

## PSIONIC DISTORTION

Plum Blossoms Gallery  
555 West 25th Street  
Through April 30

The international posse represented in “Psionic Distortion” deploys a flanking maneuver in Japan’s pop invasion of Gotham. It is revelatory to see East Villager Paul Pope’s gorgeous sumi ink brushwork in raw black-and-white *Batman* boards before their subtleties are lost in translation to DC’s glossy color stock. Taiyo Kimura uses pencil for his tiny manga sketches—one bulb-headed creature cavorts atop his own dialogue balloons—which form the basis for video shorts of the artist grafting bathroom faucets, flashlights, and dead fish onto his body, creating grotesque parodies of kids’ Transformer toys. In one excruciating segment he practically suffocates inside a plastic bag, morbidly recalling the Aum Shinrikyo cult’s deadly gas attack on Tokyo’s subway. In the center of the gallery, relics from recent sonic performances by Muneteru Ujino (power drills bolted to guitar bodies, a vinyl disc of Yes’s warhorse *Relayer* spiked with colored-pencil stubs) form a visual mash-up. Jeremy Stenger’s acetate painting of an eviscerated sparrow, which mimics the sharp-blurry focus pull of multi-layered animation cels, shares a tragic vision with Mikio Taka’s watercolors of distended, drooling heads covered with farragoes of psychedelic tattoos and drenched in acid rain. They feel like stills from an anime epic set within the shadow of the bomb. R.C. BAKER

## Da bomb! Japan’s subcults point fingers while looking inward

## LITTLE BOY: THE ARTS OF JAPAN’S EXPLODING SUBCULTURE

Japan Society  
333 East 47th Street  
Through July 24

Your country lies in radioactive ruins; your rapacious military has been castrated; hated barbarians write your new constitution. Naturally, you rebel, and eventually unleash upon the world . . . life-size plushies.

A bipedal persimmon greets visitors to “Little Boy,” its doe-eyed visage typical of the cuddly civic mascots that represent many Japanese municipalities. Descended from cinematic actors in monster costumes trampling miniature cities, these hybrids embody curator Takashi Murakami’s thesis that catastrophic defeat in World War II turned the Japanese into “bloated little children.” And children must have toys—just beyond the ranks of Hello Kitty merchandise, 14 Godzilla models



Photograph by Sheldon Collins

## Japan Society’s monster mash

snarl before an enlarged excerpt from Japan’s 1946 constitution (promulgated by the American occupiers): “The Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right.” Officially pacifist amid Cold War anxieties, Japan crouched beneath the U.S.’s

protective nuclear umbrella. Is the exhibit’s phalanx of Jurassic reptiles (in the original movie, Godzilla is awakened from hibernation by an H-bomb test) raging against the victor’s paternalism?

Murakami flattens the distinction between pop culture—manga, anime, and sci-fi, laced with atomic imagery—and contemporary Japanese art; Izumi Kato’s haunting canvases of a mutant couple (her swollen genitals glowing as if irradiated, his puffy and drooping) are a hellish vision of inflamed impotence. They flank a vitrine crammed with tiny bears driving Formula One cars and Ski-Doos and other plastic ephemera. Some walls are hung floor-to-ceiling with pseudo-scientific anatomical sketches of monstrous characters from the *Ultra-man* TV show; others display Chinatsu Ban’s tender acrylics of elephants in comforting “underpants,” which in turn contrast with Aya Takano’s androgynous waifs, nude limbs entwined, knees, elbows, and cheeks flushed pink from mysterious exertion.

Sixty years ago the Japanese lost the war; this disturbing, funny, passionate exhibit argues that they’re still searching for their soul. R.C. BAKER