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Chiho Aoshima, Cyborgs and Yōkai: Recoding the Present Through the Past.

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CHIHO AOSHIMA, CYBORGS AND YŌKAI: RECODING THE PRESENT THROUGH THE PAST.

by
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SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

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Preface

In many ways, I think my thesis topic chose me. Much of my childhood was spent being interested in Japanese culture, and indeed my first art history course was about imperial Japanese art, taught by a Claremont Graduate University alum whose specialty is in Japanese art. It was that teacher who sparked my passion for art history at sixteen years old, and with whom I went on many field trips to Seattle Asian Art Museum. The summer before I started college, I found myself working the distinctly unglamorous job of a wading pool attendant (a less qualified lifeguard) in Volunteer Park, which is a stone’s throw from SAAM. I can’t remember exactly why a friend and I decided to go on a museum excursion on August 5, 2015, but it brought us to SAAM, where I saw *Rebirth of the World* for the first time. I was so taken with it I went back two days later! Chiho Aoshima and that particular show have been on my mind for over three years, and this thesis is meant as a labor of love for a work that quite literally changed my life.

The first time I saw *Rebirth Of The World* at Seattle Asian Art Musuem.
Introduction

In the spirit of clarity, allow me to give you a roadmap of where this is heading. This thesis is a case study on Chiho Aoshima’s 2015 show *Rebirth of the World* at Seattle Asian Art Museum. It will consist of two chapters, discussing a particular influence on her artwork coupled with an in-depth study focused on one specific medium per chapter. What the reader should understand by the end is my characterization of the artist’s work, the influences of Shintoism and folklore found in her work and the connections between Aoshima’s dystopian utopic visions and the text *A Cyborg Manifesto*, and a clear understanding of how her practice fits into a modern context and why it is significant. I sincerely hope you come away with a greater appreciation for Chiho Aoshima, and are able to uncover for yourself the fascinating blend of Japanese religious and art historical elements with a very modern feel, and her distinctly contemporary, critical and feminist oriented practice.

Chiho Aoshima is a Japanese artist born in 1974, and a member of the prominent art collective Kaikai Kiki, founded by Takashi Murakami. She is a self-taught artist, who started making art as a teenager by doodling images of young girls. She studied Economics, not Art, at Hosei University in the 1990’s, later going to work for Kaikai Kiki as an assistant and eventually becoming one of the earliest represented artists.¹ Her artistic career began with her inclusion in the 1999 show *Tokyo Girls Bravo*, organized by Murakami to illuminate the careers of female artists Aya Takano and Aoshima. From there, Aoshima was included in the seminal show *Superflat*, which brought Murakami’s art historical theory by the same name

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² "Rebirth of the World." Virgil Abloh | Kaikai Kiki Gallery.
into the global arena. When asked how he would describe Aoshima’s work, Takashi Murakami said, “her style is based on innocent and spiritual ideas sandwiched in the mixture of outsider art context and the cultural complexes of post-war Japan. This, then, snugly fits into a feminine, spiritual world that is an area of calm air amidst the context-ridden, testosterone-filled worldview of contemporary art.” This speaks clearly to the key successes of Aoshima in her rather unusual practice. Owing to her lack of formal, art historical and fine art training, she is able to incorporate themes and aesthetics into her work that would otherwise be frowned upon by academia. However, this is not to discredit her ability to weave in threads of cultural history that are so central to a modern comprehension of Japan. Finally, her “spiritual worlds” provide an alternate conception of reality that forges a new path into contemporary art and is critical of the misogynistic overtones of contemporary art as a whole.

As is the case with many things outside of one’s own culture, it is easy to misinterpret and simplify concepts that lay outside a collective cultural understanding. Aoshima’s work is certainly not immune to this, and it is critical to understand exactly where Western criticisms of her works fall short. In essence, her work gets superflattened by an untrained and uninformed Western eye and is described as being influenced by anime and manga, as well as a minimization of her works on paper. Aoshima has said herself that, “I really don't read manga or watch anime, so actually there shouldn't be any connection”\(^4\), and yet the constant comparison persists. A significant quantity of reviews of her work will mention anime and manga, and proceed to draw strong connections between them and the artist’s work. In

\[^{3}\] "Rebirth of the World." Virgil Abloh | Kaikai Kiki Gallery
fairness, this is unsurprising, and I too made this mistake initially when I first encountered her work. Anime and manga are something easily recognizable to a Western eye, so for viewers with little background knowledge on Japan, animanga may be the most readily accessible comparison. The genesis for this confusion comes from the mass export of Japanese cultural items, particularly anime and manga in the 1990’s. In the consciousness of the United States, anime and manga were understood in a fairly reductive manner as saccharine cuteness like Hello Kitty, or coy erotic temptations in the form of wide eyed, school girl uniform clad adolescents like Sailor Moon. This narrow conception is most visible in the art criticism related to Aoshima, where it becomes apparent that not only is anime one of two things, but it is also not seen as art. One critic wrote, “her prints of rope-bondage scenes and Boschian hellscapes recall certain sadistic nineteenth-century woodblocks as much as they evoke contemporary Japanese animated pornography.” Now there is certainly a lot to examine here, but let’s start with the basics. What is most puzzling is, why the comparison to specifically Japanese animated pornography? Rope bondage is a Japanese concept, but it is certainly not unique to any one place, nor remotely specific to animated porn. What is perplexing is why this comparison was made at all when there is a wealth of manga and anime works to reference, though this comparison is certainly a debatable point in the first place as the artist denies any relation between her work and these two genres. The point that this quote illustrates is that, to some outside of Japan, anime is simply code for pornography, and far from the notions of fine art. Owing to the inundation of Japanese animanga, it is understandable that certain archetypes stuck while other, perhaps more original ones faded out of cultural relevance. Here arises another problem, which is the idea that anything which is popular should be treated as overdone or cliché. Prominent critic Jori Finkel said of a 2005 show, “Aoshima deserves to be evaluated... not for the originality of her

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visual vocabulary but for how well she brings overexposed images back to life- for how well
she redeems the clichés of her culture.”6 In fairness, a show by the artist in 2005 might not
have been as complex as a show in 2015. However, it is diminishing to suggest that, simply
on the basis of the style being akin to that of animation, it is cliché. That comment suggests a
shallow appraisal of the work at best and a disinterest in it based on the ideas of “low” culture
aesthetics at worst. Unsurprisingly, I took issue with other parts of this review, and here I will
conclude with this: “But the animation itself is so much stronger that the prints seem like
mere souvenirs from the film.”7 As this show was in 2005, the animated work Finkel is
referring to is City Glow, the first of Aoshima’s animation projects with New Zealander
Bruce Ferguson. Was this as cohesive as her 2015 animated work? Likely not, but if there is
only one thing you should take away from this thesis, it is the notion of Aoshima building
one world out of many others, with a diverse cast of characters and images, who none the less
stand on their own, independent of only one narrative. One cannot understand any of the
artist’s pieces well without the aid of the others, even if they are seemingly unrelated. Even if
a particular character does not directly appear in other images, their role is likely replaced by
another character that comes from the same conception of Aoshima’s universe we inhabit. It
is easy to get sucked into Aoshima’s complex and vibrant images, and this is the quality of
her work that I most admire. It is a shame that others did not see it that way, but such is the
nature of art criticism.

