

**ATSUSHI KAGA**  
REST WITH US IN PEACE  
MAY – JULY



**The brick mountain** (detail) Papier-mâché, collage over subframe, monitor and animation  
120 x 140 (diameter) cm 2010





Rest with us in peace Installation view, mother's tankstation





**I fell asleep while I was thinking about a galaxy far away from here**  
Acrylic, spray paint, glitter, collaged fabric, silver foil and decoupage on plywood 206 x 436 cm 2010



## UNIVERSE SOUL GRAMMAR

Usacchi is a little bit upset. This seems familiar. Instantly, Atsushi Kaga connects with his audience – and, in this exhibition, the possessive pronoun is fitting. It is his second show at mother's tankstation, and since the last his appealing bunnies have attracted a loyal fan base. The intimate portrait of the distressed protagonist *He is a little bit upset* (2010) is addressed to them, reanimating an existing dialogue. There is no escaping the painterly delicacy with which Usacchi is depicted, the evocatively dejected gaze or the tonal perfection of his boxing gloves. We are willingly seduced into his world, perhaps at first believing that only our craving for the cute adventures of Kaga's animals is being indulged. As the visual explosion of the narrative cacophony in this exhibition threatens to overwhelm us, we realise that we have fallen deeper into the rabbit hole than Alice ever slipped, tricked into following a bunny through a labyrinth of intellectual and challenging (sur)realities.

The recognisable characters who feature across Kaga's work could at this stage be documented on an anime Rosetta stone – pictograms with a literal translation.<sup>1</sup> Functioning on this level, the exhibition and, in particular, the vast panels of *I fell asleep while I was thinking about a galaxy far away from here* (2010) offer hypnotic sequences for interpretation, riddles which appear temptingly solvable. Trees burn themselves in order to move forward; greedy men throw gold dust out of fridges; goblins play music to provide the soundtrack for a hell peppered with 9-tailed kitsune. These hieroglyphs are a masterstroke in communication – keys used by Kaga to construct a powerful dialect, with a unique but understandable vocabulary and a universal grammar.<sup>2</sup> While reception of his work often focuses on the minutiae of the linguistics, the characters themselves, the visual language he has built up over time is the tool which Kaga wields to express meaning.

Thus symbols represent myths, and, as in any traditional mythology, expound their own histories. Like Greek gods, they emerge as an assemblage of characteristics to illustrate allegory, and possess their individual morality tales to root them in popular memory and situate them within the whole fabricated culture. Satisfaction is the reward of the faithful viewer, as the animation *Factory* explains the background story of Pretzel Man, who recurs in these works. Allowing us to see his mundane morning ritual, his esoteric working conditions and the loaded self-sacrifice that his role in the production of pretzels entails (they grow out of his head, and his likeness becomes objectified as a kitsch charm), encourages us to re-evaluate his significance when he reappears in, for example, *We are falling while birds are singing*. Kaga's devices are a combination of eccentric inventions like Pretzel Man and Elevator Girl,<sup>3</sup> and icons with a foot (or more pertinently a head) in the 'real' world.

The totems of Michael Jackson skulls have been a feature of his work for some time, but since the pop star's death they have new implications, and peculiar relevance in an exposition on urban myth. Central to the panel work which dominates the gallery, the Jacksons reflect the temporal pertinence of this monumental hellscape, with the countless individuals patterned into a visual rallying-cry for escapism. The structure of their described environment (a pyramid of tiered boxing rings) signals another key influence on Kaga's work in this exhibition – the Sonny Liston/ Muhammad Ali fights

of the mid-1960s. The now iconic photograph of the ultimate knock out has typecast Liston in the canon of popular culture, and is the visual summation of his previous two attempts to avoid, and thus escape, the unstoppable, superior power of Ali.<sup>4</sup> It is this survival strategy, his escapist method of play within the boxing ring, that the artist focuses on. In a similar way to the Myotonic goat (which Kaga also cites as an influence), Liston chose the ignominy of half-conscious surrender rather than the pain of a more aggressive defeat. Interweaving such recognisable urban myths with his own cast of characters renders the artist's work as dense with meaning as with detail. Although the ferocious detailing may express Kaga's despair at the current political climate, it is not without hope. The verbal urgency ("sleep with us") which he conveys is not an infinite escape: sleep insinuates a subsequent waking, as the alarm clocks which feature prominently in *Factory* and in the sculptural *The brick mountain* (2010) demonstrate; rest implies a pause before a further time of action. Without bias, Kaga encourages a time for reflection and inspection as a solution for a troubled world – and in the dazzling symmetry of *I fell asleep...* his work commands such attention.

