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DRAWING FROM LIFE'S HISTORY

STORY BY **MAGGIE KINSER HOHLE** PORTRAIT BY **GION**

Painter and installation artist Tomokazu Matsuyama, just 30, has already lived through more years of cultural confusion than most of us will ever see. The oft-transplanted Matsuyama, now in New York, makes the accidental multiculturalism that doesn't show on his face the primary subject of all of his work. "When I considered what is uniquely mine," explains the artist, "I realized I wanted to take everything I was raised with and mix it all up and make something completely new."

In keeping with his global upbringing, Matsuyama exhibits his contemporary art around the world, in addition to working with multinationals like Levi's and Nike to bring them into line with "the now, today, in all of its cultural complexity." He strives to portray this global melee through a conscious "appropriation" of all of his influences: cultural, artistic, and personal. Matsuyama's unconflicted and positively ebullient works do not ask, "What am I?," but assert, "I am everybody."

It's no surprise, then, that observers have a hard time accurately labeling the guy. Passersby catching an eyeful of Matsuyama's "live paintings" and murals assume him a graffiti artist; American curators picking up on the Japanese spatial sensibilities and color schemes in his paintings call him a Japanese painter; Japanese audiences, in turn, spotting the Pop forms and patterns and label him Western.

This lack of a defining label started early for Matsuyama, during his childhood in central Japan. "I never felt I was involved in the community," reflects Matsuyama, commenting on the town he grew up in, Hida-Takayama. "They never welcomed me and my family. It's a little town with a closed community, where we were [virtual] strangers." Hida-Takayama was his dad's hometown, but Matsuyama's Tokyo-bred mother, a sophisticated, English-speaking Christian Japanese, was an oddity to the tradition-bound locals, and the impression extended to her two boys as well.

Yet from the beginning, Matsuyama found cultural complexity and its fallout thrilling, not disheartening. "If one or two foreigners showed up, it was like a festival," he recalls gleefully, commenting on the celebratory dinners that would accompany such events in the town's community center. "I remember people shoving and jostling to sit near the foreigners. [The locals weren't] even used to seeing Japanese from out of town, so it was as if they were meeting aliens!"

When Matsuyama was eight, his father, a convert to Christianity, moved the family to the United States, intending to study the Bible and become a pastor. The entire family entered the US on student visas, and Matsuyama crossed the threshold into American culture on the streets of Los Angeles.

"Everything was a shock," he says. "I didn't have a clue!" Matsuyama spoke no English, and LA was diametrically opposed to Hida-Takayama, a rural enclave whose cultural heyday was during the Tokugawa period (1603-1867). Later, the imagery of this period would become one of the many resources for Matsuyama's art, but its importance was lost on the boy, who dove headlong into mid-'80s LA culture.

Three years younger than his brother, Matsuyama picked up more than just the spoken language. "The first thing I remember as being fun, that I totally got into, was skateboarding. And of course American youth culture is mixed up in that. Through that flamboyant world, I saw graffiti too. And because I was young, I was influenced by the graphic design of that culture. That's just something that became part of me naturally." In this, Matsuyama doesn't differ from other artists of his generation, like friends David Ellis and Kenji Hirata. The originality of Matsuyama's work springs from his exposure to, immersion in, and eventual recognition of multiple, unique cultural clashes, in which he was repeatedly on the outside looking in.

His family eventually returned to Japan, and Matsuyama remembers being on the phone during his last day in the States, "talking with my friends: white guys, black guys, Mexican guys." His older brother, because of his more awkward age when they arrived in the States, "couldn't wait to get back," but Matsuyama had assimilated. "Then, I went back to finish the last half of sixth grade in Hida-Takayama. I was coming back to the same place, but the culture shock was so bad. I was picked on so hard. The school rules said you had to have a buzz cut. I was the only one who put gel in my hair, and it was long. Everyone else played baseball, and I brought my skateboard to school. It was like, 'You're an outsider, so we won't acknowledge you.'"

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Six months later, Matsuyama was at a boarding school in Tokyo, a common choice for upper middle class Japanese families. "That forced me to study a lot, which turned me Japanese again," he explains. But then, as a sophomore, he spent half a year in an intensive language course in London, where the locals outed him as not typically Japanese; they teased him for the American accent, the legacy of Los Angeles, coming out of his Asian mouth.

In college Matsuyama toed the line for a while, studying management in the economics department of Tokyo's Sophia University, but the lure of the creative arts led him to sign up for night classes at Kuwasawa Design School in Shibuya. After two years of studying at Kuwasawa, he was hungry for more, so he packed his things and flew to New York to study Communications Design at Pratt Institute. "I wanted to have creative friends from different fields—fine art, photography, design," Matsuyama explains. "Pratt was the only art school in New York that had a full campus where all that was gathered."

