



ANIMAL ART **ARTIST ATSUSHI KAGA** **ON WEEPING PANDAS,** **BUNNIES AND DOUGHNUTS**

WORDS JAMES KELLEHER
PICTURES STEVE RYAN

Sooner or later it's the question we all have to answer. If you could be any animal in the world, what would you be? Anyone who picks an eagle or a lion or any other type of beast that likes hanging around on heraldic crests and fighter jet nose cones is obviously a self-regarding nitwit who thinks they're better than the rest of us, and should be diligently avoided. Anyone who opts to be a rabbit is OK with me, though. Atsushi Kaga seems to think so too – you'll see his long-eared totem appear front and centre in much of his art, most publicly on the cover for The Jimmy Cake's Spectre & Crown album, where Bunny can be seen carrying the shiny pink cheroot-smoking, aviator shades-wearing skull of Michael Jackson, as if it was the most normal thing in the world. Which, if you are Atsushi Kaga, it is.

He grew up in a "suburban, lower middle class" satellite of Tokyo in a defiantly non-arty household; his first taste of museum life was a visit to an Andy Warhol retrospective at the age of 17, where he looked at those big screen prints and thought "if this is art, then I can do that too." So he could, but there were a few careers to try on and discard before he found his roundabout way to study fine art in NCAD: comedian; world traveller; film director; flight attendant. You can see the vestigial organs of some of these jobs-that-weren't in his painting sometimes too, particularly the comedian. Fart gags get equal billing to recondite scrutiny of the human condition and, in case it wasn't clear by now, there really are a lot of animals. The bear that finally worked up the courage to explore beyond the forest - his reward? He gets hit by a truck and is doomed to spend the rest of his life on crutches. The hundreds of crying pandas (who may or may not represent his father), imploring the viewer to cry along with them. The polar bears on shrinking ice floes. Doughnuts aren't animals, but there are a lot of those on show too, which leads me to believe that there's probably a doughnut animal that we just haven't discovered yet. You could hunt them with spears pretty easily.

Doing the Spectre & Crown cover brought him exposure outside the usual Dublin art clique and introduced him to a bunch of new fans who probably can't afford to buy any of his work, but who he's very glad to be talking to, all the same. Even if he seems to think he's now known as more or less "the bunny guy."

I think people do actually know your name though, the album was how I got introduced to your work.

Yeah, it's been great. My work in the beginning was painted or drawn on paper, really crap paper and cardboard and MDF, and really badly painted. Never intended to sell them, never thought I would show in a museum like the Butler Gallery – it's bizarre that that's happening. I mean, at the end of the day, the people who buy my work, they wear suits and it's like "do I paint for those sort of people?" And at the same time, because of those people, they have taste,

and allow me to follow my own kind of expression. So it's a kind of balance. But at the same time there are lots of people my own age and younger that I want to talk to. Of course, I don't mind talking to people in their fifties or sixties, you know, in Armani suits, that's fine, I could do that all day.

And do you think that's your audience – or rather, not that that's your audience, but that's who hangs your paintings on their walls – the guys in suits?

At the moment, I'm happy with the art world. It's like going out with someone, she seems to be happy with me and it's mutually beneficial, but at some stage, if she doesn't like me, I'll still do what I do, I don't mind at all.

A lot of the write-ups of your work, they frequently mention that your work is "humorous but dark", as if those are two distinct things. It seems to me that a lot of the humour comes directly from the darkness.

I know. There was a lady who was at the opening [in Kilkenny] who was crying. I was amazed. There's this poor bear who has one leg missing, and there's a whole story about it, and she was in tears.

This was a particularly dark piece, there was a story about the origin of the bear having an accident and then eventually he dreams about it, and then, in a dream, he can forgive the person eventually, come to terms with the whole thing. Then he becomes a writer and writes a really dark story. It's quietly subversive, but people like it, and I'm happy with that. Lots of people keep telling me "Oh, you're so courageous to come forward with this

▼ **A consolation for Kumacchi**
Acrylic on board,
31.4 x 25 cm,
2008



stuff", and I'm like, I'm not that black or depressed a person – can I not write a fiction? You don't need to kill people to write about murder. I mean, it's part of me, but it doesn't need to be the whole truth.

It's a depressingly common error to assume everything in someone's work is 100% autobiographical – and in certain circumstances, that can be the case – but if you carried out all of the stories that happen in your work, I probably wouldn't be talking to you now.

