

ATSUSHI KAGA
HAPPILY SKIPPING BACKWARDS (2013-1978)

NOVEMBER - FEBRUARY 2014



HAPPILY SKIPPING BACKWARDS (2013-1978)

What would it look like to skip happily backwards? What would it involve?

On first consideration, it would involve a degree of blissful naivety: skipping backwards might be dangerous, and so to do so with any amount of happiness could be perceived as troublingly naïve. Aside from a conceivable presence of danger, then, what else might this act, *happily skipping backwards*, involve?

Moving backwards, and gleefully so, necessitates a degree of self-effacement. In this era of eternally 'going forward', to deliberately act counter to this desire seems almost counterintuitive, at the very least - counterproductive. It doesn't quite make sense: willingly entering into a productive relationship with the past - with the sum total of 'backwards' - is an affront to the era of 'onwards and upwards', 'don't look back' and so on, ad infinitum. But what if there were yet un-mined possibilities located therein? What would it say about the present, if happily retreating from it - into the past - appeared more productive than eternally, myopically 'moving forwards'?

Atsushi Kaga's work appears cogent of this self-imposed problem, and indeed both formally and with regard to content, this action is reiterated. On the level of form, Kaga's works very much adhere to the traditional, particularly Japanese disciplines of painting and sculpture; though his practice is not bound to any particular form, it nonetheless remains faithful to the medium being used. Kaga's practice does not, in short, interrogate the *form*, of which his works eventually take. Neither does this interrogation occasion itself with regard to the realm of content: rather, at every point a narrative is present, demonstrating and foregrounding a real desire to *engage with the viewer*.

What I mean to say is: within Kaga's work, expansion often feels like contraction. As much as he prodigiously creates, as much as he shades and pictures his characters and narratives, they appear eternally caught in a loop; figures recur, and new episodes are inserted into what is now a sustained narrative, and yet the promise of progression is absent. Kaga's characters 'evolve' in retrospect: caught in the double bind of painterly representation and the glimmers of narrative which abound throughout his practice. His work is gleefully out-of-time; a perfect antidote to that which is, to paraphrase recent discourse, not simply 'just-in-time' but *all of the time*. Kaga's work beautifully articulates the politics of temporal disjuncture: to be *out of time*, and happily so, is, also, to implicitly deny the ineluctability of this 'now-ness': happily skipping backwards is recast as almost radical.

Semantics aside, what form does this skipping take? *Happily skipping*, of course, is an unlikely turn of phrase: it suggests a degree of joy essentially absent with regard to the content of the work. For, inasmuch as I put forward a notion of a *practice* being content in this act of (formally) skipping backwards, of temporal retreat, the characters that populate Kaga's narrative are most certainly not. They drag their heels in a sea of anxiety, illness, dashed hopes and absurdity.

Throughout his work, language is offered as a means of engagement and through its use, Kaga opens up a space of reflection on the bittersweet world that his characters populate. These recurring characters, often drawn from popular culture, appear painfully self-aware, imbued with a self-consciousness that hangs heavy. Transient visitors from popular culture sit alongside Kaga's creations; Darth Vader, weighed





Atsushi Kaga happily skipping backwards (2013 - 1978) Installation view mother's tankstation 2013

down by normalcy and shopping; a forgetful Yoda; the eternal trickster rabbit, Usacchi; a crippled bear, Kumacchi; all are portrayed as suffering the self-same anxieties proper to contemporary living; a fear of aging, and of death; the fear of missing out; the anxiety of influence; the fear of being made redundant, without a use. Taken as a cumulative whole – Kaga’s substantial collection of small tableaus, poignant snapshots into a humdrum world – the effect is one overwhelmingly of melancholy, of the absurdity of the human condition. One of the most poignant depictions here simply represents a wearied dog figure, wearing a blue shirt and beige chinos, shopping basket in hand, with the tender inscription, ‘Tomorrow will be a Better Day.’ The form of these characters, their embeddedness in the vocabulary of childhood, does nothing to negate their painfully felt humanity. Indeed, to depict these sentiments by human representation, through the means of traditional portraiture, might be emotionally inadequate: it is by virtue of the works’ unanticipated anthropomorphism that grants them their affective charge.

The effectiveness of the exhibition – and Kaga’s work in general – is predicated on the real banality of the human under representation here. For, inasmuch as Kaga’s characters are shown to suffer the anxieties proper to human living, what is most obvious is just how trivial, and yet affective, these anxieties can be. Wondering about someone replying to your email, about getting a response; worrying about the changes that accompany aging; about authenticity: these are the fears and worries that follow us on a daily basis. Technology, particularly, is cast here in an ambiguous light, for inasmuch that it offers a means of interaction, and of openness, it often appears to separate and to alienate: in one scenario, Usacchi sits on a bed hunched over a laptop screen as though imploring it to give him *something*, some glimmer of connection or warmth. His anxiety is a well-founded one: the desire for recognition through the medium of the computer screen – the acquisition of ‘likes’ and ‘friends’ – is one that has come to truly shade contemporary life. Just as ubiquitous is the fear of missing out, or the very real fear that one isn’t living life to the full: in another scene, Usacchi appears atop a flat cornflower blue backdrop, clutching what appears to be a velveteen monkey. The accompanying text reads, ‘I used to be deep and philosophical when I was young. What happened to me now?’