**Tracing the Artist’s Practice**

Before jumping in to analyzing the artist’s works, it is important to start with an
overall characterization of her pieces and practice to better understand and uncover the
complexities of her work. The single most important fact about Chiho Aoshima’s practice

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and works is that all of her creative outputs come from her unique and self-taught style, creativity, and vision of the world. Her lack of formal training is in fact her greatest asset, as it has allowed her to make art that is hers from inception to realization. To put it simply, Aoshima’s works create a vivid, otherworldly appeal with unique characters comprising a complex whole, with feminine, deceptively cute figures reigning supreme. Her art prominently features motifs milled from the natural world, and she has said of her work, “what inspires me are all fauna, insects, animals, the universe and nature.” The most descriptive word I have found for these worlds is “hypnagogic scenes” meaning a dreamlike space. Whether dream or nightmare is more appropriate remains to be seen depending on the work, because despite being cute, much of Aoshima’s portfolio is unmistakably dark. This juxtaposition of kawaii, a Japanese word for cute, aesthetic with a darker over or undertone is at the core of Aoshima’s practice, which is often influenced by her affinity for duality.

Adding these layers often causes one to feel uneasy or conflicted when looking at her work. It is precisely this complexity that elevates her work beyond being sickly sweet kawaii or overblown, melancholic darkness.

A typical piece is oriented lengthwise, mounted on Plexiglas, and as busy as a Hieronymus Bosch painting. Figure 1, Haruna in a Meteor Shower, is a textbook example of her work. It is vividly colored and eye catching, explores the ever-present tango between nature and technology, and prominently features female figures that likely do not belong to this world in our narrow understanding of reality. The scene overall paints a picture, but the discreet images that make up the entirety have their own stories as well. This is key to the

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8 Vartanian, Ivan. Drop Dead Cute. 33
10 Vartanian, Ivan. Drop Dead Cute. 32
understanding of Aoshima’s work. There is never simply one image. The illustration you see before you is more about the parts than it is the whole.

With these concepts in mind, it becomes easier to understand the œuvre of the artist and how she arrived at the central tenants of her practice and aesthetics. Because of her lack of formal training, Aoshima started her career exclusively working in Adobe Illustrator rather than working in more traditional mediums.11 This is what gives her works, primarily on plexiglass, a distinctly animated, technological feel, rather than a painterly aesthetic. Several years into her career, she began sketching on paper and using watercolor and colored pencils.12 These sketches are then usually scanned into the computer, and used in other, larger images like figure 1. For Aoshima, one image seldom remains one image only. “I concentrate on creating individual worlds within my images” 13 the artist said of her work, and the evolution of her practice has only complicated this idea of part and whole.

Since 1999, Aoshima’s aesthetic has changed notably, and it is important to track these changes in order to understand not just the growth of her practice, but the evolution of her style and content. Her practice started out in the same way her adolescent imagination brought inspiration to her, through drawing girls. Her early works are dominated by young, female figures in a variety of scenes, but the population of women in her artworks is the dominant trend. Her earliest works, truthfully, are simple. Figure 2, *Japanese Apricot 2*, showcases Aoshima’s early work, which is aesthetically beautiful but not as conceptually and iconographically rich as later works. The image of a pale damsel in distress is not a new one, but the cherry blossom archetype and misty mountains situate the work as distinctly within the Japanese art historical tradition. While the colors are a range of calming, feminine pink

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13 Vartanian, Ivan. *Drop Dead Cute*.34
hues, one can clearly see that Aoshima has not yet developed her signature barrage of color or crowded “one image amongst many” style. However, her early work is the locus for an important element of her practice, seduction. “Aoshima’s project is seduction, but she seduces on the level of form, not content, which is to say the fantasies these worlds incarnate are more aesthetic than sexual.” While it would be easy to say that the content is distinctly sexual in figure 2, this would be an oversimplification of her work and miss the point. The sensual nature of all of Aoshima’s hypnagogic works is more a factor of the soft, animated quality, tranquil, lush scenery and careful composition of the images rather than the mere presence of a naked woman. Here I am referring to The Tate’s secondary definition of form, being ”the element of shape among the various elements that make up a work” In this particular image, note the curvaceous shape of the mountains and branches, and in particular how the cherry blossom tree mimics the curves of the bound female figure, delicately nesting her in the tree itself. Despite the fact that she is in a precarious position, the image creates a sense softness, drawing the viewer deeper into Aoshima’s world.

As the artist’s career developed, so too did the complexity of her works. In figure 3, Hot Spring, we see a comparatively more detailed image than that of her 2000 work Japanese Apricot 2. As with her earlier work, there is still a clear, singular female subject dominating the narrative, but at this point in the artist’s career we begin to see added subject matter to the overall composition. In Hot Spring, we see an adolescent-looking girl taking a bath in a hot spring, gazing playfully out at the viewer. She is posed suggestively, perhaps making sly reference to masturbation and female sexuality. The scene is further heightened by the cloud-like mist that permeates the middle ground of the image. This sense of the supernatural adds

to the intrigue and drama of the overall composition, and suggests a more complicated perception of reality. As if this was not sufficient, there is a little butterfly perched delicately on a yellow flower in the foreground, a lizard lurking on the rocks to the left of the bath and a spider cheekily crawling on the bathing subject’s foot, and, if you look closely, a frog right at the very front, hidden amongst the foliage. These are the “individual worlds” that Aoshima spoke of. This piece is critical in understanding the artist’s trajectory because her worlds within worlds approach is inextricably tied to nature, as it is in this particular image. When Aoshima is world building, she always does so within the broader context of the natural world. Nature is the locus for her fantastical realms, and this is unsurprising once we begin to examine the spiritual influences in her art.

2003 is the distinct period in which Chiho Aoshima’s signature style begins to emerge, but it is not until 2005 that it comes to be in the most recognizable form known today. In figure 4, City Glow, Aoshima’s convoluted relationship between the natural and urban is in full swing, with her animation style aesthetic more polished and her emergence of animism in its genesis stage. Unlike other works already examined, City Glow has no one central figure, but rather is populated by dynamic, unmistakably feminine skyscrapers amidst a verdant, tropical jungle. The way these structures rise seamlessly out of the greenery sets up what will become a long artistic dialog for Aoshima between the natural world and the ever-developing urban centers of today. Despite the irony of their phallic shape, the skyscraper’s facial shape and features mimic Aoshima’s earlier depictions of feminine figures, particularly in Hot Spring. The animism of the buildings is one of the earliest and clearest examples of Aoshima’s affinity with Shinto elements, particularly that of spirits. The belief that everything is endowed with an energy, and many things, be it inanimate objects, mountains or buildings, possess such energies, is an important belief within Shintoism, and as will be discussed later, guides much of Aoshima’s creation of characters in her work.
The most significant development in Chiho Aoshima’s career came in 2006, when she began making works on paper. Her drawings are quite intricate, delicate, and gripping, especially since they make up the bulk of her recognizable characters in her later video works. Figure 5 is a particularly fine example of her watercolor on Japanese paper images, which I will be calling *Kodama* in lieu of an actual title. *Kodama* are classified as *yōkai*, and are spirits that live in trees, and are perhaps most recognizable to a Western audience from the acclaimed Studio Ghibli film “Princess Mononoke”. Aoshima’s portrayal is more literal, with her characteristic round faces and big eyes nestled right into the center of a tree branch with stick-like, leafy arms and legs. Betwixt the two *kodama* is a spider web, which they both observe with a sense of childish playfulness and wonder. Seemingly all of Aoshima paper works carry these themes of the natural world, cuteness and a somewhat otherworldly quality, and these elements are founded upon deeply ingrained Japanese religious and cultural beliefs.

**Chapter I: Past and Paper**

Chiho Aoshima’s art is unmistakably contemporary, but her works on paper explore concepts that predate her by hundreds if not thousands of years. The works on paper in *Rebirth of the World*, were her first to be displayed in a museum.\(^{16}\) Considering that the artist is self-taught, her paper works are truly extraordinary, and are a testament to her natural abilities. These stunning works reflect over ten years of exploration into, among other things, Japan’s indigenous religion, Shintoism.

