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Shock tactics return

Art collective Chim ↑ Pom provokes Tokyo with a crow and a rat

BY EDAN CORKILL

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“The only thing humans, rats and crows have in common is garbage,” announced Ryuta Ushiro, leader of artist unit Chim ↑ Pom, with a mischievous smile.

Before I had a chance to suggest some others, a sudden and very unhuman scuffling sound at the back of the gallery made it clear that this was no time for pedantry. Whatever incongruous conclusion these wacky artists had drawn from their dodgy “discovery,” it had already been played out. All that remained was to step inside Hiromi Yoshii gallery and survey the damage.

I say “damage” because in the three years that these guys have been working together, they have gained a reputation for art that shocks as much as it inspires — and horrifies as much as it entertains. Just last month, they deliberately flooded the basement gallery at book store NADiff in Ebisu. Earlier this year they were flinging garbage from a helicopter onto a community in Bali that subsisted on recycling. What had they done now? And, importantly, what did it all mean?

Chim ↑ Pom emerged in Tokyo in August 2005, out of a loose group of friends who communed around well-known artist Makoto Aida.

“Some of us were working as Aida’s assistants, Ellie modeled for some of his paintings, and basically we’d all just go out drinking together,” said member Yasutaka Hayashi about how the six in the group came together.

The influence of the 42-year-old Aida is detectable in everything the twenty- and thirtysomething members of Chim ↑ Pom do. His uncanny ability to combine slacker humor with almost accidental social commentary informs all their work. It's worth recalling one example from Aida to illustrate.

One of his rarely seen classics is "One Man Demo Machine" (2005) — a child's cart loaded with small papier-mache dolls who repeat in unison anything the person pulling the cart feels like yelling. I once saw Aida cavorting around trailing the machine, yelling "*Geijutsu hantai!* (I'm against art!)." The echoing dolls made even his usual half-asleep voice resonate like some fired-up politician.

"Got a gripe? Got no friends? Here is the contraption for you," Aida seemed to be saying. The work was funny until about June this year, when it proved scarily prescient. It was those very two emotions — loneliness and frustration — that prompted Tomohiro Kato to go on a stabbing spree in Akihabara. (If you ever wondered about the utility of today's art, then you could start with it as an early warning system for social ills.)

Chim ↑ Pom have cranked up the shock component in Aida's formula, but they've also adopted a less introverted, more outward-looking perspective. That tendency is perhaps the natural consequence of their working in a group, and it is nowhere more apparent than in their current show.

The suspicious scuffling sound came from a small room made of concrete blocks at the back of the gallery. Except for its lack of a door and the incorporation of a one-way mirror that allows viewers to peak inside unseen, the room resembled one of those garbage-collection sheds in Tokyo's apartment buildings.

Inside, Chim ↑ Pom have embarked on what can only be described as an extraordinary experiment in cohabitation. Group member Toshinori Mizuno is entombed, along with one crow and one rat. For the duration of the show — three weeks — this intrepid trio are going to live inside this roughly 3x2x2-meter box, and what's more, they say they're going to subsist off bags of garbage brought in fresh from Shibuya.

By 6 p.m. on the first day (Saturday) Mizuno and his roommates had achieved an uneasy peace — the crow was on a specially provided perch, the rat was in an open mesh tube and Mizuno was sprawled on the floor. (The mirror had apparently lulled him into a false sense of privacy — he had his hand dug deep inside a ridiculously tight pair of black jeans.)

Every now and again the crow would jump down onto the garbage and fish out something edible.

Chim ↑ Pom leader Ushiro gazed on the scene with a nervous satisfaction.

“They’re all resting now,” he observed.

It was hard to disagree. I asked Ushiro about Mizuno’s tight jeans and his hair, which was dyed yellow.

“He’s a *gyaru-o* (a male version of a Shibuya “gal”), like the guys who scout girls for hostess bars in Shibuya,” came the answer. Suddenly the hand down the pants seemed to make sense. Would he be getting any proper food?

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“Just what’s in the garbage,” Ushiro said. “When we found the rat (in Shibuya’s Senta-Gai — the crow came from a “crow trap” in Yoyogi Park), there were homeless people there, and they were living off garbage, too,” he explained. Did Mizuno volunteer for this?

“It was decided by the group — while we were drinking one night,” Ushiro said.

What about a toilet?

“We’ve given him an emergency toilet, which he can use without dirtying the room,” Ushiro explained.