There is a sense that these characters are in some way projections of the artist’s sensibilities, and his approach suggests an intensely felt empathy to be drawn from his depictions of them. Also within the exhibition, there is a peppering of nostalgic family photos: the luminescence of 35mm film serving to further emphasise the emotional portent of the work. Physically interspersed between the painted tableaus of the all too human cartoon animals, a certain naturally occurring sympathy is detected: all act as signifiers of an event, of an emotion even, fleeting and yet no less important in its profundity. Another element firmly rooting this body of work to the artist’s specific narrative is the qualifying time period amounted to this ‘happily skipping backwards’; 1978-2013. This is, of course, the amount of time that Kaga has, up to the point of this exhibition, lived. This body of work, then, acts as a temporal marker of some significance, though of what breed remains ambiguous. I conceive of this particular act of marking, of periodization, as at once futile and melancholy: there are always slippages, events that evade this process of demarcation, and inevitably so: impossibility underscores any desire to observe time. Kaga is always in a productive relationship with this past, the mnemonic sum being a running total, rather than a fixed, quantifiable amount. Happily skipping backwards from 1978-2013, then, necessitates a re-evaluation and rethinking of this period, which reduces it not to overarching, definitive statements, but a quiet sedimentation of sentiments and conversations, gleaned from a past that is never linear nor fixed.

This tendency towards periodization is commonly deployed when talking about artistic output. This performs the un-performable – neatly boxing off works into periods or styles, as if to flatten their essentially irreconcilable nature. Also, to periodize is to insert a narrative where, possibly, there might be none: the artist’s work changes and progresses, and grows, never looking back. There is a sense that this is the objective in Kaga’s ordered periodizing, to mark a point from where he starts anew. However, this desire, too, is problematized, the large painting *Usacchi tries Josef Albers (2011)*, being its clearest articulation. Atop a flat, dark grey backdrop, and curiously surrounded by cats – some sleeping, some awake and dead-eyed – Usacchi attempts to forge a painting, an instantly recognizable Albers. He works from a reproduction in a book, which is kept open by one helpful cat. This is not his first attempt; a series of these faux-Albers line the wall behind, with a calendar depicting some idyllic beach hanging to their left. A charlatan, Usacchi, acting in the absence of the anxiety of influence: he simply accepts it head on, and acknowledges it outright.

If only it were so simple, so straightforward. By this depiction of Usacchi, Kaga articulates both an anxiety and a desire deeply embedded within artistic production. The artist, like the writer, like the composer, at every point is faced with the fear of repetition, of not saying anything new: even more than this, of plagiarism. Indeed there is a sense that Kaga’s prodigious output only further belies this anxiety. And yet, Usacchi’s oblivious or wilful mimicry appears, alongside this anxiety, as a kind of blissful, unaware state; meticulously creating nothing new, but skilful in and of itself; in much the same way that the artist might envy, on her less-productive days, the much-maligned ‘Sunday painter’. To create without the anxiety of influence, in the absence of the myth of the artist-maker forging forwards, always forwards, must be beautiful in its unencumbered passivity. And so it is this double bind that Kaga negotiates in his work, a push and pull of activity and passivity, anxiety and desire. Indeed, being an artist doesn’t seem like much fun. Kaga’s narratives, containing recurring characters and worries as they do, encapsulate the anxiety towards newness that pervades contemporary life: how new can a life really ever be, it seems to ask. Life is populated by joys and mistakes and the inevitable repetition of those joys and mistakes: Kaga’s characters are no different.

Kaga’s happy skipping backwards is infused by a definite melancholy, for the attempt to create a narrative often bears no fruit, even when undertaken with the advantage of temporal estrangement. All that the past can be reduced to is a series of points of convergence, realisations and utterances, often banal. To consider the past is not to think in the linear, but rather necessitates a perception of historicization as a constellation of events in space and time. Linearity, too, belies some degree of progression; it negates the ineluctable presence of repetition. In truth, we repeat ourselves all of the time, we are bound to it: drinking too much, getting a broken heart. Life is a series of repetitions, both good and bad. Kaga’s progression backwards, through time, might then at the same time be treated as a moving forwards; forwards too, might be rethought as backwards. We are always in a productive relationship with the past, remaking, reimagining, forgetting and often getting confused: in the familiar words of William Faulkner, ‘*the past is never dead. It’s not even past*’¹. Kaga’s work reimagines the past as it really is: a series of fragments, of events significant or otherwise, seeking out new connections in space and time.

¹ Faulkner, William *Requiem for a Nun* (1951) New York: Random House, pg. 92



Atsushi Kaga Make Something Good Watercolour and collage on paper 25 x 20 cm framed 2013



Atsushi Kaga Luke is Gone Watercolour and pencil on paper 20 x 24.5 cm framed 2013



Atsushi Kaga *Ping Pong Sculpture (Detail)* 25 handmade clay & paper clay pieces, painted table 74 x 126 x 223 cm 2013