

## ATSUSHI KAGA

*Here I am*

28 September – 25 November 2023

*Lá breithe shona Usacchi...*

As the trickster rabbit turns eighteen, I wonder if even Atsushi Kaga is fully certain when *Usacchi* first visited, from whence they came, or if in some semblance the character has latently just always been there. Not necessarily conscious nor as fully rounded as they are now, but present nonetheless; *Usacchi* and Atsushi are of course indivisible – one-and-the-same<sup>i</sup>. So it's a double birthday, of a kind. As *Usacchi* increasingly shoulders the way to centre-stage, bolder, ever more complicated, and now globally familiar, it continues to dumbfound that many who recognise, empathise with, and sometimes – in a manner akin to pop-adoration – feel (and express) genuine love towards an anthropomorphised rabbit, that they do not wholly understand the complete resonance and psychological make-up of a copiously complex and fully *human* incarnation, underestimating the project as purely charming (*kawaii*<sup>ii</sup>). At the same time this of course attests to the primality and universality of a language in and through which Kaga's brilliant, darkly comic, alter-ego poetically communicates. But, while acknowledging Kaga's psychoanalytic awareness, *Here I am*, as an exhibition, seeks an investigatory stance, as it takes a walk through a breezy Irish landscape<sup>iii</sup> of *Usacchi*'s most private archive.

In finalising the edit of this text, currently seated in the middle of a gallery disarranged with work tables and the, as yet uninstalled, elements (vying for inclusion) in the show, *Usacchi*'s past, present and probable future are almost overwhelming. Tellingly, in the earliest image, *Here I am*, 2005, leaning against the wall opposite me, an unflappable, brazen *bunny* smiles broadly, yet works representing 2022 and 2023 arguably speak to the effects of passing years on us all: In a small gilded panel from 2022, a very different, small and more laden, tiny, exhausted creature sleeps surrounded by protecting owls. In a brand new triptych, straight from the studio *Usacchi*, cropped and overflowing the frame – the most explicit use of this challenging anti-Albertian composition to date – is in a solemn, melancholic, or at least reflective mood, heavy-head resting on out-flapped paw before a cooling windswept landscape. Birds ride the updraft behind, a fox slips quietly away<sup>iv</sup>.

As noted in recent text<sup>v</sup> *Usacchi*, though probably still nameless at that stage, first appeared in painted form in the above-noted seminal student work, *Here I am*, 2005. A generous loan from a private Dublin collection, sees this never-exhibited painting marking the entry point to the show. Eighteen years have passed since that first meeting with *Usacchi* in an uncannily quiet Dublin art school studio, making them now a legitimate adult member of the population (we should look for a little second-hand car or something, maybe champagne). A stunning, more self-confident, slightly later 2005 canvas, again kindly lent from a private collection, also marks *Usacchi*'s 2005 arrival: Encrusted with 'diamond' halo, it features the same sassy three-quarter profile bunny and sports the brilliant if not long(er) title, *What are you afraid of? Darling? Trust me. Look at my halo. It's so shiney [sic]*. There are other early pre-cursors; in a couple of 2005 biro on notepaper drawings, a more standardly comic-book style (a very young-looking) rabbit 'messes about' with an equally juvenile 'devil'. Paper bags over their heads, they literally seem to be *at play*, although (*cutely*) shooting at one another. More developed, an ink and coloured crayon drawing, also 2005, depicts a clearly affronted rabbit seated in a plain, negative spatial ground, with a serious-appearing character (dark hair and spectacles<sup>vi</sup>), whom we assume to be in the role of a psychoanalyst. Cast-off red high heels, somewhat beg the question of that assumption, but nothing is ever that *black and white* in Kaga's world, unless it is intended to be so. Words are attributed to both characters: 'psychoanalyst' "*take off that stupid mask*" – rabbit – "No, it's my face". In many respects, the show starts and stops right there. There are bees and stylised vines on the reverse that hint of Kaga's interest in the Rinpa school, to come.

Moving to 2006, Atsushi Kaga exhibited at a small open studio (Broadstone, Dublin), that witnessed new character developments of what was at the time, simply determined 'Bunny'. *Smoking might affect your memory span*, a small-scale oil, multiple *bunnies* (or one moving about a lot) abstractly roam a sunny summer meadow, clearly stoned and surrounded by colourful balloons (imaginary?). More darkly, and printed as the invitation to the studio show, in an ink on paper drawing, the rabbit startles itself out of sleep. Bolt upright, in a indicatively traditional Japanese setting, Tatami mats, paper screens and futon, etc., bunny yelps; "that bastard appeared in my dream again"...