Chim ↑ Pom's room — I guess you'd call it a performance piece — is surprising in a way that is not gratuitous. The sheer shock of finding a man locked in a room with a live crow and a live rat doesn't wear off. It hangs there like a high-pitched note and ushers in a flood of uncomfortable thoughts and concerns.

Hot on the heels of my first thought — does Japan have an animal welfare advocacy group? (It does, the Japan Animal Welfare Society, but they're not particularly active) — came the suspicion that Mizuno simply won't be able to pull it off. He'll go crazy. The crow will turn aggressive. The rat will nibble at him in the night. He'll kill them.

But then again, these three “scavengers” (and what is a hostess-bar scout if not a scavenger?) do have a common purpose: They need to survive from those same bags of trash. Maybe Mizuno could orchestrate a kind of interspecies detente — an unprecedented form of cooperation — where scrounger would help scrounger. Call me crazy, but by the time I walked out of the gallery I was hoping he'd represent humanity in the spirit of peace and diplomacy. Maybe he could give us a good name in the animal kingdom because heaven knows, we need to improve our image.

“Becoming friends, eating each other or falling down together,” as the work is titled, throws out so many suggestions that it seems pointless to name them all. Is man no better than rat? Has Shibuya, and by extension all urban environments, become a form of urban ecosystem in which we must fight for survival alongside other beasts? If so, is the environment so degraded that only these three creatures will survive? And if so, is man so ruthless that he will resort to destroying his fellow survivors in order to save himself? Looking at the tout stretched out on the floor in there, it seemed the odds were even.

A second work also draws its power from the oddly disconcerting idea that we can communicate with animals. A video, “BLACK OF DEATH” (2007), shows the Chim ↑ Pom crew driving around carrying a loudspeaker and a stuffed crow. A prerecorded soundtrack on the loudspeaker plays the squawking of a crow caught in a net.

“When crows hear that sound and see the crow, they think one of their mates has been caught by the humans,” said Ushiro. “They think they have to save him.”

The results are extraordinary. As Chim ↑ Pom drive around Tokyo, the birds swarm in the skies. Nagatacho, Kabukicho and the Hamarikyu Gardens become scenes from horror films.

Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara has made the eradication of crows one of his pet projects. And yet, before our eyes, these artists turn Tokyo into crow central. How could this be? The police buses conveniently lined up in the background of the video set us wondering whether this — whatever *this* is — would constitute a crime. If so, the police choose to sit it out. But at the same time, Chim ↑ Pom's performance is much, much worse than the mere breaking of a law. It's almost like they're deliberately provoking nature into a fight. These crows are clearly angry at humans — no anthropomorphization required. It's scary to watch, and if the environmental movement ever needed a startling visual metaphor then this is it.

As with all of Chim ↑ Pom's work, shock plays an important role here, too. Something totally unexpected, nay something hitherto *inconceivable*, sets in motion a chain reaction of questions, each exploding in discoveries and conclusions like Chinese New Year fireworks.

You have to go back four decades to find Japanese artists with Chim ↑ Pom's mastery of shock. In the turbulent 1960s, there were avant-garde groups such as Hi-Red Center, whose projects included dressing up in lab coats and cleaning Tokyo's streets with toothbrushes. In the intervening decades, however, as the society became more affluent, its cutting-edge art was characterized by a quiet academism more than anything else. In the '70s, there was Mono-ha; in the '80s British-influenced sculpture; and in the '90s, delicate installation.

Why has the riotous Chim ↑ Pom emerged now? In a lot of ways, changes are being forced upon Japanese society in a way that they haven't since the late '60s, what with the rise of China, rapid internationalization, decreasing population and the pension-fund squeeze. While these issues haven't yet directly informed Chim ↑ Pom's art, they have dented the nation's self-image of prosperous harmony — perhaps to the extent that subversion has again become a credible form of expression.

Challenges to the status quo have a habit of rising rapidly in waves, and if so — and if Mizuno ever emerges from his rodent room to rejoin his mates in Chim ↑ Pom — then it is likely Japan is in for many more shocks to come.

Chim ↑ Pom's "Becoming friends, eating each other or falling down together" runs till Aug. 30 at Hiromi Yoshii. For more information call (03) 5620-0555 or visit www.hiromiyoshii.com (<http://www.hiromiyoshii.com>). Chim ↑ Pom will also hold a solo show at Mujin-to Production in Koenji Sep. 19-Oct. 25, in which they will exhibit new work, including the Indonesia helicopter piece mentioned above. See www.mujiin-to.com (<http://www.mujiin-to.com>) for details.

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