In order to fully realize the complexities and intricacies of Aoshima’s works on paper, it is necessary to start with a brief explanation of Shinto. Shinto means “the way of the gods”\(^{17}\) and is a prehistoric pantheistic religion. Early Shintoism derives from reverence towards nature\(^{18}\), and thus natural elements, as well as other things, are considered to have an

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\(^{16}\) "She's Part of Kaikai Kiki." Seattle Art Museum (SAM).


energy akin to a soul. Shintoism does not have gods in the Western understanding of an omnipotent being, but rather comprises of many deities of various appearances, derivatives and energies. Though Shintoism does not have central texts in the way that many Western religions do, the earliest collection of Shinto beliefs is in the *Kojiki*, written in 712 CE. Shinto was really only formalized as we now recognize it in late Kamakura Period (1192 to 1333), which sheds light on how established this religion is within the tapestry of Japanese history. This timeline is meant to illustrate just how far back these beliefs go, and how, at its core, Shinto has remained fairly consistent with its original tenants. One important distinction to make about Shinto is the lack of a Christian sense of moral shaming: “… there is no god who exists as an absolute being in opposition to humanity. Consequently, there is no awareness of guilt arising from the fear that severe judgment from some vastly distant place might be imminent.”

This can be attributed to the pantheistic nature of worship, with no one deity being supremely powerful and thus causing fear. Shintoism does practice deity worship, which is the guiding principal for almost all Shinto sects, particularly Shrine Shinto and Folk Shinto. The key element in reverence for deities is purification, which is first discussed in the *Kojiki*, and entails performing ritual purification, or *Misogi*, which was originally ritual purification in a river. In shrines now, *misogi* is performed by rinsing one’s hands before entering the shrine, removing pollution from the body before being in the presence of the deity, known as *Kami*.

These aforementioned deities in Shintoism, *kami*, are essentially deities to be worshipped. *Kami* encompass an extremely broad range of ideas, but are in essence,
“anything out of the ordinary, anything deserving reverence.” There is a wide classification of extraordinary objects that can be considered a *kami*, with examples being: mountains, rivers, trees, inanimate objects, and even humans. The relationships humans have with *kami* is meant to be friendly, and the positive relationship is maintained through worship. *Kami* can become devious or even malevolent, but this is a direct result of human error in their treatment of the *kami*. *Kami* inhabit their own realm called Takaamanohara, or “the plain of high heaven”, but they do not stay in their realm and coexist in the same plane as humans do. More often than not, *kami* are represented as being friendly, which has greatly aided their appeal over their thousands of years of history.

While Shinto largely revolves around the idea of animism and manifestations of energy, these concepts can be found in many other aspects of Japanese culture, including in Japanese folkloric traditions. Japan has an immensely rich history of storytelling, which often capture the imagination with stories of otherworldly creatures or ghosts based upon this framework of understanding about energies. The most fundamental element of understanding energy is *Mononoke*, which is “an expression of the primordial untamed energy that is utmost feared and awed for being supernatural; that is dangerous in its powerfulness and mysteriousness.” This mysterious energy is the building block for all of life in the Japanese spiritual understanding, and the roots of the word illuminate this concept clearly. “Mono is all things without distinction, while ke is originally another reading for ki, energy. Mono no ke means all aspects of energy, the essence of all things” This belief explains the prevalence of spirits in Japanese religion and folklore, and the importance of distinct forms of energy in the understanding and formation of spirits and all other things in the world. There is clear overlap

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between Shinto and folklore with respect to the understanding and manifestation of different energies, and while Shinto addresses the underlying principles, it does not fully encompass one particular and very important group of the supernatural, called yōkai.

There exists a subsection of spirits popular in folklore called yōkai which are readily present in Chiho Aoshima’s work. Yōkai is a compound word comprised of two Chinese characters that mean uncanny or eerie, and this is in essence exactly what yōkai are. The word is commonly translated into English as ghosts, but there are literally hundreds of different yōkai, only some of whom would illicit comparisons to the understanding of ghosts in the West. This word has been present in the mainstream since the Meiji Period (1868–1912), where it was used to describe “supernatural phenomena” in Japan. In figure 6, we see the ox demon Ushi Oni, who is a great example of the strange, supernatural quality that most yōkai possess. The governing principal behind yōkai is transmutability, meaning both the literal idea of transformation, but also the mental notion of transforming. The best example of this is a specific brand of yōkai, called Yūrei, which are entirely female ghosts. Generally, these yūrei are vengeful spirits, whether it be from a violent death or unfinished business on earth. They represent the idea of a perfectly normal human having the capacity to transform into something frightening based on experiences. Every human is capable of this transmutability, given a circumstance that brings out their worst qualities. This perhaps paints yōkai as scary or evil, but by no means are all yōkai malevolent beings. In terms of locating yōkai’s place in the realm of humans and kami, scholarship suggests they sit on the border between the two and that one is capable of becoming the other. Yōkai are said to appear: “on bridges, at cross roads, at the edge of the water or in the forest glade. They appear when

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28 Papp, Zilia. *Anime and Its Roots in Early Japanese Monster Art*. 8
30 Papp, Zilia. *Anime and Its Roots in Early Japanese Monster Art*. 10
night turns into day or day turns into night, at dusk or dawn.”

This makes sense, given the transitory nature of these beings, but naturally these spirits are far more complicated. Though generally kami are seen as benevolent and yōkai as malevolent, they both have the ability to move to the other’s domain. Some scholarship suggests that yōkai are in fact unworshipped kami, and similarly, yōkai are capable of becoming benevolent spirits if their souls are properly laid to rest. There is a rich art historical tradition of specifically depicting yōkai, spanning hundreds of years. These illustrations help map the change in these spirits, and the changes over the centuries come to inform Aoshima’s works in their own ways.

The first iconographic references of yōkai can be found in the Muromachi Period (1338–1573), and the art historical tradition of these eerie spirits persists even today. The earliest examples were scroll paintings, and “often relate to the Yakubyo-gami (plague gods) associated with the bubonic plague epidemics of the Heian and Kamakura periods.” These scrolls largely contribute to a theory postulated by the Japanese anthropologist Kazuhiko Komatsu, which suggests that monsters often appear at times of social crisis. These early yōkai were a certain brand of frightening, but once the uncertainty and fear created by the plague diminished, yōkai began to change, albeit slowly. As social anxiety decreased, yōkai started to take on more humorous depictions and characteristics, though they didn’t lose their signature eerie aura.

By far the most recognized yōkai depictions are found in “The Illustrated Night Parade of One Hundred Demons”, or Gazu Hyakki Yagyo, made in 1776 (Edo Period), by artist Toriyama Sekien. Featuring fifty-two distinct yōkai, Sekien’s seminal works have

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34 Papp, Zilia. *Anime and Its Roots in Early Japanese Monster Art*. 32
35 Papp, Zilia. *Anime and Its Roots in Early Japanese Monster Art*. 26
36 Papp, Zilia. *Anime and Its Roots in Early Japanese Monster Art*. 66
informed the art historical traditions of yōkai imagery well into contemporary manga and anime representations. In figure 7, Ninmenju Face Sap, Sekien has depicted a traditional landscape with the curious exception of disembodied heads growing out of a tree like ripe fruit. While this is certainly an oddity, the image still manages to have an undercurrent of whimsy and humor, suggesting a reaction not of fear, but curiosity. In figure 8, we see a similarly odd, but not frightening depiction of some of the yōkai found in the Hyakki Yagyo. The part of the procession features a range of yōkai, from a tiger in a robe, to what looks like a yellow elephant with a beard, and any and everything in between. While these spirits are certainly otherworldly and frightening in the sense that you probably would not want to run into this parade, the artistry is spectacular, and the sheer imagination of these particular yōkai makes the absurdity of their existence humorous and lightens the overall tone of the work.

