

REVIEWS ATSUSHI KAGA

## ATSUSHI KAGA: BUNNY'S DARKNESS AND OTHER STORIES

MOTHER'S TANKSTATION, DUBLIN  
23 MAY - 30 JUNE

Atsushi Kaga is a Japanese artist who trained, and now lives, in Dublin. The artist's work, however, is distinctly post-place. His gusts of little dramas unfold in a world that appears to be touching ours, but whose resemblances turn out to be almost accidental, a sci-fi planet on which some law of physics operates slightly differently from our own, skewing the visible reality, leaving intact something we almost recognise; a similarity that, in the end, only serves to make its forms all the harder to grasp.

The manga artists who have come to prominence in recent years create work across which lies the superflat shadow of the mushroom cloud, be it ever so playfully, so colourfully interpreted. But Kaga is, despite gentle resemblances, another kind of artist altogether, even if his work bears the marks of otaku culture: an unexpected conflation of Goth and Day-Glo; obsessive, atomised, dysfunctional and inordinately fond of cuddly toys. (Significantly, Atsushi's characters do finally take the manga route, and escape their frames to become 3-D figurines, in the show's single sculpture, *The Future Is Too Bright* (all works 2007).

*Bunny's Darkness and Other Stories* consists of a pair of large-scale pictures, shown alongside constellations of smaller images in acrylic or pencil on canvas, card and paper, often featuring a small scene in which a tight cast of cartoon characters interact. In addition, the entrance to the gallery is occupied by a little heap of stacked monitors on which play simple line animations featuring one or more of the characters, apparently trapped in an intricate rhizome of tunnels, lifts and secret passages.

Into the spaces of his pictures – which often feature forests, or cages – Kaga introduces panda-headed sloths, blue-faced lions, one-legged bears (complete with crutches), ineffectual superheroes and the repeating figure of a man hanging by the neck. Most consistently of all, however, the artist uses the character of a rabbit – a Bugs Bunny, anthropomorphic, walking-on-two-legs bunny – a figure of the trickster, but also a reminder of the culture (via Takashi Murakami's appropriation of Jeff Koons) of American and Japanese cartoon iconography.

It's the figure of the bunny that dominates the show's more imposing piece, *Purgatory*, an immense work in watercolour, acrylic and markers on paper, which evokes a Bosch tableau made over with plushies. Here many of Kaga's characters come together – including the hanging man, the bunny and the panda – in a scene in which pattern seems to displace narrative, and the artist's cute bestiary gathers and stills itself around its leader/creator, the bunny.

The effect of all this, like perhaps medieval religious painting, is to inspire a consideration of iconography as much as style or technique, as though the artist's task is simply to focus our attention on portions of a cosmology as part of our spiritual education. But here, of course, there is no instruction on offer, and the suggestion of completeness elsewhere never materialises, leaving narrative impulses somehow trapped in the picture's frozen, mandala-like pattern. Luke Clancy



*Candlelight and Bunny*, 2007, acrylic on board, 30 x 30 cm. Courtesy the artist and Mother's Tankstation, Dublin