

Art watch

## Bunnies in dystopia

by Jacqui McIntosh

*Atsushi Kaga: Bunny's darkness and other stories at Mother's Tankstation, Dublin, [www.mothersankstation.com](http://www.mothersankstation.com)  
Blaise Drummond: Things to Make & Do at Rubicon Gallery, Dublin [www.rubicongallery.ie](http://www.rubicongallery.ie)*

One of last year's most interesting exhibitions was undoubtedly Getting on Mother's nerves, a group exhibition of drawings at one of Dublin's newest galleries, Mother's Tankstation. The show boasted an impressive line up of artists (Raymond Pettibon, Marcel Dzama, Adam Dant and even Rembrandt to name a few, all made an appearance) and introduced many to the work of Dublin-based Japanese artist Atsushi Kaga. Kaga, who graduated from NCAD in 2005, showed himself to be more than capable of holding his own against the international heavyweights of the art world, with his witty and often surreal take on contemporary life.

Kaga has really pulled out all the stops for his first solo show in Ireland, Bunny's darkness and other stories, with countless small drawings and paintings, two gigantic drawings (one which is four metres wide), several animations and a sculpture. It is more work than many artists produce in three shows and whilst in some cases less is more, in this show, the sheer quantity of work only adds to its enjoyment.

Kaga executes his drawings and paintings in a deceptively simple style. He paints using acrylics, often on board or cardboard, sometimes drawing on pages from a notebook in pen or coloured pencil. Whilst the tools Kaga uses may appear



'There were all kinds of little human touches in the design that made it beautiful, rather than grim. People really liked living there. There was a great sense of community.'

crude, his work is much more sophisticated than it appears to be at first glance. Through an interplay of characters created by the artist, he explores major subjects such as cultural identity, the environment and even the Irish health system as well as the small, everyday successes and failings of human existence. His characters include a pair of depressed lions (who both have blue heads), a bear that has lost a leg, an unsuccessful superhero who often finds himself in trouble whilst trying to come to the rescue, an elevator girl and Kaga's most prominent character, Bunny. "I don't know what Barry Flanagan would say about his rabbits," says Kaga, "but for me, he allows me to say things that are difficult or embarrassing for people. Because he is cute he has permission to touch on issues or tell stories that people don't want

to talk about, because those issues are either incredibly insignificant or too awkward." Bunny at times can appear to have both elements of childlike innocence and a sense of mischief about him. In one painting, Bunny can be seen lifting up the hem of Snow White's dress as she sleeps to see if her knickers are also white. In another work, Bunny's friends smoke a joint whilst he exclaims, "I brought carrot sticks with me". There is also an evil streak to Bunny, albeit childlike, and he is frequently involved in tricking Kaga's hopeless superhero who invariably ends up tied up and hanging from the ceiling. In one painting, a bear is bound to a pole whilst Bunny and other characters gleefully light a bonfire beneath him. Extreme violence and malevolence, when it occurs

Left: Her knickers are white too by Atsushi Kaga

in Kaga's work is, much like the drawings of Marcel Dzama, tempered with a childlike innocence. The two major drawings in the exhibition, Do not kill yourself because you're bullied, and the four-metre-wide Purgatory, depict a disturbing dystopian reality executed with the lightness of touch of a child's colouring-in book. Whilst literally the whole world goes to hell – volcanoes erupt, people hang themselves en masse – Bunny exists in a heavenly peacefulness in the centre, surrounded by pandas with angel's wings. Bunny could certainly be viewed as Kaga's alter ego. Like Kaga, Bunny has one foot in Japanese culture whilst enjoying what Irish society has to offer him and inevitably coming up against its problems. Nevertheless what makes Kaga's work so compelling is that within each of his characters there is something that we can identify with – from Bunny's preoccupation with his own mortality, to the hopeless superhero's failed attempts to sort out the world's problems. In isolation, Kaga's work could be seen as a series of witty one-liners. Viewed collectively, in this excellent first solo exhibition, it is clear that Kaga is a sophisticated and intricate storyteller.