

Ayako Rokkaku's Artistic Concept and the Creation of Her "Children's Theater"

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Abstract: Growing up alongside the development of pop culture industries such as anime, Japanese contemporary artists have absorbed and integrated Eastern and Western postmodern art concepts, forming a distinctive Japanese Neo-Pop Art. Ayako Rokkaku (born 1982), as an emerging Japanese contemporary artist, has developed a free, anti-representational artistic concept under the influence of Japanese Neo-Pop Art and Western avant-garde spirit. In her on-site creative process, she renders the pictorial background highly decorative and abstract, while the figurative depiction of the youthful female protagonist embodies pure innocence. Combined with bright yet harmonious colors, this creates an aesthetic experience for the audience akin to being immersed in a "children's theater." Rokkaku has achieved considerable success in the global art world; her unique creative forms and stylistic features are worthy of study, yet the overall "infantilization" tendency in Japanese contemporary art, as reflected in her artistic expression, also serves as a cautionary reflection for artists of all nations.

1. Introduction

Since the mid-20th century, Japanese artists have endeavored to construct the subjectivity of their national art, seeking to develop an art form that expresses new ideas and concepts. With an adventurous spirit, they have persistently explored possibilities—neither simply replicating Western trends nor passively reverting to traditional national styles. They have been searching for the possibility of establishing an art that truly possesses a contemporary Japanese character.^[1] By the 1980s, the global image of Japanese art had undergone unprecedented transformation. Subsequently, with the rapid development of industries such as anime and other pop cultures, Japan witnessed the emergence of a Neo-Pop Art movement with distinct national characteristics, producing a large number of world-renowned art masters. Artists such as Yayoi Kusama, Takashi Murakami, and Yoshitomo Nara, acting as "trendsetters of pop culture," exported image culture to the world. As a rising star of Japanese contemporary art, Ayako Rokkaku grew up in precisely such a cultural environment; her art represents a rational integration of avant-garde artistic spirit and popular culture.

2. Ayako Rokkaku and Her "Free" Artistic Concept

Unlike artists who have received traditional academic education, Ayako Rokkaku escaped the constraints of empiricism, abandoning the procedural sense of fabrication in her creative practice.

This has shaped her unique artistic concept: how to create with imagination, thereby discovering one's own actions; how to doodle purely and freely, like a child. In her work *Rainbow and Girl*, one can observe traces of spontaneous, graffiti-style creation. The girl, rainbow, and butterfly in the painting are not carefully composed; the girl's skirt and other elements in the painting are relatively abstract, and the work as a whole does not convey profound meaning. Yet it is precisely this quality that allows viewers to recall childhood. Rokkaku stated, "I try to return to the mindset and original intention of childhood when painting; everyone has, as a child, painted and scribbled without thinking." This "free" creative artistic concept of Ayako Rokkaku is the state of fearless ignorance that modern art masters also deeply cherish and pursue when their skills have reached perfection. The absence of deliberation in the artistic creation process is the true "freedom" of art. As a female artist, Rokkaku also believes that there exists something that only women can discover and express. This is not merely the external differences compared to men, but more importantly, women's unique perspectives on observing the world and emotional expression. The recurring female figures in Rokkaku's works are derived from anime styles, combined with women's presentation of childlike imagination.

Rokkaku's "free" artistic concept is manifested not only in technique but also in her choice of creative media. She never restricts herself to materials; her hand serves as the brush. Rokkaku's artistic expressiveness transmits intuitive and delicate emotions and warm tactile sensations onto the canvas through her fingers. Flowing from her fingertips are rich layers of color—thick, soft, light, and dense—that cover the canvas, forming a unique Expressionist style belonging solely to her.^[2] Beyond traditional canvases, corrugated cardboard, wooden unfired vases, and other materials can all bear her painted marks. Rokkaku has stated that corrugated cardboard is her most familiar medium; this material is easily obtainable and can be freely torn to alter size or shape, bringing a sense of liberation, and she explains that the warmth and uneven texture felt when her fingertips touch corrugated cardboard are captivating.^[3] Furthermore, Rokkaku has attempted to three-dimensionalize the female figures she creates. She constantly explores new forms, challenges the boundaries of creative media, derives pleasure from these attempts and innovations, and hopes to transmit this feeling to the audience.

3. The Creation and Presentation of the "Children's Theater"

Ayako Rokkaku's "free" artistic concept and her representation of childlike innocence in creation naturally constitute a "children's theater" in her artistic practice, imbuing her entire creative process and works with "theatricality." The term "theater" as an independent spatial form was proposed in theater arts. Theatricality had no direct connection with the field of plastic arts; American art historian Michael Fried introduced the term "theatricality" into criticism of plastic arts in *Art and Objecthood*, providing an exquisite model for understanding Minimalist art, which was subsequently borrowed by many scholars.^[4] In subsequent developments, the characteristic of theatricality gradually moved beyond the theater and integrated into various art forms. Ayako Rokkaku's artistic creation is precisely an example of theatricality intervening in contemporary art. The artist stands before a huge canvas, creating freely with her fingers, and viewers involuntarily become immersed. The female figures in her works, the abstract backgrounds, and the symbolic color expressions envelop the viewer, dreamlike and illusory, as if situated in a children's theater. The original contemplative viewing of art is transformed into an experience akin to drama.

