Godzilla’s grandchildren

How the nuclear disaster roused Japan’s artists

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Disorderly conduct

Chim Pong/ Courtesy of Main to Production
IN JAPAN there is no kudos in going to jail for your art. Bending the rules, let alone breaking them, is largely taboo. That was one reason Toshinori Mizuno was terrified as he worked undercover at the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear-power plant, trying to get the third reactor holding up a referee's red card. He was also terrified of the radiation, which registered its highest reading where he took the photograph. The only reason he did not arouse suspicion, he says, is because he was in regulation radiation kit. And in Japan people rarely challenge a man in uniform.

Mr Mizuno is part of ChimPom, a six-person collective of largely unschooled artists who have spent a lot of time getting into tight spots since the disaster, and are engagingly thoughtful about the results. Twice they have used the off-limits Dai-ichi plant as a canvas for strikingly daring video art or photography. Once, they attached a painting of its smouldering wreckage to a famous Taro Okamoto anti-nuclear mural, “The Myth of Tomorrow”. Vandals they are not; they say they peeled it off a day later.

It is easy to dismiss ChimPom’s work as a publicity stunt. But the artists’ actions speak at least as loudly as their images. There is a logic to their seven years of guerrilla art that has become clearer since the nuclear disaster of March 11th 2011. In fact, Noi Sawaragi, a prominent art critic, says they may be hinting at a new direction in Japanese contemporary art.

Radiation and nuclear annihilation have suffused Japan’s subculture since the film “Gojira” (the Japanese Godzilla) in 1954. The two themes crop up repeatedly in manga and anime cartoons. Over the past decade or so Takashi Murakami, Japan’s best-known artist, has explored consumerism and the fetishisation of sex in “Superflat”, work that draws on the flattened forms of fine art and cartoons to
highlight the mindless Utopianism of Japanese shopping culture. Mushrooms and mushroom clouds are frequent motifs and he recently travelled to Qatar to unveil a 100-metre painting inspired by Fukushima.

ChimPom confronts Mr Murakami’s consumerist concerns, at times head-on. One of their works, “I’m BOKAN” (2007), obliquely refers to his collaboration with Louis Vuitton, which included decorating its ubiquitous handbags with the Japanese artist’s bright and instantly recognisable marks. ChimPom took some Louis Vuitton bags to Cambodia and blew them up using cleared landmines. The message to Japan was that conflict exists, however cute things might seem back home.

In 2008 they used a plane’s exhaust fumes to mark the sky over Hiroshima with the word “Pika” for the flash an atom bomb makes in manga. They were pilloried for what was seen as an insult to the victims of the tragedy and grovelled in apology. But they also explained that they were reminding the public of what was often forgotten in Japan’s subculture: that the nuclear threat was real, not a figment of an otherworldly imagination.

ChimPom says it pays homage to Mr Murakami, but its work has moved on. As Mr Sawaragi puts it, Superflat largely reflected the culture of stability during the “bubble years” until the early 1990s (the bubble was not just economic; it was also one of “imaginary reality”). ChimPom questions that stability itself. “Their work is not flat. They are trying to question and discuss what was invisible in the Superflat society,” he says.

Other young artists are ploughing similar ground. Kota Takeuchi, for instance, secretly took a job at Fukushima Dai-ichi and is recorded pointing an angry finger at the camera that streams live images of the site. Later he used public news conferences to pressure Tepco, operator of the plant, about the conditions of its workers inside. His work, like ChimPom’s, blurs the distinction between art and activism.

Japanese political art is unusual and the new subversiveness could be a breath of fresh air; if only anyone noticed. The ChimPom artists have received scant coverage in the

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stuffy arts pages of the national newspapers; mostly they are treated as part of a
delinquent fringe. The group held just one show of Mr Mizuno's reactor photographs in
Japan. He says: “The timing has not been right. The media will just want to make the
work look like a crime.”

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