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East Meets West Pop

May 1 – July 28, 2006

Pop Goes the World

Essay by Eric C. Shiner

In the late 1980s, the Quebecois pop group Men Without Hats released the decidedly unremarkable yet catchy tune *Pop Goes the World*. The lyrics recount a young couple's gradual possession of that decade's perhaps most lusted after object—fame—as they make their rise to pop music stardom, and soon beyond to the highbrow world of the legendary silver screen. Having infiltrated the entertainment industry, the duo seemingly takes over the world through the proliferation of not only their talent, but also—and more importantly—via the steady supply of their image to the masses that adore them. As the song goes, "Johnny played guitar, Jenny played bass. Name of the band is the human race. Everybody tell me, have you heard? Pop goes the world." Simultaneously elevating Johnny and Jenny to the status of pop stars while at the same time implicating the entire society in the creative act, *Pop Goes the World* positions the divergent yet codependent worlds of fame and mass culture within the gears of the fame machine. This philosophical site of exchange is the place where the already famous both fuel and define the world of popular culture, which in turn identifies and embraces the next appealing character that it shall propel from the land of obscurity to the world of fame, thus ensuring its own longevity.

And it is just that binary relationship between obscurity and fame that informs *Pop! East meets West* at Nathan Bernstein Fine Art. The show features works by many masters of American Pop Art—Rosenquist, Warhol and Wesslemann among them—displayed alongside examples of Japanese Neo-Pop by some of that nation's most highly acclaimed younger artists—Miyake, Mr. and Nara. As an interesting alternative to the pop vocabulary of the United States and Japan, the

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inclusion of Chinese artist Wang Ziwai's work presents an outside reading of Pop Art through the appropriation of classical American pop imagery in the form of multiple Disney characters juxtaposed against China's own omnipresent pop icon, Mao Zedong. That image, having itself been appropriated by Warhol in his Mao Wallpaper and related series of portraits, is once again borrowed by Wang in his examination of visual omnipresence and its effect on a nation's zeitgeist.

The range of artwork in the show, from works on paper to large-scale paintings—represents the similarly heterogeneous modes of expression of the artists that produced them and the cultures from which they emerged. For example, the American Pop on display reveals a number of positions vis a vis U.S. society of the 1960s through the 1980s, including the significance of consumerism, sexual expression and concepts of beauty on Post-War American society, just as the Neo-Pop on exhibit represents the same cultural traits of contemporary Japan, albeit through entirely different means and with a focus on the 1980s through to today. Although the works and the artists' ideas behind them rely on the above-mentioned fame machine to make sense in mainstream popular culture, it is interesting to further examine the diverse imagery with which artists from each nation elect to portray their culture, consciously or otherwise.

For example, do the disembodied heads, smiling mouths and bright eyes of the mostly female figures in the show hold the same meaning in America, Japan and China? In the case of James Bidlo's Not Warhol (Marilyn) and the actual Warhol Marilyn that it copies, the visage of Marilyn Monroe embodies both artists' critical readings of beauty, fame and appropriation as they relate to different periods of American culture. Conversely, Marilyn's smiling and unflinching face arouses feelings of unease and provocation in the viewer who is forced to define the image using only experience and cultural prompts to do so. The Japanese artist Mr.'s floating head sculptures, Golympic-Chan and Okonomiyaki-Chan, likewise capture the cultural ideals of beauty, fame and appropriation, but through a wholly different vocabulary than their American counterparts. Whereas Warhol borrows his image from Hollywood, and Bidlo borrows his image from Warhol, Mr. does not acquire his figures from high culture, but instead looks to the underground currents of Japan for his inspiration. With the silly names of Little Miss Go Olympic and Little Miss Japanese Pancake, Mr.'s floating female heads seem to leap out of the pages of Japanese manga (comic books), acquiring their personalities and accolades of fame not through actual cultural omnipresence, but instead through the fantasy-laden imagination of the viewer who is thus able to inscribe meaning on this familiar albeit decidedly not famous identity. In direct opposition to anthropological stereotypes of the two nations, it seems that in America, the fame that is depicted in Pop Art depends on a group mentality, whereas in Japan, the fantasy depicted in Neo-Pop is fully dependent on the individual.

We might say then that the main difference between American Pop Art and Japanese Neo-Pop is to be found in the shift in subject matter from human to animated forms as enacted through the screen of pop culture. American Pop is all about the recognition of fame and cultural saturation, whereas Japanese Neo-Pop might be better read as being about the potentiality of fantasy. American Pop borrows actual imagery from the repertoire of fame—Hollywood, advertising, and

the beauty industry just to name a few. Japanese Neo-Pop however is not concerned with the here and now of actual people or places. It is more in favor of lifting the fantasy world of comic books, animated cartoons (anime) and the imaginations of artists and museum visitors alike as the true locus of production of Japan's cultural mores. Seemingly lodged in the middle of this reality-fantasy binary, Chinese Pop often relies on the color palettes and animated qualities of the cartoon world, yet in most cases, the narrative undercurrent of a given work nearly always relates to the here and now. In China, pop is still political.

The above-mentioned fantasy world of Japanese Neo-Pop is easily seen in Yoshitomo Nara's Untitled that features a devilish little girl drawn on an envelope who seems to want to throw her ninja star at an unseen target. In this exhibition, and in following one's own imagination, it might be a worthwhile exercise to envision that very star slashing through the floral screen of Rosenquist's Shriek to reveal the smiling faces hidden beneath. Likewise, might the viewer not look at the idyllic country scene sprouting forth from the figure's hat in Nara's other envelope work, Untitled, as a fantasy-based—and wearable—exterior landscape, whereas Wesselmann's Study for a Bedroom graphically depicts the ecstasy of dreaming as viewed in a domestic interior?

And although Nara often depicts outside visions of play, and Wesselmann inside private scenes, when it comes to the over-arching definition of Pop Art in America, China and Japan, it might be said that American Pop is based in reality, and indeed on the exterior world of society on the whole, whereas Japanese Neo-Pop is based on fantasy and the interior worlds of the artist and viewer alike. Chinese Pop, in its intermediary role between Pop and Neo-pop, seems to habitate the interstitial space between private fantasy and public reality. Although Chinese Pop and Japanese Neo-Pop were vastly influenced by American Pop Art, it is only when the three overlap in the constructed environment of *Pop! East meets West* that one can clearly hear the sound of the world going pop.

EAST MEETS WEST POP

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Artist List:

Mike Bidlo
Allan D'Arcangelo
Sylvie Fleury
Nir Hod
Robert Indiana
Jeff Koons
Robert Longo
Shintaro Miyake
Mr.