Kaga's first formal solo exhibition in 2007 with mother's tankstation, carried the simultaneously clear-cut yet confounding title, *Bunny's Darkness and Other Stories*.<sup>vii</sup> Suggesting that *Usacchi* seemed still nameless – or at least irregularly named<sup>viii</sup> – yet pregnant immanence pending (...). An inventory search of the earliest painting bearing *Usacchi's* name seems to proffer the weirdly beautiful and previously unexhibited *Usacchi meets brainy bunny for the first time*, a 2008 dated 120 x 150 cm oil on canvas, establishing a scale and format to which the artist still maintains, or more specifically, to which Kaga resolutely returned around 2020<sup>x</sup>. The two overlarge characters dominate against a plain, Caravaggio-dark ground, with knitted woollen mittens strung from their necks in toddler fashion, and 'brainy bunny' (BB) awkwardly carries an over-large cranium presumably to store its (we think female – smarter) over-large brain<sup>x</sup>.

I'm not certain (again) why *Usacchi* sounds Renaissance(ishly) Italianate in our parlance? There are competing arguments, at least in *my* not-so-large-brain – I feel a certainty of correction coming-on, "in fairness...": One, that Kaga's creation is very consciously a fusion of eastern and western traditions, so therefore the western pronunciation of an eastern term might legitimately be intended. Second thought is that *mother's tankstation*, way back in 2006 had very little of the Asian exposure and contact that it has enjoyed since, so we simply might just have been wildly mis-pronouncing it, and that Atsushi was too polite to correct us. Officially *Usacchi*, or Katakana character version of said..., with Japanese linguistic origins, meaning a loveable soft toy, in rabbit form (?) should be pronounced *Usaki*, but *Usacchi* it has become, and I guess will remain... unless we get official notification from Deed Poll<sup>xi</sup> – in fairness.

From 2008-2013 Atsushi Kaga was a regular contributor to mother's tankstation's excursions to Miami art fairs, NADA and Art Basel Miami Beach namely, and consequently the doors to both America and (less obviously) Asia, and most specifically China, began to open. The experience arguably peaked in 2012, with a solo performative installation for Art Basel Miami Beach, where Atsushi and his mother Kazuko, sewed and decorated bags to order for a near-delirious audience. The presentation originally designed for the process room at IMMA, Dublin, and now on the cusp of legend, is well again documented, so I shall refer<sup>xii</sup>, rather than return. But merely to say that much of the work was generated by Kaga while on a residency in New York, and trucked down to Florida, including a life size anthropomorphic tree, from which the bags were hung from its branches/arms, to await collection. That particular year had witnessed a severe storm system (Sandy) around the New York area, and quilted works that Kaga had made at classes along with the New York ladies that sew, served as a crucial aid to keeping warm in his studio during regular winter power outages and freezing temperatures. The most important of these works, *The prudent sleepers*<sup>xiii</sup>, features in *Here I am*.

Enjoying the New York experience at the time, Kaga endeavoured to make the city his new home, and produced a large solo show with Jack Hanley in his Chinatown gallery during 2015. Hanley had a professionally admired habit of printing fliers with local printshops, featuring an artist's work to advertise a forthcoming show – early San Fran examples, such as those by Pettibon, Chris Johanson, Simon Evans etc., – are the stuff of artworld folklore and eBay. A work made specifically for the flier for Kaga's show, features as a rare example (this side of the planet) from this period, as much of the show subsequently moved on to Kaga's following Tokyo exhibitions and mainly now exists in Asian collections. The compositional structure of this small ply panel painting pre-empts that of the Kyoto/Taipei series 2019-2020, or which sadly there is nothing this side of the planet to represent it otherwise.

