

INTERVIEW: Chim ↑ Pom on their New Garter Gallery | Artinfo

BY Darryl Wee | November 03, 2015



Installation view: Sion Sono solo show “The Whispering Star,” Garter, Tokyo, 2015 © Sion Sono
(Courtesy of Garter)

Formed in 2005 in Tokyo, Japanese art collective Chim ↑ Pom are Ryuta Ushiro, Yasutaka Hayashi, Ellie, Masataka Okada, Motomu Inaoka, and Toshinori Mizuno. They are known for their provocative video installations and documentations of actions that straddle a fine line between social satire, obnoxious prank playing, and mordant humor.

Chim ↑ Pom have been claiming a fair share of attention this year, after winning this year’s Prudential Eye Awards in Singapore and winning the right to hold a solo exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery in London this September. And now, they’ve turned their most recent efforts to opening their own modest space, called [Garter Gallery](#), in Tokyo’s Koenji district. Housed in little more than a rickety shack that dates from before World War II, Garter opened earlier this summer with an inaugural exhibition devoted to cult filmmaker Sion Sono.

Before Chim ↑ Pom took over the space, this shambolic, makeshift structure, called the Kitakore building, actually first became known as a cult fashion destination that attracted lots of well-known foreign visitors and style icons like Pharrell Williams, Jeremy Scott, and Courtney Love. “Our friend, the fashion designer Koshiro Ebata, moved in here first, taking up residence here when it was still derelict and abandoned,” says Ryuta Ushiro. “Because this building is located some distance off the main shopping street, everyone started making additions and modifications as they saw fit, which resulted in this Kowloon Walled City-like structure.”

“Koshiro was making these radical, way-out clothes, and running his own store. Then other extreme fashion designers followed, moving in to open their own studios, ateliers, and shops. And that’s how Kitakore Building gradually evolved to become something of an underground Tokyo fashion spot,” explains Ushiro.

Why Koenji? Ushiro and the rest of Chim ↑ Pom have a long connection with this offbeat area, located just ten minutes west of Shinjuku by train, and long established as a rather rough-and-tumble district of vintage and secondhand stores, live music venues, and small, quaint eateries and bars. “Our gallery [Mujinto Production](#) used to be located in Koenji. We would go drinking with Koshiro and hang out here, as well as other people in this same neighborhood,” Ushiro recalls.

But Koenji also retains something of a village charm that dates from an earlier time. “Recently, the number of places and districts in Tokyo with a free, underground atmosphere that haven’t been overly packaged has been decreasing,” he notes. “Koenji is rather unique in this respect: there’s no big mall in front of the station, and there are still many small shopping streets and arcades remaining.”

“This street that Kitakore Building is on is also where the collective Shiroto no Ran (an anarchist collective) is located. There aren’t any galleries or museums around, but everyone here respects each other, but my sense is that we can all coexist here and make extreme, radical things happen,” muses Ushiro. “There has been one particular local resident just in front of the building who’s been complaining a lot about our activities, though. We have no idea how long we can be here. Maybe not for very much longer!” he laughs.

Following their presentation at Tokyo’s Watari Museum of Contemporary Art earlier this autumn, Chim ↑ Pom have been attracting quite a bit of attention with a more site-specific project dealing with Fukushima, called “Don’t Follow the Wind.” The artists, along with the curatorial team of Kenji Kubota, Eva and Franco Mattes, and Jason Waite, invited 12 international artists to install their work in the uninhabited radioactive exclusion zone in Fukushima, surrounding the site of the nuclear accidents of 2011.

Ushiro describes “Don’t Follow the Wind” more as a conceptual proposition, rather than an actual display that is designed to receive visitors. “Until the blockades are lifted nobody can go and actually see these works. And so we’re currently planning a sort of satellite

exhibition of 'Don't Follow the Wind' that will extend the conversation on Fukushima, including new related works by the artists that function as 'interpretations' of the works in the zones, as well as documents and voices of the displaced residents, that will start at the Watari Museum. The intention is to have it travel to museums abroad as well," he explains.

In terms of the concept, Ushiro calls it a "non-visitor center". "Typically with a nuclear plant, for instance, it's not open to the public. But just next to or outside it there will be a visitor center. And you find the same thing outside a nature reserve or protected zone, for example. With Fukushima the no-go directive is so strong that we decided to make it a 'non-visitor center'."

"Our intention with 'Don't Follow the Wind' is for audiences to be aware of this giant, empty no-go zone that suddenly opened up in Japan, displacing the residents, and which is constantly transmitting a message about this reality," Ushiro explains. "You don't experience the works or exhibition visually, let alone in person, but through your imagination. So we're targeting both a present audience and a future one. For the present audience, I think this is an experiment in whether audiences actually make an imaginative attempt to engage with, or recall, the energy produced by the exhibition. It's not really a question of our audience wanting or not wanting to go to Fukushima to see for themselves, but how they use the 'non-visitor center' as a mechanism for engaging with its reality," he says.

Although Chim ↑ Pom's work is often seen as verging on political activism, Ushiro begs to differ. "We don't really see it that way. Of course, our lives are controlled by the politics to a certain extent. There are six of us in Chim ↑ Pom, so whenever we get together to discuss work, there's a sense in which we function as a microcosm of society. So I would understand, actually, if people said that the art we make is 'social.'

"Unlike activists who work to realize a particular political agenda or objective, we have more abstract ends. Rather, I would say that our works are a record of how we try and make sport of society, to trifle with it — how individuals living in a particular society and political system stage all manner of pranks with rats, crows, living together with garbage. It's just a reflection of living within society."

[Garter Gallery](#) is located in the Kitakore Building, 3-4-13 Koenji Kita, Suginami-ku, Tokyo.