

Ikebana Zombie and the Insomniac Octopus in the Jelly of Existence

“When I can’t sleep, I think about the transparent glass box that is still stirring with life even in the darkness of night. That pristine aquarium is still operating like clockwork. As I visualize the scene, the sounds of the store reverberate in my eardrums and lull me to sleep.”

— **Sayaka Murata (Convenience Store Woman)**

“This is a donut. It is very sweet, and very good. But if you’ve never tasted a donut, you wouldn’t really know how sweet and how good a donut is... meditation is like that. Transcendental meditation gives an experience much sweeter than the sweetness of this donut.” This is how David Lynch begins one of his conferences about the ancient Indian practice, holding a fresh donut. The straightforward image chosen by the filmmaker lures the viewers in to open themselves up to something new. Through an improbable overlaying of themes, Lynch directs his audience into the mysterious vortex that constitutes the human mind.

Those who practice transcendental meditation work on their concentration and breathing to achieve mindfulness, a sort of “hyper-awakened” state that can reach beyond the more immediate experience of reality. Currently we are experiencing a sense of extreme present that could not be further from the aspirations of transcendental meditation. Our globalized production system has not only placed our perception of time/space in disarray but also changed our ability to make sense of a succession of events, turning days and weeks into a jelly-like amalgam of accumulated tasks and unsurmountable demands.

In the last few months, Yuli Yamagata thoroughly experienced vigil. In order to create the group of works presented in this exhibition, the artist inhabited a place in the borders of sanity, in other words, she has been awake for long periods of time in closed spaces. Insomnia and confinement have led her to dive into the often dystopian world of Japanese manga. The fine line between pleasure and horror, humans and machines, reality and dream, are key themes in manga comics and a universe she has been visiting often since the beginning of her trajectory.

The fragmented space and the rhythm of manga cartoons also inform many of Yamagata’s compositions. For instance, in *Cyborg Being Born* we see a body lying down at a low angle against an ample sky, which is suggested by a piece of tie-dyed fabric. Stuffed leeches float over the watery stains. Tie-dye, a technique associated with the psychedelic-hippie aesthetics from the 60’s -70’s generation in the Western world is, in fact, a rushed version of *shibori*, a Japanese dying technique that dates from the 8th century. Each piece is unique, its form being the result of the precise handling of liquid indigo through folds and twists that imprint the rhythm of the artisan’s labor and choices. *Shibori* is the opposite of the sparkling stretchy fabric that gives shape to the cyborg’s body. By juxtaposing the ancient Japanese technique with the industrial fabric, Yamagata points to the damaging speed of the textile industries and its residues.

Following this path, Yamagata's most recent works mark a sort of transition – or, in her own words, a deceleration on the “digestion” of her imagery. She began to measure more the use of fluorescent hues – which are typical of the visual landscape of gym-goers and cross-fitters – and the lumps and distortions made with Lycra that characterize her earlier work. Perhaps, what she calls a slower digestion has more to do with eating pizza with chopsticks than adopting a slow-food diet. Her compositions are still juicy and loaded with information, though they are less immediately apprehensible. The exercise of decoding references and identifying the origins of her resin and fabric objects is made more complex in this exhibition. Like David Lynch, Yamagata offers us fresh donuts rather than answers.

No semantic barrier is insurmountable for those who cannot bear the idea that things are just what they appear to be. The fleeting perception of reality and the mild aphasia which many of us have been experiencing during the pandemic is Yuli Yamagata's natural habitat. Her practice lays somewhere in between the improbable meeting of psychological terror, the excesses of consumption and an immanent desire for transcendence. The work *Summer Sweaty Dreams*, a more “haute couture” version of the artist's textile mash-ups, seem to embody this thematic triad. To create a super-lit – almost radioactive – environment through the overlaying of silky and velvety fabrics, Yamagata borrows a gigantic skeleton (Gashadokuro¹) from a macabre woodprint from the Edo² period. Instead of threatening a group of people, the originally bloodthirsty skull appears smiling and sun kissed in Yamagata's work. It seems to be enjoying itself with a bunch of fresh flowers: the flesh is gone but the senses remain.