In New York, Matsuyama became familiar with two important tools for his self-expression: modern art and, curiously, Japanese art from the Edo and Meiji eras—it wasn't until he was displaced from Japan that he began questioning where he came from. On trips home to Tokyo, he bought long-forgotten catalogues and old art books for a pittance in secondhand bookstores.

"In order to create a universal language, I'm using the only cultural language I have," Matsuyama explains. "That's why I'm studying traditional culture, searching for my own roots in order to express the universal." What troubles those who would like to place him in a

box (graffiti artist, Japanese painter, decorative artist) is that he uses each of these elements, but not strictly as themselves. Each plays the role of something else. The subculture he presents to the mass culture; the young, the pop, he expresses as a philosophy, not just musings on the street; the ancient Japanese he applies with incongruous patterns.

"'Sampling' or 'imitation,' trying to make a decorative piece more decorative, my work is not that," says Matsuyama. "What I'm trying to communicate by assembling all these figurative objects is a very abstract, complex thing. By using one thing, I'm trying to grasp, and express, another. I'm not telling a story. Instead, through the entire process, I want to portray the society in which we live."

In 1917, Marcel Duchamp defined three aspects of readymade art: first, choosing as a creative act; second, canceling the object's original function by calling it "art"; and third, giving it a new title and thus a new meaning. Matsuyama says his work is closer to readymade than to anything else, because he chooses—appropriates—something with great, heavy meaning (i.e. figures of Japanese art, from cranes to cherry blossoms), obscures its original function (by slicing and reproportioning patterns and replacing colors), and presents it to an audience that is unlikely to see the meaning, thus creating "a new thought" for the subject.

Take a look at *3Rip-Hors* (on page 36) whose original is from a well-known series of fusuma-e (sliding panel murals) by Tanryo Murata (1874–1940) in the 2,000-year-old Kotohira-gu shrine in Kagawa Prefecture. In the West, Matsuyama's work is commonly said to prioritize negative space, or *ma*, a pivotal concept of Japanese art and culture. The source for *3Rip-Hors* fascinated Matsuyama because of the power of the absence of the main subject. "I did it as a challenge," he says, "I thought it would be extremely interesting to paint a picture in which there's nothing in the center. Then I wondered what it would look like if I got away from that uniquely Japanese look, and applied contemporary things, a really strong red, a completely different color scheme, and threw in rays of light, mixed it, blended it....I thought I could capture something really interesting."

Like all young artists, Matsuyama faltered in the beginning, leaning too far in the various directions that make up his experience of the world. A few years ago, he recognized that "when I got totally involved in the youth culture, that wasn't quite right." He also found that when he strives to be "the least [Japanese-influenced] as possible when I paint, it will be balanced. I have finally matured, and have begun to be valued. I'm finally able to express my core, which is none of these elements alone."

By overlaying particular Japanese motifs and details with modern/pop/graffiti-like/Western imagery and colors, he can express the "natural chaos" he sees around him. In *Unit* (on page 40), whose original motivation is a mid-19th century hanging scroll by an artist in the Rinpa school, Matsuyama adeptly juxtaposes modern textile patterns with Japanese forms and elements, and succeeds in enticing the viewer to recognize the world we all share, increasingly confusing, but electrifying in its cultural turmoil.

Matsuyama's vision of this cultural chaos is entertaining. In the mural he executed on the outside wall of Triple Crown, a bar in Brooklyn's Williamsburg neighborhood, he uses familiar Japanese animal symbols: a monkey (greed, ingenuity) and a bird that is based both on the crane (eternal happiness) and the duck. (Matsuyama says ducks grace many paintings but never play the main role, and at the time of painting he felt marginalized as an artist.) The mammal and the bird look at each other from opposite ends of the wall because, he says, New Yorkers are both notoriously chasing after money and equally, deeply committed to their local communities. But he disguised the animals in such a way that, if anything, they look like a sloth and a turkey. Without the artist's explanation of their origins, these two animals make us laugh, in their bright oranges and solemn browns, but there is something about their relative placement, the surrounding graphics, and the pointed angles slicing through their line of sight that makes us think: What is this scrambled reality?

If we recognize ourselves in his work, Matsuyama has succeeded again. If we do it laughing, all the better.

Airline travel is cheap, the Internet connects us all, and there are a thousand cable channels through which we can eavesdrop on other ways of seeing the world. But we often miss the complexity of cultural differences and gloss over their effect on our very being. It is to our benefit that what we miss, Tomokazu Matsuyama does not. ⌘