Like many artists, Kaga found New York trying after a couple of years and relocated back to Japan to be closer to family and with his adored Kazuko during her last years. During which time he re-discovered the work of the late Edo period Rinpa school in the Kyoto museums and Itō Jakuchū (1716-1800)<sup>xiv</sup> in particular. As a thoughtful and conscious re-inventing inheritance of Jakuchū, Kaga made a concerted series of wondrous small panel paintings, fusing Japanese traditional stylisations of nature, seasonal light, fruits and vegetables, hope-to-melancholy-and-back-again, grafted onto a format and setting derived from a pretty obscure Dutch Vanitas portraiture genre, where the sole figure sits in a darkened space before a laden table. The resulting and highly compelling installation, *Usacchi's long summer into fall*, at Taipei Dangdai 2020<sup>xv</sup> began the chapter of Atsushi Kaga as ascendant interplanetary artistic being. Subsequent exhibitions at mother's tankstation in Dublin and London; *Melancholy with vegetables surrounded by miracles*, 2020<sup>xvi</sup> and *Your memorabilia floats in the air*, 2022<sup>xvii</sup>, respectively, both produced from Kaga's professed favourite place to work, Ireland, have confirmed the flight path and delivered us to the current destination, *Here I am*.

Happy birthday *Usacchi*

<sup>i</sup> The artist tends to commonly sign his name with a simple line drawing... the sign of the rabbit...

<sup>ii</sup> In a more complete and complicated definition; kawaii is also vulnerable, shy, innocent, childlike, etc.,

<sup>iii</sup> The 2023 painting made especially for this show, to represent the present is titled: *Usacchi in an Irish Landscape (Dublin 8)*. Acrylic and gold leaf on canvas (triptych), 180 x 360 cm.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.* no.iii

<sup>v</sup> See text for Kaga's 2020 show; *Melancholy with vegetables surrounded by miracles*, that recounts the first studio meeting with *Usacchi*: <http://www.motherstankstation.com/exhibition/melancholy-with-vegetables-surrounded-by-miracles/text/>

<sup>vi</sup> A recurring trope in Kaga's practice. See love interest etc., and *Sachiko* (or "Ruby" by night). Also c.f. 'Take off that stupid mask' (?)

<sup>vii</sup> *Bunny's Darkness and Other Stories*, 2007: [motherstankstation.com/exhibition/bunnys-darkness-and-other-stories/text/](http://www.motherstankstation.com/exhibition/bunnys-darkness-and-other-stories/text/)

<sup>viii</sup> Later drawings anti-chronologically still refer to *Usacchi* as 'Bunny', as in '*Bunny in red Adidas*', watercolour on paper, 2008.

<sup>ix</sup> During COVID lockdown, Kaga was inadvertently 'trapped' by unforeseen global circumstance (for eighteen-months) in a beautiful studio residency in rural Kilkenny... but with delivered art supplies.

<sup>x</sup> We believe that this important painting has only been exhibited once, briefly at the short-lived RDS Dublin Art Fair, 2008.

<sup>xi</sup> Similarly *Usacchi's* inseparable, but misfortunate pal; *Kumacchi*, meaning a loveable soft toy, in bear form (?) should be pronounced *Kumaki*, but *Kumacchi* it is... unless...

<sup>xii</sup> *Nerd Bag*, Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2010: <https://www.motherstankstation.com/exhibition/atsushi-kaga-nerd-bag/overview/> and *Nerd Bag Factory*, Art Basel Miami Beach, 2012: [www.motherstankstation.com/exhibition/art-basel-miami-beach2012-art-positions/overview/](http://www.motherstankstation.com/exhibition/art-basel-miami-beach2012-art-positions/overview/)

<sup>xiii</sup> *The prudent sleepers*, 2012, Fabric, thread, fabric glue, 220 x 170 cm, [www.motherstankstation.com/exhibition/art-basel-miami-beach2012-art-positions/overview/](http://www.motherstankstation.com/exhibition/art-basel-miami-beach2012-art-positions/overview/)

<sup>xiv</sup> *Jakuchū*, an assiduous observer of nature was the son of a grocer who turn to painting as a profession at around forty years of age (so intimately acquainted with vegetables...)

<sup>xv</sup> *Usacchi's long summer into fall*, Taipei Dangdai, 2020: <http://www.motherstankstation.com/exhibition/solos-atsushi-kaga/text/>

<sup>xvi</sup> Atsushi Kaga, *Melancholy with vegetables surrounded by miracles*, <http://www.motherstankstation.com/exhibition/melancholy-with-vegetables-surrounded-by-miracles/text/>

<sup>xvii</sup> Atsushi Kaga, *your memorabilia floats in the air*: <http://www.motherstankstation.com/exhibition/your-memorabilia-floats-in-the-air/text/>