The series of Ikebana sculptures and the “puddles” of things wrapped in resin are also a sort of material substrata of exhausted times and bodies. The semitransparent and oddly dense synthetic liquid used in the works seems to trap us forever on that ungodly hour that breaks out a night spent awake, either due to insomnia or bohemianism. Its presence is both abject and revealing of a way of life. *Chorume* is the eeriest of the lucid nightmares created by the artist. The somewhat disgusting and multi-sourced objects yoked together on the floor, could be read as a portrait of the contemporary narcissuses: dispersed, toxic, asphyxiating and self-enclosed. The flower that spouts from the resin puddle is made of plastic. Its petals materialize the inexorable conflict between desire and reality: the flower breaks through the form to which it was subjected, yet it is betrayed by its own synthetic constitution.

The insomniac is never fully awake nor fully asleep. In insomnia nothing is real, says the protagonist of *Fight Club* (1999). Over 20 years ago, American director David Fincher used insomnia as the guiding thread for one of the most unsettling portraits of self-indulgent middle-class alienation in the USA at the turn of the 21st century. In the film, a workaholic executive employed by a mediocre insurance company oscillates between apathy, paranoia and violence in order to deal with his lack of sleep and a life emptied of meaning. At a time when remote shopping was done via land lines and printed catalogues, Fincher's psychotic character was already rehearsing an inglorious crusade against the corporate manipulation of our unconscious. When *Fight Club* was released, 0.4% of the world's population had internet access and its impact on daily existence was minimal. In 2021, 64% of the world's population has access to the web, and during the pandemic there was a 40-100% increase in data use worldwide.

¹ In Japanese folklore, the "Gashadokuro" is a type of "yokai", a mythological monster, devil or spiritual-being described as the result of the merging of the bones of people who died from starvation, negligence or who were not buried and later reemerged in the form of a gigantic skeleton. The Gashadokuro is a nomadic being that feeds on human flesh.

² Takiyasha, the Witch and the Skeleton by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (19th century), Victoria and Albert Museum Collection

The equally seductive and unpleasant materiality of Yamagata's works evoke the pleasures and dangers of excessive consumption and is at the same time a sort of response to the sensorial deprivation imposed by the digital world. In a landscape of intermittent confinement, the algorithmic manipulation of desire has reached unprecedented levels. And in order to consume, we, supposedly, must be awake. In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the End of Sleep*³, American critic Jonathan Crary describes sleep as the last frontier to be overcome in the consolidation of a new, uninterrupted and fully supervised mode of production. Sleep is the last non-commodified stronghold of human activity. Crary claims a global economic system that depends on the 24/7 market and non-stop consumption is not compatible with the "dead time" of sleep. For him, deep-rest hours must be protected as they are the only possible pause within the logic of permanent spending and endless waste imposed by global capitalism. Not surprisingly, this year Pokémon⁴ announced the launch of Pokémon Sleep, a game that proposes to turn sleep into entertainment or, in other words, to transform dreams into saleable data.

Octopuses change color as they dream but they are certainly not the target public of Pokémon Sleep. Today, to understand time as a logical succession of events seems to me as ludicrous as insisting on the exceptionality of the human species or underplaying the imminent climate catastrophe. We are in the waiting room of something radically different, which has yet to be named. An epistemological change is in motion and the neoliberal paradigm is under threat. It is impossible to know if whatever is coming next is even more terrifying or if technology and science will show us the way to acknowledge alterity and mutual cooperation. It will likely be both. Meanwhile, Yuli Yamagata's haberdashery-style Franksteins and stuffed oddities confront us with the cognitive confinement to which we are compliant, mocking any attempt to make them fit in existing words. Their eccentric presence seems to point towards a possible escape route away from the impending fire.

– Last one out, turn off the lights.

Fernanda Brenner

³ CRARY, Jonathan. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the End of Sleep*, Verso Books, 2013

⁴ <https://www.frieze.com/article/how-pokemon-sleep-promises-commodify-our-dreams>