Ei Arakawa, who as United Brothers asked a range of artists to collaborate in the project. The vegetables were grown by the brothers' mother in the nuclear disaster area; the piece is entitled "Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?" and it will be interesting to see how many visitors will be confident enough to taste the brew, even if it has been declared perfectly safe.

Other exhibitors are increasingly confident of a potentially resurgent market. Taka Ishii is extremely upbeat: "Contemporary art is on the brink of becoming the next big thing in Japan; the market has been ignited and the flames are being fanned!"

Aiko Miyanaga is at White Rainbow gallery, London, until November 22
white-rainbow.co.uk

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