All yōkai without exception have some kind of a backstory, and often times whomever was looking at a particular image of yōkai would be familiar with the corresponding legend behind the spirit. A superb example of this is in figure 9, The Heavy Basket, which depicts the cautionary tale of the fortune that befalls those who are greedy. The short version of the story is this: An old man is tending to a wounded sparrow, but he comes home one day to discover it is missing. Concerned for the bird’s wellbeing, he asks his neighbor, an elderly woman, if she has seen the bird. To his horror, she tells the old man that the sparrow ate some of her rice paste, and to teach it a lesson, she cut its tongue. The old man goes to search for the bird in the forest, and upon finding the bird, he is introduced to its family and given a feast. At the end of the meal, the bird offers the man the choice of two baskets as a token of his gratitude. Because of his humility, the old man chooses the smaller basket, and goes home to find it full of precious items. Seeing his gift, the old lady, who cut the sparrow’s tongue, goes looking for the bird in the forest, pretending to be happy to see him. Not wanting to be rude, the sparrow invites her in and offers her the choice of two
baskets, but she selects the larger one. After dragging it home, she opens the lid and a host of yōkai burst forth from the basket to devour her as punishment for her greed. This example not only illustrates a more traditional example of an eerie and chilling yōkai tale, but also includes several different kinds of yōkai. The long necked ghost emerging from the center of the basket appears to be a mix of two distinct, priest inspired yōkai (the one eyed priest and the long necked priest) and the basket itself is actually an example of a Tsukumogami, which are inanimate objects that become animate on their 100th birthdays, and have been a part of the yōkai visual tradition as far back as the Muromachi period. This print shows the wide variety of yōkai and the kind of rich context that accompanies their presence in a narrative. These dark tales seem to have fallen out of favor with twentieth century depictions of yōkai, and after the Edo period, we begin to see a markedly different brand of yōkai. 

Throughout world history, technology tends to weaken the cultural mythology of a given culture, and Japan has been no exception. With the tide of Western industrialization reaching Japan’s shores in the late 19th century, there was a shift in cultural interest favoring Western imports. Unfortunately, this led to the “demystification of nature and banishment of the yōkai.” There was a lengthy period of time when the once revered nature spirits and yōkai were all but forgotten. This was brought to an abrupt end by the wreckage of World War II. In the process of picking up the pieces of a history and culture spanning thousands of years, Japan turned once more to their supernatural beliefs after the end of the war. This search for a new national identity also led to the rediscovery of the spirits that were once so intertwined with cultural heritage, reinforcing the presence of yōkai in times of anxiety and

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38 Papp, Zilia. Anime and Its Roots in Early Japanese Monster Art. 161
40 Achenbach. Hokusai X Manga Japanese Pop. 22
trauma. Credit for the mass cultural revival of yōkai is widely attributed to two seminal artists in the pantheon of Japanese anime film, Mizuki Shigeru (1922-2015) and Miyazaki Hayao (b. 1941) from the 1960s to the 1980s.\textsuperscript{41} Mizuki’s immensely popular series GeGeGe No Kitaro is considered to be the starting point for the reintroduction and fascination with yōkai. Figure 10 illustrates how this new style of yōkai took on a much rounder, cuter aesthetic compared to, say, a literal parade of demons.

It is specifically in the 1960s series of GeGeGe No Kitaro that, “yōkai are represented as comical creatures, often with visual signs of big, round heads and small bodies, signifying their childlike and harmless nature.”\textsuperscript{42} This more kawaii kind of yōkai I believe is what started the worldwide anime craze in later decades. Miyazaki walks the line a little differently. Some of his yōkai are based on actual recorded yōkai from the past, such as his rendering of the giant, human-eating skeleton Gashadokuro, as seen in figure 12, with an Edo period example in figure 11. Others by the same conception are far cuddlier, like the catbus from the film My Neighbor Tototro, as seen in figure 13. The large, terrifying skeleton in figure 12 is very obviously not a kind of round, cute spirit, but Myazaki has a more diverse set of yōkai than equally contemporary representations, and this aids in creating complexity rather than simplicity around the worldwide consumption of yōkai. The popularity of yōkai has only grown since Mizuki, and Takashi Murakami said in a 2002 book, “In Japan now a days there is an incredible interest in ghosts and spirits (he posits as a response to the economic crisis)... but the fact that the Japanese are so responsive to these dark, almost monstrous characters no doubt shows that, by taking this darkness upon themselves, people are trying in their own individual ways to understand the difficult situation the country is in now.”\textsuperscript{43} The flexible, transmutable nature of yōkai make them an ideal subject for

\begin{itemize}
\item Achenbach. Hokusai X Manga Japanese Pop. 22
\item Papp, Zilia. Anime and Its Roots in Early Japanese Monster Art. 129
\item Murakami, Takashi. Takashi Murakami: Kaikai Kiki. 103
\end{itemize}
manipulation in art and animation. Because of their ever-changing nature, they can serve a variety of aesthetic and narrative purposes, while always creating a sense of wonder in those who look upon them.

Chiho Aoshima’s drawings are the clearest examples of the presence of yōkai and kami in her work, and she draws on both historical and contemporary notions of these dynamic spirits. Compared to her Adobe Illustrator works, her drawings offer a more natural and intimate approach to her art, with a pared down approach that allows the viewer to get to know her individual characters better. Made on Japanese paper, the images are created using colored pencils and watercolor, which instantly give them a painterly quality that is perhaps lacking in her digital images. The texture alone of the Japanese paper elucidates a more tactile viewing experience, and evokes the bark of trees. They are also quite small, which is a departure from her large, inundated works on Plexiglas. Figure 14 is my absolute favorite work by Chiho Aoshima, entitled Rock, and depicts what looks like a hilly, green lagoon, but upon closer inspection, the lagoon has a face. As is the case with virtually all of Aoshima’s characters, this particular nature spirit is female. She cries blue tears that flow back into the water below, giving you the sense that her sorrow is what fills the ocean. The delicate, personal touches of her cradling her head in her arms immediately suggest her sadness, and the almost Monet-like atmospheric quality of the watercolors is breathtaking. Similarly in figure 15, the rich hues of the composition and natural subject matter ring consistent with Aoshima’s work as a whole, but these round faced lotus flowers seem to be a nod to the “round heads and small bodies” popularized by the GeGeGe No Kitaro yōkai, which she likely would have grown up watching as someone born in the mid 70’s. The lotuses themselves have a kind of vacant, irreverent quality that is jarring, despite the fact that one of them is clearly dying. This dark sense of humor about strange, otherworldly creatures is consistent with many of the images of yōkai we have already examined. Just as images of
yōkai play with boundaries between humor and darkness, so too do Aoshima’s images thrive off of an interplay between eerie qualities and colorful cuteness.

Aoshima’s most endearing character, Moi Moi, also provides another iteration of the presence of spirits in the artist’s works. As seen in figure 16, Moi Moi is a round, androgynous, almost childlike\textsuperscript{44} character of Aoshima’s design that I believe represents the idea of kami as a whole. Figure 17 is Moi Moi in its uninhabited form, by which I mean to suggest that Moi Moi takes on many different forms, with this being the neutral illustration. Essentially when a round face and big eyes are present, such as in Rock and Lotus Child, this is Moi Moi in a different iteration. This uniform symbol for kami helps to understand the interconnectedness of nature and all things in the universe, while also making reference to the Post-War iterations of spirits in Japanese anime and manga. Due to its gentle character and affinity to all things natural, Moi Moi is more than likely a kami and not a yōkai, though there are certainly examples of benevolent yōkai. This difference is important to understand, because while both are supernatural, kami is a general nomenclature, while yōkai have very specific archetypes and genres. However, Moi Moi’s image is certainly used in the depiction of some of Aoshima’s figures decidedly on the yōkai spectrum, such as Lotuses.

