

IN SIGHT/ DIFFERENT STROKES: Soft focus on reality links `loose' women

By EDAN CORKILL, *Contributing Writer*

Two solo shows by female artists in their mid-30s are under way in Tokyo's Ginza district: Laura Owens at the Shiseido Gallery and Chieko Oshie at the Nishimura Gallery. While their work has in common an attractive softness, it is also very different: One is by a Westerner fascinated by the East, the other by a Japanese residing in the West.

Perhaps the oddest thing about Owens' show is that it is by an American. So much of the exhibition is reminiscent of the young painters on the Japanese circuit.

Foremost among the similarities is Owens' willingness to incorporate recognizable stereotypes into her work. Her paintings are inhabited by characters that seem instantly familiar: gleefully prancing horses, wise old birds, Yorick-like skulls, proud reindeer, dreamy-eyed young girls. While not traceable to any single source, these characters are quickly identifiable-they populate the myths, fairytales, cartoons and books with which we all grew up.

Owens achieves this comfortable familiarity by employing techniques of book illustration and comics. She is less concerned with realistic depictions than with conveying a single emotion or facial expression in her characters.

This trait aligns her with almost every young Japanese artist from manga interloper Chiho Aoshima to painter Naofumi Maruyama, all of whose work includes characters that seem to have stepped directly from the pages of someone else's novel.

A more obvious example of Owens' interest in Asia is her referencing of Asian characters. The major canvas ``Untitled" (2001) includes a pair of monkeys lifted from 15th-century Japanese painter Sesshu.

Her work also has a softness of finish similar to Japanese artists. This is largely due to the neutrality of her backgrounds: uniform fields of faint blues and autumnal creams. It is on top of these that she adds the boldly colored strokes, dabs, splotches and blobs of acrylic and oil paint that comprise her characters.

Of course, the variety of Owens' references reveals that her fascination is by no

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means limited to things Japanese. On the contrary, it is the voracity of her appetite for reference that best characterizes her. Hints of everything from Greek myths and Shakespeare to traditional American patchwork quilting are detectable. She creates a world that is neither completely real nor completely fictional; it is like a dream- or memory-scape, inhabited with figures whose origin lies in some long-forgotten book or film, but who now roam our subconscious freely, having shed the narratives via which they entered our minds.

Owens already has a strong following in the United States. In 2003, at 33, she became the youngest artist ever to have a solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. The Shiseido Gallery show is her first in Japan.

Meanwhile, Chieko Oshie, born one year before Owens in 1969, is showing a few blocks away at Nishimura Gallery, one of Ginza's oldest commercial galleries. While she's not had the museum exposure of her American contemporary, she is well on the way to building a successful career.

Oshie first gained attention in the late 1990s with her large paintings of flowers and leaves. She then won a series of awards, including the 2001 Vision of Contemporary Art prize and an Agency for Cultural Affairs scholarship in 2003.

She is now using the scholarship to spend two years studying in Belgium. Her current show consists of work she has made during her university classes there. The work's interest lies in the collision it reveals between her established style and the university's assigned tasks.

In the past, Oshie's work rarely included people. Her paintings of flowers and plants were at times sensual with their evocative colors and motifs, but never overtly so. She also made landscapes, in which diffusive swaths of watercolor or pastel were skillfully maneuvered to summon a low-lying headland or beach. People were too small to register in her freewheeling brushstrokes.

However, in Belgium the artist has had to confront the human form, and fortunately she has had the confidence to tackle the nudes on her own terms. Rather than alter her style, she has taken to swishing out bodily forms like she did petals in a flower or contours in a landscape.

Oshie's nudes are not concerned with details, be they anatomical or facial. Muscles are reduced to graceful curves and faces are hidden or made comically simple. Backgrounds have been deleted entirely; leaving the daintily depicted forms floating like pink clouds in midair.

The work reveals that Oshie's goal is a type of beauty achieved by combining soft hues with forms that have only a loose correspondence to reality.

And it is this deliberate looseness that she shares with Owens, and which may well characterize their generation-both in the United States and Japan.

``Laura Owens'' runs through March 27 at the Shiseido Gallery, near Ginza subway station in Tokyo. Open 11 a.m.-7 p.m. (until 6 p.m. on Sundays and

holidays). Closed Mondays. Free. Visit < www.shiseido.co.jp/gallery > or call 03-3572-3901.

` `Oshie Chieko -Nude-" runs through Feb. 26 at the Nishimura Gallery, near Ginza subway station. Open 10:30 a.m.-6:30 p.m. Closed Sundays, Mondays and holidays. Free. Visit < www.nishimura-gallery.com > or call 03-3567-3906. (IHT/Asahi: February 18,2005)

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