

# animal instinct



ARTIST **ATSUSHI KAGA** TAKES CUTE CREATURES AND GIVES THEM SERIOUS BITE. BY W. DAVID MARX. PHOTOGRAPHED BY SHAWNA SCOTT

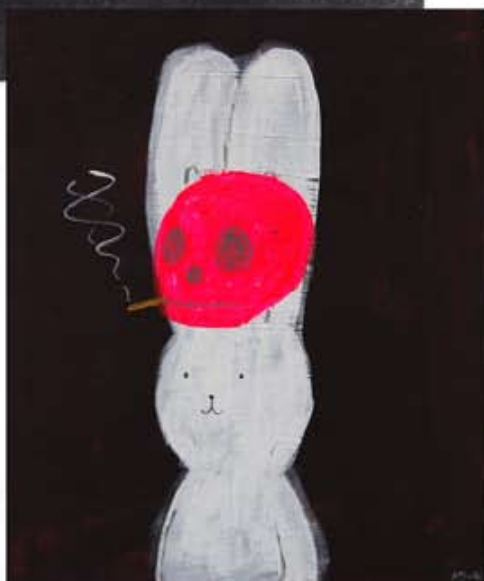
MULTIMEDIA ARTIST Atsushi Kaga was born in Tokyo, but he speaks English with a full Irish brogue, evidence of the years he's spent in Dublin, his adopted hometown. This strange linguistic twist is just one of the unlikely cross-cultural currents coursing through Kaga's work. His output veers from oil on canvas to sculpture to animation, all the while returning to a few signature images: a skull in sunglasses, a patriarchal panda, a motherly kangaroo, and a cute, white bunny meant to represent Kaga. Even if the bunny, for instance, looks like it has just hopped out of a children's book, there's an unmistakable menace to the overall tone: "I think most people put a cute façade over their darkness," Kaga says over tea, during a visit to Tokyo.

Kaga's visual aesthetic will be familiar to fans of Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara, but his work is distinguished by a heavy use of text on the canvas—a rarity in an era where visuals are supposed to speak for themselves. "I wanted to be a writer when I was younger, but also, the style is very similar to traditional cartoons," he says. The text itself strikes a notably confessional tone, especially within the conservative Japanese culture Kaga experienced as a youth; these more revealing aspects of his work are at odds with a cultural tendency to hide from the public gaze. Kaga believes that his many years abroad have profoundly changed his attitude towards openness: "I realized recently that I've lived one-third of my life in Ireland," he says. "I now try to be as honest as possible in my work. I don't think this would be true if I still lived in Japan. But there's so much conceptual art right now that it's nice to have something personal."

Kaga's decision to attend art school in Dublin was the unlikely by-product of one of his earlier career ambitions: "Originally I wanted to be a flight attendant," he says. "I thought if I became a flight attendant, I could travel the world cheaply." In order to get the in-flight gig, Kaga left Japan for Europe to brush up on his English. While there he met a few charismatic Irishmen, who made their native soil seem like a lovely place to live. Kaga packed his bags and moved to Cork, applying to Dublin's National College of Art and Design at the encouragement of a teacher at the English language school where he was studying. Kaga went on to do a graduation project that was so successful, Dublin gallery mother's tankstation put in a call and later exhibited his work. "The scene is small, but really good. There's a very high proportion of great stuff and it's well-funded," he says. "And it's not as overly competitive as New York."

Since then, Kaga's work has traveled around the world, most notably to Art Basel in Miami Beach; at the 2007 exhibition, all of his pieces sold out. "A Chinese woman came in and bought everything," Kaga recalls. He's now gearing up for solo shows in Brazil and New Zealand, but Dublin will remain his base. In many ways, he says, Kaga owes his artistic career to the fate of landing on the Emerald Isle. "If I had stayed in Japan," he jokes, "I would probably be a flight attendant right now."

artwork images courtesy of the artist and mother's tankstation.



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