All of these images, with the exception of Rock, feature a line of text and are stamped with the traditional seal seen in many Ukiyo-e prints. These nods to art historical tradition make sense after reading the limited interviews in existence with the artist. A consistent and evident influence she states is the famed Ukiyo-e woodblock print maker Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), who is well-known for the famous The Great Wave Off Kanagawa and also known for his depictions of yōkai. Figure 18 is Hokusai’s best recognized yōkai print, representing a popular Japanese ghost story about betrayal and death. This jarring print is of

Oiwa, who is the main character in the hugely popular kabuki play *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan*. She was given poisoned ointment by her husband, which caused her eyelids to swell and clumps of her hair to fall out. He did this so he could marry a younger, more beautiful woman, but when the poison did not kill her, he sent someone to assault her, so he had grounds for divorce. Legend has it that when the man sent to assault her saw her horribly disfigured face, he could no go through with it, and instead held up a mirror for Oiwa to see herself. In her madness brought on by her reflection, she ran a sword through her throat, and her ghost haunted her husband until his dying day. Hokusai’s representation spares none of the gruesome details of this famed ghost story, complete with sunken, red eyes, patchy hair and a gaping hole where her mouth should be. As to why Oiwa’s face is represented on a lantern, the only suggested reason I have come across is that in kabuki plays, a lantern with a face on it was used to represent Oiwa in ghost form after her death. Chiho Aoshima has notably made her own illustrations of Oiwa, and they are a distinct homage to Hokusai’s famed depiction. Figure 19 is one of Aoshima’s watercolor images, and there is absolutely no denying it is done in the style of Hokusai’s print. Her print, like the original, features sunken, red eyes, lantern creases around the eyes, a gaping hole for the mouth, a similar character in the middle of the forehead and even ghostly smoke rising from the battered lantern shell. Aoshima even appears to have used a similar Prussian blue color for the background. She has taken the story one step further to incorporate it firmly into her conceptual and aesthetic practice by situating the lantern amongst grave markers, which feature prominently in some of her other works. Aoshima also incorporates Oiwa into her animated work *Takaamanohara*, as seen in figure 20. In the bottom right-hand corner, hanging from a skinny lantern post in a vivid lavender is Oiwa, but this time not in her smoldering form. Making

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reference to history strengthens the ties Aoshima has to Hokusai’s yōkai, and continues these vibrant traditions in a contemporary context. However, her work balances the past with the present, and despite the rich Shinto context of kami and yōkai in her work, it too has unmistakably relevant contemporary themes. In the next chapter, we shall explore how her animations can be read in conjunction with twentieth century critical feminist theory.

Chapter II: Utopias, Dystopias, and Plains of High Heaven

This chapter will explore the artist’s animated work Takaamanohara in conjunction with the 1985 text “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” by Donna J. Haraway. Though it is not exactly known when Chiho Aoshima read this seminal feminist text, many of its central themes are readily discoverable in the artist’s works and particularly in Takaamanohara. The most important and visible element appropriated from A Cyborg Manifesto is the idea of transgressed boundaries, with particular respect to the boundaries between human and non-human. The Manifesto posits the idea of a world in which “people are not afraid of joint kinship with animals and machines, nor afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints”46, and nowhere is this statement better realized than in Takaamanohara. In many respects, Chiho Aoshima realized the dystopian paradise of A Cyborg Manifesto, but managed to do so while still maintaining her creative vision and incorporating ancient tenants that pair seamlessly with Haraway’s more modern concepts.

To understand the connection between the two works, we must first explore A Cyborg Manifesto on its own. From personal experience, the Manifesto is a difficult read, so here is a summation that is as clear and succinct as possible. The author, Donna J. Haraway, Distinguished Professor Emerita at UC Santa Cruz, has a background in the History of Consciousness / Feminist Studies Departments as well as crossover with the Anthropology

and Environmental Studies Departments.\textsuperscript{47} In addition to this already wide breadth of expertise, she has an extensive research background in primatology, and wrote a pivotal book entitled “Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science” in 1989. This text clearly breaks down the scientific and historiographical boundaries between humans and animals, in this case primates, and the conclusion that very little, if anything, convincingly separates the two. This book makes greater sense in the context of her previous work in \textit{A Cyborg Manifesto}, as the text mostly explores boundaries of such a kind. The Manifesto is structured around three main pillars: the notion of breaking boundaries, a discussion of the political climate of the 1980’s centering the cyborg as a representative figure of change based on Haraway’s ideas and an affinity-based approach to community building. This text was written at a time when conservative, Christian family values were front and center for the Regan presidency, and the cyborg was extremely radical as a being that refuted every aspect of Regan’s idea of the nuclear family. The paramount element of the text is this idea of deconstructing the boundaries between human and animal and human and machine, and the spaces each can or cannot occupy. The role of the cyborg in the text is as the locus for the fictional blurring between man and machine, and represents ideas of joint kinship, post gender identity and the end of patriarchal reproductive ideals. Haraway says of cyborgs, “the cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed”\textsuperscript{48}, and it exists in many ways as the perfect boundary disruption; as a partial human, it can occupy physical space in our immediate understanding of the world, but as a machine, it can also be present in nonphysical, technological spaces. A cyborg can move through data and code, or a space invisible to mere humans, while simultaneously straddling


\textsuperscript{48} Haraway, Donna J. \textit{A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century}. PDF. University of Minnesota Press, 2016. https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fictionnownarrativemed iaandtheoryinthe21stcentury/manifestly_haraway_a_cyborg_manifesto_science_technology_and_socialist-feminism_in_the.....pdf, 11
the physical world. In essence, they can occupy a world we cannot see but also coexist in our
own realm, seamlessly. Cyborgs have also transgressed the heteronormative reproductive
boundaries of Haraway’s time, and no longer reproduce in our conception of the term.

Haraway notes, “organisms and organismic, holistic politics depend on metaphors of rebirth
and invariably call on the resources of reproductive sex. I would suggest that cyborgs have
more to do with regeneration and are suspicious of the reproductive matrix and of most
birthing.” This leap away from reproductive sex and towards the idea of regeneration
evokes multiple meanings of the word, being that of actual restoration and also of spiritual
rebirth. Finally, Haraway emphasizes that, “feminist cyborg stories have the task of recoding
communication and intelligence to subvert command and control.” The cyborg and its
location in Haraway’s mythic dystopian future may come across as something beyond the
present day understanding of these boundaries, but there is in fact something already in
existence that echoes many of the ideas of a cyborg, and that is yōkai.