The intricately patterned composition of this work lends itself to the stunning visual impact. A Rorschach of tactile elements, the physical materiality is as fascinating as the individual icons within. While this has been a constant feature of Kaga's work, in this exhibition he exposes a design aesthetic which harnesses a bold appropriation of media and colour. Spacemen in *We are falling while birds are singing* are dressed in silver foil, taken from Kaga's favourite brand of chocolate pudding. Like the fabric scraps collaged in *The prudent sleepers*, the materials emphasise the personal narrative underscoring Kaga's practice. Throughout, this is not hidden from the viewer: the puddings sit on the heads of the foiled spacemen; the hand-sewn bags which provoked the use of fabric in his work are displayed in the back room of the gallery. His adolescent embarrassment at carrying such a bag, made by his mother (as these are), to school is laid bare. The overlooked histories of craft and the home-made are added to Kaga's repertoire of neglected media, just as he continues to bring manga and anime into the arena of high art.

The use of craft materials and construction may link him to a wider network of contemporary artists exploring these media, but they are deeply personal in motivation. Kaga's mother's handmade birthday card, shown in the back room of the gallery, is a powerful influence, combining collage, text and painting, with sketched calculations still visible on the paper. It is this 'confidence of the amateur' as Kaga calls it, which liberates the artist and opens up new aesthetic possibilities. *The brick mountain* expresses this potential, through its raw finish, the individuality of each vignette and its joyful colour. The extremes of hi and lo-fi are combined by the juxtaposition of cotton prints with the television embedded in the mountain's foundations. Within the animation itself this continues, as the romantic saga of the trees involves text messages and a baby tree receiving an iPod. Mass-produced technology is swarmed with gestures by the artist's hand: here in the lava of domesticity pouring down the mountainside, coating the television; and in the back room, in the pen sketches covering the TV set where *Factory* plays.

Further to this re-contextualisation of the media, bringing craft tradition into his work demonstrates the craftsmanship of the artist, something which has previously been clear in Kaga's assured canvases. The skill of the painter is seen in the immaculately painted duo *Life is a battle so you need vitamin[e]s* and



*Life is a battle so you need sometimes a break (I wish I was in Spain)*. Now, with the process of making, Kaga reincarnates a renaissance ideal – artist as artisan. The emotive narratives of his work, whether multiplicitous (*I fell asleep...*) or evocative (the haunting *You are doing OK for just being alive*) are his methods of conveying personal, political and tangible meaning. Truth, and its attendant humour, transcends the popular and the cute. Alberti describes this idea of tackling the most complex category of works within art: “The istoria will move the soul of the beholder when each man painted there clearly shows the movement of his own soul. It happens in nature that nothing more than herself is found capable of things like herself; we weep with the weeping, laugh with the laughing, and grieve with the grieving. These movements of the soul are made known by movements of the body.” Or as Kaga doodles, “Fart as much as you want!! Life is short!!”

Mai Blount

<sup>1</sup> Like the original stone itself, the line would be blurred between a who’s who and a what’s what.

<sup>2</sup> Noam Chomsky postulated the theory that all languages share basic structures, a universal grammar.

<sup>3</sup> Elevator Girl naturally assimilates her job as a sex worker with a tender fondness for cradling wrestlers in *I fell asleep...*

<sup>4</sup> Like Michael Jackson, Liston’s earlier success risks being completely overshadowed by his dramatic exit from the limelight.

<sup>5</sup> Tracey Emin’s appliquéd quilts being a headline-grabbing example.

<sup>6</sup> In conversation with the artist, June 2010

<sup>7</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, (De Pictura, 1435), transl. John R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), Book II, p.77



**The prudent sleepers** (detail) Collaged fabric over painting stretcher 50 x 40 cm 2010





The brick mountain Papier-mâché, collage over subframe, monitor and animation 120 x 140 (diameter) cm 2010





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