

ATSUSHI KAGA

*Melancholy
with vegetables
surrounded by miracles*

17 September – 28 November 2020

*Life is butter, life is butter,
Melon, cauliflower, melon, cauliflower,
Life is but a melon, life is but a melon,
Cauliflower, cauliflower*

(trad. Scouting/Guide campfire song. Sung as a round, to the tune: *Frère Jacques*).

In writing about Atsushi Kaga's Melancholy with vegetables surrounded by miracles, at mother's tankstation, Dublin, it's going to be – whichever way you shake it – difficult to avoid some sort of historical, journalistic, narrative. So accepting my fate, let's begin at a beginning.

Approximately eighteen years ago... it was a little after 9.00am on a weekday morning, and as anyone who has ever lectured at a European art college (probably, art colleges anywhere, actually) will surely attest, it's a good hour to look around in peace, with the complete absence of the student body¹. Mostly all seemed relative to its expected place in the order of things, until entering a small mezzanine studio I found myself confronted by a near 'life size' portrait of a plump, anthropomorphised rabbit (bunny). Composed against a painterly chiaroscuro ground, in noble three-quarter-frontal pose, chest puffed, slight smirk, it looked right back at me². I immediately knew who had invented and painted this cheeky creation, as it was clearly a satirical 'self portrait', existing with effortless confidence like it had always just been there. Other than a mid-week-nine-o'clock-sort-of-astonishment, of the general sort, it felt that the specific genius, lay in the manipulation of three dots and two lines conspiring to, not only, establish a legible face, but to register and convey subtle particularities of mood, and emotion: wistful.

I was transported to Rudolph Töpffer's³ idea, noted in the early nineteenth century (and promoted by Goethe as an ideal of communication beyond the restriction of languages), that even a rudimentary soul/abandoned on a desert island (without exterior influence), might draw with a stick in the sand a complete inventory of human emotions. Atsushi Kaga seemed to have seamlessly inherited Töpffer's speculation and proved his thesis, that such a depiction could be as powerful, or have the communicative potential, as any degree of academic mimesis.⁴

Moving time forward, Atsushi Kaga, now an established, internationally recognized artist, having exhibited numerous solo shows; Dublin, Sao Paolo, Los Angeles, New York, Tokyo, etc., has with evident reason, but rare courage, never released this moment of student invention, but rather has nurtured, honed, developed – like a sharpened pencil - and expanded the nameless bunny into the

sophisticated, lean Usacchi; to the point where it seems a fully rounded, 'believable' being, with autonomous determination, yet still a perfect mirror in which its creator is refracted.

*Atsushi Kaga has suggested that he originally came to Ireland to learn English, harbouring an idea of becoming a comic, but with self-analysis thought better of it, sensing that the necessary extroversion for *stand-up* might not be at the forefront of Japanese temperament. So a fusion of visual art and writing might serve as an alternate way to realize his vision. Enter Atsushi Kaga, artist.*

*After some years of trying out other places to live and work as professional artist; New York, Tokyo, Kyoto, Kaga-san has once again settled-in with the country of great literary, dark-observers, satirists and absurdists; Flan O'Brien, Swift, Wilde, Joyce, Beckett, Behan (*house-painter, drinker – with a writing problem, chancer...*) Higgins, to name but a few, as the one place in the world, where he feels free, comfortable and inspired, as he claims, to create his most inventive, productive work. The landmark project, *Melancholy with Vegetables...* may well evidence this point, as it seems set to pivot the perception of his work from beloved, slightly underground cult status, to fully fledged, mature, international recognition. [I'm washing, ironing and neatly folding my early Kaga T-shirt, into the 'precious' drawer].⁵*

*There are a couple of further considerations to be held in sight, that ineluctably contribute to Kaga's extraordinary body of new work: ...a long summer into fall, a breakthrough series of paintings developed and realized while living and working in Kyoto, resulting in a solo presentation of particular focus and clarity at Taipei Dangdai, January 2020.⁶ And secondly; a global pandemic and lockdown in rural Ireland. Fortuitously, the latter is a vessel filled with the experience of the former. In late 2019, Atsushi Kaga was granted the Tony O'Malley Studio Award, managed by the Royal Hibernian Academy, which for those unfamiliar with things Irish, is the house and studio of the late, eponymous, well-respected modernist painter, located in the heart, the high street of Callan, in fact, of a picture-perfect Co. Killkenny town. The large, well-appointed studio that opens out to a formal, slightly overgrown, garden, even in the times of COVID-19, is well served by deliveries of art materials - Kaga has been painting furiously. The twelve month award turned into eighteen, due to international travel restrictions, and Kaga as happy as a proverbial... has painted his way, literally, from winter into spring, spring into summer, and back again. During all of which, he has managed the exceptional feat of tuning any audience directly into the frequency of his *lockdown* brain waves.*

*Kyoto: Briefly escaping Tokyo during 2018, Kaga took refuge in the more tranquil centre of Kyoto to focus on the developmental production of new work, eventuating in a series of over thirty small panel paintings, and in the meantime, he re-discovered the paintings of Itō Jakuchū⁷ and the Rinpa school. The term 'school' is essentially a misnomer, as it's more a series of painters that either learnt from one another or clashed and rebelled against each other, commonly banded together as a tradition by a broad rejection of the state sanctioned Kanō school. The paintings of Itō Jakuchū – appropriately the son of a famous Kyoto grocer, a one-time grocer himself, prior to becoming a fully recognized painter in his own right – are known for their elegant elongations of form. (Similarly, Kaga's upgraded Usacchi has become leaner with longer, simpler limbs). More than this, Jakuchū's works are a veritable cornucopia, redolent with fruits and vegetables, stylised plants and vines, lushly populated with birds and wildlife. Like Jakuchū, - who was much criticized for it during the cultural resistance to exterior influence, during the Edo era – Kaga has fused Japanese traditions, stylisations and symbolism with more western academic concepts; *trompe l'oeil*, perspectival tricks,*

after Alberti⁸, and the looming chiaroscuro of Caravaggio and Holbein (maybe there was just less light then?)