Strangeness and that unexplainable quality in creatures have historically earned them
a place on the fringes of social understanding and acceptance, often relegating them to the
broad category of monsters. A common trait of monsters is not being wholly one thing, but
existing in an in between state of being part of one being, such as human, and part of another,
often an animal or supernatural phenomenon. Partial identities seem to frighten the Western
imagination, with creatures like the Minotaur, Medusa and countless other “half breeds”
becoming the subject of hero tales. Haraway notes in *A Cyborg Manifesto*: “monsters have
always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations.” However, “monsters”,
which are basically anything that has a partial identity, are not only their own community in
Japan, but exist in a multitude of human communities and are central to a community’s
storytelling, folk history and art history. Chiho Aoshima’s eerie, otherworldly characters

49 Haraway, Donna J. *A Cyborg Manifesto*. 67
50 Haraway, Donna J. *A Cyborg Manifesto*. 55
51 Haraway, Donna J. *A Cyborg Manifesto*. 64
belong to this class of monsters, which are what I will be calling Post-War Yōkai. This
distinction serves to separate the blatantly frightening yōkai of Pre-World War II Japan from
the decidedly more kawaii, but no less strange, yōkai that are far more prolific in Japan today.
Defining this term borrows from standard definitions of yōkai, being something”
unexplainable and mysterious”52, but the differentiating factors are that these yōkai offspring
are not aesthetically frightening, and illicit more of a sense of unease than fear. As mentioned
in Chapter I, yōkai made a comeback after the Second World War as a coping mechanism for
the desolation of Japan, and have historically reappeared throughout Japanese history at crisis
points. Aoshima’s yōkai in the context of Takaamanohara echo this cultural need for yōkai to
help navigate destruction and change. In the same vein, Donna Haraway’s cyborgs exist to
challenge the boundaries of communities and identity and exist as loci of a rapidly changing
world. Aoshima’s yōkai are highly reminiscent of Haraway’s cyborgs, and the bonds they
share will now be explored further.

These creatures of “permanently partial identities” speak to radical concepts about
modernity, but Chiho Aoshima uses the folkloric traditions of Japan’s past to clearly
articulate thoughts about the future. The central tenants of cyborg identity are what ultimately
lead to my making a connection between these human machines and the many shapes of
yōkai. The paramount similarities between the two are: their dislocated identities, their
location between boundaries and the nature of their gender identities and paths to
regeneration. The very nature of both of these monsters is that they are neither merely part of
one category, neither human nor machine, or ghost nor animal nor plant nor human. Rather
than exist in one liminal space, they occupy two, or more in the case of many yōkai. They
exist between worlds, but are simultaneously part of both, and in spaces that people can never
hope to occupy with their singular construction of identity. Key to this is understanding that

while these creatures exist in their own liminal spaces, they also occupy a liminal plane with humans, and can be as much a part of our world as theirs, as they are not bound to the planes of reality as we understand them. As noted, “the cyborg is a creature in a post gender world”53, and cyborgs themselves exist without gender in the binary or reproductive sense. Yōkai do have a distinct set of male and female entities, but for many others, gender is far less clear. *Tsukumogami* for example are without gender, and Chiho Aoshima’s *yōkai* tend to be either decidedly feminine or androgynous, which removes the historical dichotomy of gender that relies on the female as the vestibule and the male as the source of heritage and bloodline. This idea of procreation is lost on cyborgs and *yōkai*. As cyborgs and *yōkai* are not organisms in the strictly biological sense, they regenerate rather than give birth. In these ways the cyborg and *yōkai* are strikingly alike, and ultimately, they both have come to symbolize change. The cyborg is the epicenter for radical discourse and recoding gender, identity, community and the political through feminist mythology. This idea of mythology is critical, as mythology is often used to discuss complex notions cloaked in fantastical tales that are able to make complicated themes understandable. The idea of feminist mythology serves to create a history through the communal act of storytelling that recodes the long phallogocentric history of humanity. By recoding the history through a new kind of communication, Haraway and other feminist mythologists seek to dismantle the patriarchic language of history itself through the abstracted lens of mythology. *Yōkai* occupy the same Western categorization as being mythological, however their purpose has always run deeper than just storytelling, and they are very real to those in Japan who believe in them. *Yōkai* appear in times of change to mitigate anxiety, but at their core, they are the very essence of this idea. “Mononoke is without known form, it is the flow of energy that accumulates into a powerful and mysterious entity. *Yōkai*, on the other hand, are the distinct formations of

53 Haraway, Donna J. *A Cyborg Manifesto*. 8
mononoke and the very symbols of the concept of change and mutation.” Yōkai do not merely represent change, they are the physical embodiment of it, in the most abstract sense of energy flow as well as the cultural necessities they serve. Takaamanohara similarly illustrates the notions that yōkai have come to embody in their hundreds of years of history, that of destruction and change. This master work is an exploration into duality, that everything in existence is impermanent, and that despite the challenges that may lay ahead, change is a vital part of being alive and crucial to the appreciation of living itself.

Takaamanohara provocatively blends modern and futuristic notions with the ancient traditions of Shintoism and yōkai, and serves as a tool to help reconcile the idea that these two must be understood separately. Takaamanohara\textsuperscript{55} is characterized as an “Animated Mural and 3D Soundscape (Multiple Projectors and Speakers)”\textsuperscript{56} and is a 7-minute piece about 60 feet wide, played on a never-ending loop.\textsuperscript{57} It chronicles the destruction of Takaamanohara by way of a volcanic eruption and later a tsunami, and was inspired by the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami that devastated Japan.\textsuperscript{58} The looped film was created in collaboration with New Zealand animator Bruce Ferguson, and is the second project Chiho Aoshima has completed with Ferguson, the first being City Glow. The title is translated into “the plain of high heaven” and is where many Shinto gods are believed to reside. Despite this clear tie to the thousand plus year old indigenous religion, the work feels incredibly futuristic. Skyscrapers build themselves, roads appear throughout the island and entire cities spring up right before your eyes. However, there is a distinctly otherworldly feel to the piece as well, with strange beings climbing buildings or unexplained entities swinging in the graveyard, and this is the stark reminder that Takaamanohara is for the gods, not humans. Given the overt

\textsuperscript{54} Papp, Zilia. \textit{Anime and Its Roots in Early Japanese Monster Art}. 11
\textsuperscript{55} The artist’s work is italicized, whereas the proper noun is not.
\textsuperscript{58} "Chiho Aoshima "REBIRTH OF THE WORLD".
theme of disaster and the reference to a very real one in Japan, *Takaamanohara*’s underlying tension suggests a different approach to the idea of high heaven. Chiho Aoshima’s *Takaamanohara* is her interpretation of the proper noun, and a manifestation of her visions of *yōkai* and cyborgs and their role in recoding/ reinterpreting the rapidly changing world of the twenty-first century.

To clearly understand the interconnections between the themes in *A Cyborg Manifesto* and *Takaamanohara*, an exploration of the work is in order. The most clearly articulated ideas present in *Takaamanohara* from *A Cyborg Manifesto* are that of blurring the boundaries between beings, challenging the ideas of gender and birthing versus regenerating, and exploring the nuances of utopias and dystopias. These key concepts will be explored in greater depth with relation to the animation later, but it is important to ground these themes in the forthcoming visual analysis of the work. As previously discussed, Chiho Aoshima’s piece is different from the Shinto conception of Takaamanohara, as she has added her unique, creative vision of the interconnection of different spirits. Mythology and folklore have long captured the imaginations of many over the course of history, but there is an element of authenticity in *Takaamanohara* that is crucial to understand. Xiaojin Wu, curator of Japanese and Korean Art at Seattle Art Museum said in an interview about the artist’s work: “but it’s [the work] not just a world she imagines but she really thinks that world exists, it's just not quite visible to us.”

Chiho Aoshima has very much been influenced by spirituality in her previous work, and while this is certainly a continuation of her beliefs, it is also a striking example of the artist’s unique vision for world building. By combining the spirituality and elements of Japanese religion and culture with her personal background and aesthetics,

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Aoshima has created her own kind of postmodern dystopian utopia as a locus for the reinterpretation of our rapidly changing world and the role of spirits within it.

