The Sunday Times, 'Super funny animals', Gerry McCarthy, August 4th, 2008

Super funny animals

Atsushi Kaga uses rabbits and pandas in work that proves his art is not child's play, says GERRY McCARTHY

Rabbits and pandas are not just cuddly toys. In the hands of Japanese-born artist Atsushi Kaga, they are symbolic figures which he uses to explore a vast range of ideas. They recur in his paintings, videos and sculptures, forming a family of symbols through which Kaga, who has lived in Ireland for the past eight years, traces ideas of childhood, linguistic difference and cultural confusion.

His work is not aimed at children, but it uses the grammar of childhood to articulate its ideas. Kaga's off-kilter sense of humour, where elements from both East and West mingle playfully, is evident throughout. He has the sensibility of a stand-up comedian, something which he once aspired to be, and it turns his work into a surreal ramble through the mind of its creator.

In his new show in Kilkenny's Butler gallery, Kaga treats the space like an enormous playroom. The videos are shown on old-fashioned television sets sitting on the floor, each painted white with drawings and scribbles scrawled across them. His smaller pieces are stuck higgledy-piggledy to the walls, which are themselves covered with graffiti, jokes and puns.

Despite the cartoon characters and the chaotic way in which he takes over the gallery space, it would be a mistake to pigeonhole Kaga as a childish or even child-like artist.

His work is not naive. It contains multiple levels of meaning, with references to family life, humour, language, and the cultural displacement involved in being a Japanese artist who trained in Dublin.

His reference points include Japanese popular culture, the world of anime and manga cartoons and pop-culture crazes such as the Hello Kitty phenomenon.

Many of these were ostensibly aimed at children but acquired a cult status among adults. Kaga's bunnies and pandas draw on a way of articulating childhood that has nothing to do with Disney.

Outgrowing his teenage ambitions to become a stand-up, Kaga poured that energy into his art. He adopts the stance of a stand-up: a blend of autobiographical fragments and references to popular culture, woven into an exploration of childhood and what it means to grow up in a world populated by cartoon animals.

His humour passes an important test. There is a tendency to talk about art as being humorous if it contains a whimsical in-joke or a vaguely ironic reference. Some art may generate a knowing smile, but art that makes people laugh out loud is rare. When genuine humour exists, as in the paintings of Beryl Cook, who drew the lumpen proletariat of Britain complete with lumps, it is frequently scoffed at. If it's funny, goes the argument, it can't really be serious: and high seriousness, even loaded with kitschy references to popular culture and saturated in casual irony, remains the unspoken aspiration of contemporary art.

But Kaga really is funny. The sound of irony-free laughter in a modern art gallery has an unexpected quality: it comes with the added thrill of a broken taboo, like telling filthy jokes in church.

Kaga's pieces work as simple visual jokes and stories, or as playful linguistic excursions into the nature of meaning. His ability to work at multiple levels is reminiscent of Alice in Wonderland. Taken together, the exhibition recapitulates the developing comic sensibility of a child.

After the simple animal cartoons, for example, the child reaches a naughty words phase, a recognition that certain words are forbidden and have a seemingly magic power to make adults uncomfortable. In the pieces Miss Fart and A Group Farting the deep fascination which pre-teens have for breaking wind, along with associated naughty language, is attached to artistic subjects.

Another phase in the evolution of a sense of humour involves the discovery of puns. Kaga is thorough in his exploration of double meanings, both verbal and visual. One small piece, for example, consists of the words "Dead is Pop" — a phrase into which we can read references to popular culture and fatherhood, a network of complex ideas behind the superficial simplicity.

Sometimes this tendency is overdone: the jokes are too old or fragile for the conceptual edifices they are meant to support. Another painting consists of a flat swathe of yellow paint. His accompanying text reads: "You are looking at yellow, just in case you are colour-blind."

This is René Magritte's famous trick: the distinction between an object, or even a colour, and a painted representation of it. Viewed in isolation, it is a shallow pastiche of 1930s surrealism. Seen in context, as a step-by-step biography of an emerging comic sensibility, it slots neatly into place. An appreciation of the discrepancies that intrigue Magritte, and the philosophical ideas about the self and the world that go with it, is a stage in the growing process. Like Kaga's weeping pandas and flatulent ladies, the discovery of paradox marks a stage in the journey towards adulthood.

Just as artists are deemed humorous when they make a tenuously ironic connection, so work is sometimes regarded as having a philosophical dimension if it appears to question the world. Such pieces almost never work as genuine philosophy. They usually just refer to some epistemological problem in the vaguest of terms.

Kaga's bunny rabbits do not aspire to the condition of philosophy but they confront the big ques-

Warren piece: Kaga's creatures mine a richly thoughtful, funny seam

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tions in much the same way a stand-up comedian ponders the meaning of life. From the openness of early childhood to the role-playing social games of a bright twentysomething, his pieces merge into a broadly biographic whole.

His weakness lies in his reliance on language. He likes to exploit the language gap between Japanese and English: some pieces have titles that sound like bad translations. His larger paintings are covered with annotations or speech-bubbles: there are witticisms, aphorisms and jokes scrawled on his surfaces. They vary from callow to profound; yet, despite his fascination with language, there are indications in the work that he can do very well without it.

Japan and the West also have distinct visual cultures, and it is in blending and exploring these that Kaga shows greatest promise. One piece, Cry with Us, contains a painting of a weeping panda plus 80 toy pandas with painted tears. It draws on a peculiarly Japanese aesthetic: to western eyes, this looks kitsch and sentimental, and therefore trivial. But it is not trivial, and it draws on a strange melancholy that pervades even his most humorous work.

At his best, Kaga makes trivia appear profound, and profundities appear trivial. His engagement with childhood allows him to invert accepted meanings and look at the world afresh.

There is a richness to his work, an ambitious sense of abundance, as if all the world's meanings are there for him to rework. His cartoon creatures captivate children, but they are also reaching for the stars.

Kaga's is not the sort of ambition harboured by artists steeped in the Western notion of individuality. But his cross-cultural vantage point affords him a rare double perspective. Most artists have no sense of mission beyond success and personal fulfilment. But Kaga's work is like the best kind of comedy, where playfulness and humour mask a more profound sense of responsibility. ❑

I Want to Give Love to Socially Neglected Parts of You, That's My Mission, Butler gallery, Kilkenny, until Oct 5