The body of work, through from the Taipei series to the current larger format paintings on canvas of *Melancholy with vegetables...* adopt formal aspects from Jakuchū and the broader Kyoto traditions, blended (I choose my word carefully – see various depictions of Usacchi *juicing*), with conventions of seventeenth century (ostensibly Dutch) Vanitas paintings. The lush arrangements (of then) expensive, rare, perishable goods, do just that; they perish, and in the doing so, remind us that we do too. Time passes visibly, stilled in Kaga's individual works, freezing impossible grocery moments, but seen collectively, time moves inexorably; through the replacement of spring vegetables for summer fare, autumnal tubers, waning moons, circling bats, visible shifts in colour temperatures. Somewhat inspired by reading Aidan Higgins' (an inveterate list maker) brilliant autobiography, *A Bestiary*, whose ferocious descriptions of memory are almost olfactory, I've attached a brief and totally incomplete shopping list of 'groceries' in Kaga's series, as a footnote⁹. Which seems to somewhat replicate the experience of encountering the exhibited works in person – or in reproduction – whereby, from 'distance'

we see major trends first, overall moods, expression, pose, colour, before we begin to close-focus on detail and Kaga's expansive symbolic vocabulary slowly reveals itself, to eventually fill up the inseparability of understanding from knowledge. Why boxing gloves?

To conclude, I suppose we inevitably return to some sort of beginning. Three dots and two lines, have become an encyclopaedic catalogue of 'human' emotion (expressed as a Rabbit – and inarguably left-centred on the wistful-to-melancholy register), but always with what the Irish call "neck". Usacchi is a classic Joyceian "chancer" (see Major Tweedy), a mischievous trickster but loyal friend and champion of the underdog. Mainly depicted solo in these portraits, Usacchi epitomizes the mental solitude of lockdown. Two late paintings in the series have given the rabbit company, re-introducing Kumacchi, Usacchi's best friend and, if you have not come across the character before, let's just say that *it* is more than a little unfortunate, a troubled bear – it's a long, sad story. They are pictured together in a night garden, Autumn moon above. Beside Usacchi, fitted with red boxing gloves in preparation for necessary-fight-to-come, on the ground, sits a transistor radio – lonely words from the outside world – and the emergency shopping necessity, a toilet roll. Kumacchi is on his back, smoking a joint, as usual, with a familiar pressed aluminium ashtray balancing on tummy. There is no eye contact, they are together but alone; a comfortable melancholy silence ensues. Illuminated paper lanterns provide the glow of a missing campfire...

Life is butter.

¹ In this instance, the painting department of The National College of Art And Design, Dublin, Ireland.

² Illustrated as the frontispiece of Asushi Kaga, *Happily Skipping Backwards*, (2012-1978), 2013

³ Rudolph Töpffer, 1799-1846, Swiss teacher, author, painter, cartoonist, and caricaturist.

⁴ Töpffer, is considered, alternatively the father, or at least an important precursor to the modern art form of Comics.

⁵ In previous years, a series of Kaga designs were made for and printed by [Im]Perfect Articles, Chicago.

⁶ <http://www.motherstankstation.com/exhibition/solos-atsushi-kaga/>

⁷ Itō Jakuchū (1716-1800).

⁸ Leon Battista Alberti, (1404-1472), artist, architect, poet, priest, linguist, philosopher, etc., considered the epitome of 'Renaissance man'.

⁹ A partially mended vase, peeled apple and orange/s, slightly wilted tulip, toaster, blenders, cut and sliced lemons, a garland of onion tops (gone-to-seed), tea bag, various teapots and tea bowls, expired match – actually two, fallen petals, pumpkins, and various squash varieties, peaches, black cat playing with a dandelion, various other cats – various attitudes; one asleep, seashells, a pair of leeks, bok choy, lilies – lots, hydrangeas – lots, three carrots with tops, others without, jugs, three sprouting garlic bulbs, two chicken wings, a whole and very naked looking chicken, a baby thrush, halved avocado, sprouting purple potatoes, net of tangerines, roll of toilet paper, transistor radio, lamp (decorated with ducks), other lanterns, a head of celery, loaf of brown soda bread, scones, three turnips, a pair of aubergines (nightshade), rhubarb, single asparagus spear (actually two; separated and at 85% angles from one another), odd circular bowls with dripping edge glaze (raku?) – some reflecting the moon, jars of pickles, three Tony O'Malley sculptures, an ailing spider plant, tennis racket – three balls (yellow), a hurly and sliotar, knives – dramatically sticking out over table edges x 2, tomatoes, a bottle of baby bio, candles, nightlights, a colander of washed (presumably) rocket, single runner bean, song birds – cartoon varieties, chillies, snail, moth, crickets, owls, bats.