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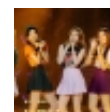
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It was one reason Toshinori Mizuno was terrified as he visited the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear-power plant, trying to get the

third reactor holding up a referee's flag. The plant registered its highest reading where it was used to house suspicion, he says, is that in Japan people rarely challenge a man in

power. A group of largely unschooled artists who gathered at the disaster, and are engagingly painting the off-limits Dai-ichi plant as a canvas. They have attached a painting of its nuclear mural, "The Myth of Godzilla's Grandchildren" it off a day later.

It.

an 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



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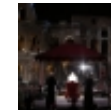
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highlight the mindless Utopianism of Japanese shopping culture. Mushrooms and mushroom clouds are frequent motifs and he recently travelled to Qatar to unveil a 100-metre painting inspired by Fukushima.

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."

- This article appeared in the Books and arts section of the print edition

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