I do like dark stories. Lately I've realised that maybe it's not so healthy to be doing all these dark pieces. Dealing with emotion is kind of a no-no thing, that's not an art world sort of thing. It's seen as just too obvious – that's the place that popular culture deals with. Fine art should deal with space, or time, or light or colour, or stuff like that. So that cute bunny and making people smile and making people cry, they're really no-no things to do.

Why bunnies, in particular?

Everybody asks me that, and then I give them a really crappy answer. I just go, well, they're really cute. I did a lot of drawings in fourth year, it's the one character that stood out. The original looked really different from the one that I paint now. It's a bit like Jesus Christ – it's a really handy vehicle to convey lots of things. Like Jesus Christ and pain, and growing, and birth. It's also incredibly accessible to people, and that's what I want it to be – the last thing I want to do is humiliate people with my work. Like my mother, if she sees an abstract painting she's like "just finish it". I want to make people confident about it, confident in themselves. The last thing I want to do is, make people go "Whoa, what's this? Am I missing something? Or I don't know enough?" I do talk about difficult things, but I don't want to just do that. I want to let people come in, I'm not going to hurt you here, I'm going to humiliate you, because I'm the silly bunny guy. I gave away lots of drawings of a bunny farting, and they're like "ha ha, this guy is really silly" and that's nice.

Did you ever get to do any stand-up comedy?

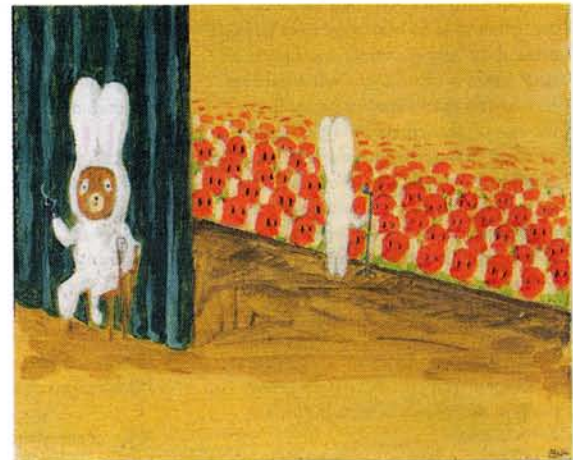
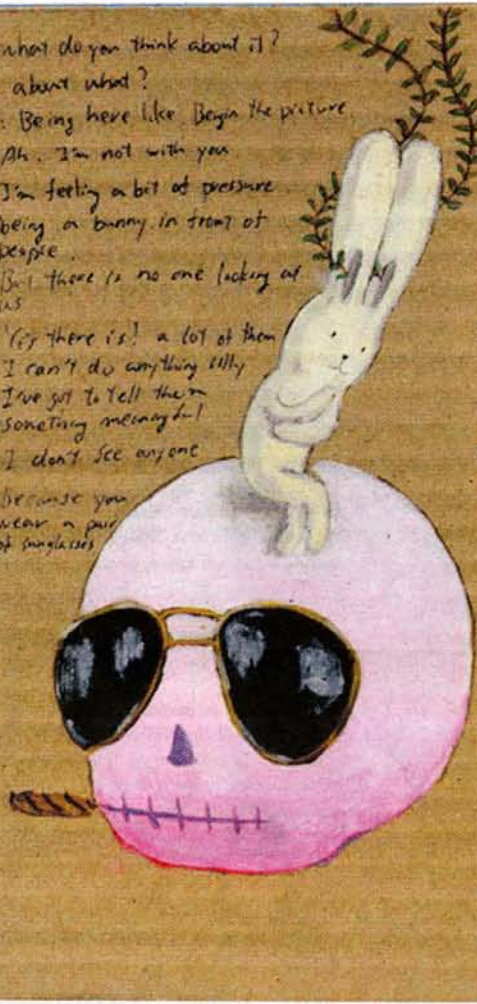
No, I'm not great at speaking in front of people. If there are more than three people in front of me I get nervous. I'm a very shy person, so it suits me to be in the studio – when I'm there, I'm 100% there. Whenever I'm with someone, I'm probably not 100% with them – this is the way it is with most people, I imagine, to some degree – but more so with me. If I'm comfortable with somebody, I'm better, but most of the time I'm not, I hide myself away.

And in the studio, this lack of confidence drops away?