Aoshima’s *Takaamanohara* is roughly split into four quadrants: the far right, or natural realm, the central, intermediary realm, the left-hand manmade realm and the bottom left graveyard, which is the spiritual realm. Figure 21 illustrates the entirety of the projection, and reveals the depth of detail present in every frame of the ever-changing loop. All are deeply connected to the spirituality of the plain of high heaven, but they manifest different elements and kinds of spirits. A Shinto story details that during creation, “light, pure elements branched off to become heaven; while heavy, turbid elements branched off to become earth. Heaven (*ama*) became the home of the gods of heaven, while earth became the home of gods of the land.” 60 *Takaamanohara* “retells a creation story about the time when the gods of heaven separated from the gods of the land.”61 The paired down version of the storyline of the projection is this: the righthand side heavily features more natural elements and accompanying spirits and characters such as *Lotus Child* and *Rock*, as well as a small cluster of skyscrapers. The left-hand side is highly developed, with a forest of skyscrapers and roads weaving around the island, with a graveyard positioned at the front. A volcanic eruption is triggered by one of Aoshima’s characters, which also summons two volcano spirits who shoot lightning bolts at the cluster of buildings on the right side. The eruption is followed by a tsunami, and the waves engulf the left side, drowning skyscrapers or knocking them over and eliciting a comparison to ritual Shinto purification with water. Despite the rampant destruction, both sides manage to rebuild in their own distinct ways, and part of rebuilding

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process is shown in figure 21. This illustrates the skyscrapers which were left standing using cranes to start to recreate the city and begin to fix what was lost in the disaster. At a later point, the remaining lost skyscrapers pop up from the ground with no clear origin point, and shoot up like daisies alongside their companions. Though this story is ultimately about the splitting of the two, there is a definitive hopefulness at the culmination of the film, which speaks to the idea that the two may understand and exist alongside one another while still maintaining their differences. Aoshima has previously stated that the piece is about the propensity for human resilience in the face of disaster and the attempt to reconcile nature and humanity\textsuperscript{62}, but these themes can also be extended to the idea of gods, spirits, and humanity.

It is worth discussing the graveyard specifically because of its clear articulation of the idea of liminality. The graveyard is located on the earth side of the splitting of the realms, and sits forefront in the shadow of the great, glittering forest of skyscrapers. Though the whole left side is rife with supernatural elements and spirits, the graveyard represents a deeply personal affinity for the artist, who used to frequent the Aoyama cemetery in Tokyo. “I like to think of them as oases in the middle of the concrete jungle.”\textsuperscript{63} Aoshima remarked, and she has depicted tombstones and graveyards in many of her other works, such as in figure 16: Cat’s Counseling Chamber. It is important to understand the artist’s affinity for graveyards because of their location as a kind of halfway point with respect to the living and dead, humanity and nature and that she views this in a utopic sense. “While gravestones are man-made things, as time passes they start to become one with nature”\textsuperscript{64}, Aoshima noted in a short film made specifically about \textit{Rebirth of the World}. Despite being a site for the dead,


there is so much life in cemeteries, from plants to house cats relaxing on tombstones, they’re surprisingly lively. This juxtaposition also points to the ability for nature to coexist with manmade creations, and that despite their constant opposition, both will adapt to be understood by the other. Figure 22 is a close up still of the graveyard and illustrates the idea of life and reconciliation in the graveyard, which is also peppered with spirits playing amongst the headstones. Grasses and flowers bloom, a playful looking skull pokes out from between the weeds, watching over the oasis, which stands in stark contrast to the towers above it. Despite being located in the plain of high heaven, when the two split, the graveyard stands to remind us of the transience of life in the first place, but that life can also be found in the most unlikely places and in more than one physical manifestation. The piece climaxes at the disaster reminiscent of 2011 tsunami, and this apocalyptic element reminds us that we are all on the precipice of death. Death is an inevitable facet of life, even for kami, but this is simply to say that the reality of being at the edge of death is what reminds us we are alive. This duality is central to Aoshima’s work, and the artist’s practice thrives in this plane of juxtaposing concepts, be it cute and eerie or light and dark. “duality is extremely important… happiness comes at the cost of going through something really tough and then lasts for just a moment. That's the proof of our being alive. Truly valuable things and being aware of life’s small joys requires the experience of grief and bitter suffering.” This is fundamentally why it is so logical that Aoshima was drawn to Haraway. Both clearly articulate in their respective works that a more complicated construction of an identity leads to a more complex understanding of possible realities.

A multitude of boundaries are breached throughout Takaamanohara, most notably the separations of the light and heavy elements in the original story and the very existence of the

66 Vartanian, Ivan. Drop Dead Cute. 32
multitude of spirits in the plain of high heaven. Though the myth being told in Takaamanohara is of the separation of the heavenly and earthly kami, that boundary is never completely formed because the film is on a loop. In the infinite context of looping a projection, the kami always end up back together. By doing this, Aoshima is able to disrupt that boundary that was created in the myth, and restructure not only our conception of the historical boundary point but also utilize it to reinterpret the story in a contemporary context. As one can imagine, the original myth did not have self-building skyscrapers or a girl that sets off volcanic eruptions, but changing the narrative to feel more in line with challenges currently facing our world has given this age old story new life in a new age, with new ways to interpret the meaning. Aoshima spoke of the idea of reconciling humanity with nature, of “souls that cannot understand each other”\textsuperscript{67}, and this idea also falls squarely within environmental concerns of the twenty-first century as well as articulate a central idea of the original myth. It is this clever reappropriation of mythology that makes this work such a standard for video installation. By crossing the boundaries that span centuries and being able to arrive at a point of understanding applicable to both, Aoshima perfectly achieves a Harawayan obfuscation that ultimately leads to a more profound understanding of both.

Then of course, there are the spirits themselves. Takaamanohara is home to a plethora of blurred identities like Rock, Lotus Child, and what looks like grown up Kodama from figure 5, among countless others. Looking around the screen, it is possible to see practically every combination of identities, of plants, machines, natural formations such as mountains, something strikingly human, and even giraffes, as seen in figure 23. Aoshima delights in the complication of identity, and it makes her works that much more unique and enjoyable. As seen in the aforementioned still, this great frenzy of the weird and wonderful comes alive at

night, which is consistent with yōkai stories. As night falls in the projection, a mist falls over the city, which comes to life with a great energy. In the projection, the music changes to that of a frenetic, dreamlike chaos, the city lights up and the skyscrapers flash in a kind of dance. The graveyard takes on a ghostly purple glow not present in the day, and becomes more active as well. All of this is to say that even though the original story is about Shinto gods, Aoshima’s update seems to fall squarely within the understanding of yōkai. Despite yōkai not being gods, they have breached the boundary of Takaamanohara. This inclusion on the artist’s part is logical due to the transmutable state of yōkai. They have the capacity to become kami, and vice versa, and as yōkai have the most complicated construction of identity I can find of the myriad of Japanese spirits, their presence in Takaamanohara is fitting. Nothing could better represent the complication of identity and exploration of boundaries as yōkai, and their presence in Aoshima’s myth recodes our own understanding of concepts and stories we may think we understand.

Aoshima explores many of the notions of a post gender society explored in A Cyborg Manifesto in Takaamanohara, with particular respect to notions of birthing and regeneration. As is concurrent with previously discussed works, Aoshima has a clear affinity for female figures, and this piece quite clearly articulates this. At best, many of the figures are at least androgynous, but Aoshima’s plain of high heaven is completely devoid of masculine figures. Aoshima has also taken Haraway’s post gender world a step further and removed the male sex, which significantly is the gender associated with lineage and bloodline in both scientific and social spheres. This deconstruction of both gender and reproduction shifts the focus away from reproductive generation and instead on the idea of regeneration. The heteronormative historical myth of birthright by male genetics is thoroughly deconstructed, and self-actualized regeneration is realized. This is most readily understood by looking at the skyscrapers in figure 21. You’ll notice cranes ascending from the base of the anthropomorphized buildings,
but no clear operator or crew. Aoshima’s skyscrapers realize Haraway’s notion of cyborgs being regenerative rather than ascribing to the “reproductive matrix” as she put it. Rather than relying on the masculinist aspect of historical birthing, the skyscrapers generate and regenerate themselves after the tsunami. This vein of the work becomes more complex when examined in conjunction with the title of the whole show, *Rebirth of the World*. The word rebirth suggests ties to reproduction, but it is my feeling that Aoshima used this word to suggest a more abstract idea of rebirth. To be reborn suggests the idea of starting something anew, of having the chance to experience something again and in a new way. If the title was Birth of the World, that would indicate the first iteration of the event, but rebirth evokes a secondary transpiration, or a new interpretation. In many ways, the use of rebirth was a poetic choice, as regeneration could easily be substituted in terms of the meaning of the words in context. However, rebirth is truly the perfect choice because of the idea of the necessity for change in order to arrive at a point of rebirth and thus reinterpretation.

**Conclusion**

Finding works that speak to one as deeply as Chiho Aoshima’s works do to me is a real gift, and the profundity of the impact she has personally had upon my art historical analysis can never be fully expressed. It has been close to four years since I saw *Rebirth of the World*, and yet I never ceased to feel amazed by the show and the works in it. At the time, I knew none of the background and theories discussed in this thesis, and the real beauty of her work is, despite not being aware of any of the aforementioned information, I was still able to connect deeply and personally with the work. Seattle Asian Art Museum Curator Xiaojin Wu also expressed this sentiment about the almost universal appeal of the artist, remarking that everyone, whether they were children or academics, could appreciate the
works and find meaning and intrigue within them. I chose this show as a case study for my thesis not just because I saw it in person, but because it was curated exceptionally well, and showcased the very best of the artist’s works. Had I not seen this particular show, I don’t know if this thesis would exist. This thesis has charted the artist’s career and works and drawn connections with folklore, Shinto and A Cyborg Manifesto, which illustrates precisely how layered and complex Chiho Aoshima’s unique perspective and visions are. Folklore and Shinto provide new perspectives and understandings for the world around us and the many complexities of life. Yōkai in particular are able to transcend a monist approach to reality, and do so in the most amusing but profound ways. Through the language of myths and storytelling, both Aoshima and Haraway use futurism as the backdrop for their explorations of utopias as a means of reinterpreting history by recontextualizing meaning. By evoking history and the historical past, we may better understand the present and even the future. In all of this, Chiho Aoshima’s magnificence lies in her ability to weave together elements from the ancient to postmodern, and do so in such a way that is coherent, provocative and aesthetically stupendous. From my explorations, I attribute this incredible skill to the artist’s comfort with the concept of death. Aoshima puts death in perspective not merely by juxtaposing vibrant, playful aesthetics with far less kawaii themes, but she ingeniously uses Japanese spirits and ghosts to transform our own interactions with the eerie and morbid. The Western or even Buddhist connotation for spirits and ghosts is one of macabre, and their very existence indicates a past death that facilitated their arrival in this state. However, in Japan, the rich folkloric tradition of ghost stories and the Shinto concepts of spirits treats this classification of beings primarily as being alive rather than dead (with the exception of yūrei). This shift in perspective allows an audience to engage on a completely different level, and to

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treat these beings as something more a part of our world than removed from it, and to use these stories as ways to comprehend death or catastrophe in the first place. In Aoshima’s interview with Seattle Asian Art Museum, she said “I want to keep reminding myself that inside my body is a skeleton or that we all inevitably die or that I could die tomorrow; I really don’t want to forget this feeling.” What this illuminates is a far more open attitude about the reality of death and a voracity for the act of living. As the artist noted herself, the reality of life is that it can change in an instant, and we are all on the precipice of death. Life’s unpredictable and uncontrollable nature stands to remind us that despite infinite human innovation, none of us are immune to the changing tides, and that perhaps we are not as in control of our fate as we would all like to believe. Like it or not and despite the challenges that may lay ahead for humanity as a whole, change is a vital part of being alive and crucial to the appreciation of living.

*Yōkai* symbolize the essence of change-as does *Takaamanohara*, and both lay bare the idea that things exist in flux, things change, but this is simply part of being alive, and that embracing something that may not fit into a contemporary conception of reality could in fact be the key to understanding life in the twenty-first century. Innovation and growth have defined the almost twenty years that humanity has been in this century, and I think perhaps humans feel more in control of their destinies than ever. Embracing the variable nature of existence is a masterclass in abstaining from the human compulsion for total control, but this is not to say that humanity is not capable of change. When creating *Takaamanohara*, Aoshima was primarily inspired not by the chaos and destruction of the 2011 tsunami, but by human resiliency. “This time I was greatly moved by the robust power of how… when everyone was shocked and beaten, both people and nature steadily recovered, so the

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1:40-150
animation for this show is not just about an earthquake and destruction, its theme is regeneration."\textsuperscript{70} Takaamanohara then, is actually a departure from the artist’s general proclivity for enveloping her works in chaos or disaster in that this piece has a tremendously hopeful and uplifting message. Humanity does have the capacity to rebuild and continue to be resilient in the face of change, no matter the magnitude. No time has this sentiment been more in need than in the aftermath of 2011 or even in 2019, and this epoch presents the ideal time to examine the artist’s work.

With these times of rapid change, now is the perfect moment to look at Aoshima’s work and find coping mechanisms and the ability to process what the future may hold. As discussed, the artist recodes our understanding of the future with some help from the past, namely yōkai. She shows us that there’s no need to treat the two as separate and unrelated, but rather to evoke the past as a means of comfort, to show past resiliency in the face of adversity. Quite a lot of significant events have happened since the work was shown in 2015, and many have still yet to transpire. In times like these in which uncertainty and misunderstanding seem to have taken a stronghold, the challenge is to find ways to cope with and reinterpret the events of the world. Yōkai have done a remarkably good job of being sources of meaning in past crises, but what are the yōkai of 2019? In many respects, I think artists can and have occupied this role in society throughout history. For example, Guernica by Picasso is one of the most famous paintings in human history, and fits the role of Aoshima’s yōkai in the respects of being present at a time of catastrophe and serving to challenge the constrains of reality (stylistically) to provoke greater discussion about what is actually being depicted. Artists are in a special position to simultaneously represent, discuss

and challenge reality in their works, and this multifaceted approach, when done well, can serve as a genesis for another medium, critical thinking and discussion. This notion is what excites me most about VR and particularly AR in recent art trends, and it is my most sincere hope that this is where Aoshima’s next stop in her career will be. Not only is this medium trendy at the moment, it is also a great way to create different realities in order to challenge our own.

Ultimately Chiho Aoshima’s work centers itself on the most fundamental and fluid notions of change, in the physical sense, in the cultural sense, and how we as a society will mitigate the onslaught of change facing our world now. Rather than use nihilism to escape the realities of a world that evolves at a lightening pace with unpredictable tragedies, Aoshima’s work stands to remind us that ultimately we will all end up in the same place, and to embrace rather than fear the unpredictable so as to truly live. Humans have long been fascinated with what the future may hold for us, but Aoshima has demonstrated the importance of remembering the past. Her imaginative and playful but balanced perspective is refreshing, as it reminds us of reality while also challenging our very conception of it. Through her worlds of ghost, spirits and endearing characters, Aoshima is able to reconstruct plains of existence that facilitate greater conversations about existence and life through complication rather than simplification. These are mad times, but perhaps embracing spaces, both creatively and intellectually, that challenge the current reality that we occupy are were where we may best find meaning, understanding and reconciliation of it.
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