Yeah, I'm just dancing away and laughing at my own jokes. It's incredibly addictive, it's the best thing about this job – just being in the studio and making work. ▶

Bunny: what do you think about it?
 Skull: about what?
 Bunny: Being here like Begin the picture
 Skull: Ah. I'm not with you
 Bunny: I'm feeling a bit of pressure being a bunny in front of people.
 Skull: But there is no one looking at us
 Bunny: 'Cos there is! a lot of them I can't do anything silly I've got to tell them something meaningful
 Skull: I don't see anyone
 Bunny: because you wear a pair of sunglasses

Skull: I don't know if that is the reason. Just I see things in a different way people don't look at you as much as you think
 Bunny: You don't see anyone because you don't have eyes!
 Skull: I know that
 Bunny: Oh I know I don't have eyes That's why I see things in a different way
 Skull: I see but I still feel the pressure



▲ Is this as good as my life can get?
 Acrylic on board,
 18.8 x 23 cm,
 2008

◀ Being Bunny
 Acrylic and pen
 on cardboard,
 18.7 x 18.7 cm,
 2008

▼ Untitled (Roll me a joint)
 Acrylic and pen
 on card, 20 x 21
 cm, 2008

Do you really hate all your previous work?
 It's a confidence thing, a self-loathing thing. My dad never gave me compliments. I never think I'm good – as a person, as an artist, I'm just constantly surprised that I'm there. I mean, a Butler Gallery show – can I do that? Someone buying my piece – do you want that?

How many paintings do you have to sell, for you to start thinking people genuinely do like your work, like it's not a trick?
 When I earn a million a year. That's when the lack of confidence melts away. I'm thinking-of doing that in five years' time. [laughing]

Outside of that piffing ambition, where do you want to go in five, ten years?
 I know this sounds terrible, it sounds arrogant, but I want a lot. I'm the kind of person who when they play a game, they want to win it. I want to go to the top. If not, I quit. I wouldn't be happy with anything else.

Do you have some wind-down time after the Kilkenny show? Do you take holidays?
 People tell me to take holidays, but I'm a workaholic and I know it, I'm hungry, I guess. This is what I wanted to do. This is one of the best jobs you can get in the world. I just think about that, how fortunate I am, I just can't hang around in parks or at the beach. People out there, working so hard to get money...

Aren't you even slightly tempted to just take a short break somewhere?
 Most people don't understand that where I want to be is in the studio, making work. That's the best place in the world. I mean, I love being in the library, or at the bookshop, I just love being here. That's the best place in the world, not Malaga. I mean, that's great, but actually, to be honest, I want to be in Waterstone's cafe, reading books. I know it's kinda sad and funny, but that's actually the place I want to be. The only place I'm interested in is here. ☺

Even though you spend thousands of hours alone, it can be very tough actually, that's the reason why a lot of people drop out.

Do you find it easy to step outside when you're in the middle of something?
 I'm not trying to make out that it's a special job, but it's a different thing if you're an artist 24 hours a day. You sleep, you're with someone, you're thinking about art all the time. That's required – if you don't do so, you're out of the game. Sadly.

Do you find it easier to separate everyday life from your studio life as you get older, or do you become more and more enmeshed in it?
 It's any art form – I mean, like abstract paintings, there's a lot of you in it. You sell a piece of you, that's what your job is. You just cut yourself, and then sell it in a gallery or an art fair. A lot of artists get joy out of it somehow. I have to do that. I live outside of the studio too... but it's a bit like [deep breath] an artist can be in this box, and he is almost naked, dancing, and this glass is a one-way mirror, and this mirror, he can see himself dancing, fully lit, the music is on, but outside there's no music, and outside they can only see this artist dancing naked. Sometimes artists are like that, and you gotta dance. And sometimes it's crap, and that's the terrible thing, you're aware that

for the people outside there, this is bad, but you gotta keep dancing. A good artist – a good dancer – is able to pretend that there's nobody out there.

So you dance a lot, for real, in the studio?
 Not so often, but sometimes when I finish work. I'm focussed for hours and hours, and I finish, and for five seconds I'm like "Whoa. Fantastic. I'm a genius." And five seconds after that "Fucking hell. Just, what the hell?" and then the next day, just disgusted with myself.

Atsushi Kaga will host a drawing workshop based on *The Tale of Genji* in the Chester Beatty Library on 30 October, 15 places only, booking essential. www.mothers-tankstation.com