Painting on-site with her fingers is a distinctive feature of Rokkaku's artistic practice and an important element in creating her "children's theater." The method of on-site creation can be traced back to 20th-century Abstract Expressionist painting. From Pollock to Fluxus, Action Painting, and others, they emphasized that bodily movements are also part of the result's presentation; there is no boundary between process and result, attempting to eliminate dualistic opposition and intervene in

painting from the perspective of Gesamtkunstwerk. Artists used free and bold expressive techniques to reveal their inner worlds; these actions were filled with the infectious power of theater performers. Although Rokkaku's artistic concepts and creative methods may differ from those predecessors of Action Painting, both have brought viewers unprecedented aesthetic experiences. Rokkaku freely gestures with her fingertips before the canvas; her fingers replace the brush as a unique creative medium, making the entire creative activity more captivating. Her every movement draws the audience's gaze. The work being gradually completed and other works displayed in the exhibition hall, like supporting actors, together with Rokkaku present a "children's play" for the audience.

The young girl is the recurring protagonist in Rokkaku's works, the first supporting character of the "theater." This female figure lacks lifelike expressions and lighting effects, as well as meticulous depiction and portrayal; she merely stares with wide eyes and pouts her lips, yet gives people a sense of familiarity and closeness. This naive and adorable female image is closely related to Japan's cultural environment; in everyday Japanese life, this image represents a prevalent aesthetic category. In each of Rokkaku's works, the young girl embarks on an adventure in her own colorful world, possessing a child's mischief and wild imagination. Sometimes she pursues an ideal world on floating rainbow-colored clouds; sometimes she hides in a corner of a room, with scattered toys around her seemingly narrating her thoughts; sometimes she sleeps amidst patches of colorful mist, having beautiful dreams. These stories combined seem to form a continuous series. As Rokkaku has said, the young girls she depicts are quite complex; the girls in her paintings are experiencing escape or pursuit, and her works always construct such a highly tense field. Like theatrical performances, these female figures surrounded by rich colors display their innocence before the audience, making people feel incredibly close and familiar. As if spending joyful times with childhood playmates, viewers involuntarily return to childhood. This marvelous experience is precisely generated with the naive young girl at its core.

Japanese art historian Tsuji Nobuo believes that what distinguishes Japanese art is its theater-like expressive power, mainly manifested in three aspects: first, the "fantastic imagination" characteristic that does not limit imagination; second, the unrestrained and magnanimous "playful" spirit; third, the "decorative" style that transforms the mundane world into a golden pure land.^[5] In Ayako Rokkaku's creation, these elements rich in Japanese artistic spirit are almost all manifested, particularly in the background composition and color expression of her works. The backgrounds in Rokkaku's works consistently maintain a distinctive abstract quality. Bright colors that overlap and interweave sometimes resemble clouds floating freely in the sky, sometimes resemble colorful flower clusters, and sometimes perhaps metaphorically represent the young girl's mood. But without exception, these elements possess strong decorative qualities. The young girl, as the main subject of the picture, is usually depicted figuratively. It is precisely this disunity between abstract and figurative artistic languages that makes the works possess an even more dreamlike theatrical quality. Color is an important means of displaying personal characteristics and individual spirit; an artist's choice and use of color are closely related to emotions and feelings. In paintings, color not only symbolizes certain things but can also symbolize certain abstract concepts. Abstracting the visual effects of color can evoke resonance in viewers and possesses certain psychological functions.^[6] Rokkaku skillfully uses color to weave a dreamy, childlike world for the young girl and the audience. Her colors are always bright, never gloomy; overlapping colors resonate beyond any single color, giving people a driving force to interpret some story from within. In the embrace of this hazy, enchanting Japanese-style color, the audience and the young girl linger within, as if appreciating scenes from a children's play.

4. The Value and Reflection on Ayako Rokkaku's Art

Ayako Rokkaku began creating in 2002, achieving breakthroughs and growth through self-

exploration. By 2006, after winning the "Scout Prize" organized by renowned Japanese contemporary artist Takashi Murakami, she became a highly sought-after young painter in the Japanese art market. Her special creative media and bold painting performances attracted a large number of art audiences. Since then, her works have toured and been exhibited in numerous countries and regions worldwide, gradually opening up the international market and being highly sought after by global collectors and art e-commerce platforms. Today, Ayako Rokkaku has undoubtedly become a successful contemporary artist; her creative methods and globalized experience possess certain learning and reference value.

Ayako Rokkaku's artistic creation emerged from Japanese contemporary art, forming a style uniquely her own—this is the key to her success. Secondly, she has created art that can touch the depths of the human heart. As French literary theorist Hippolyte Taine stated: "Each variety and school of art can only be produced in a special spiritual climate, and the artist must adapt to the social environment and satisfy social demands, otherwise they will be eliminated."^[7] Rokkaku's artistic creation impacts the currently prevalent anxious society with childlike innocence; her "children's theater" provides the audience with a pure land. Shallow art will be forgotten by people as time passes; only art that attends to the human heart can sustain its artistic life. She combines childlike artistic images with pure and natural compositions, transmitting genuine emotions contained in art through the girl's gaze. Her works are art that touches the human heart and naturally receives public affection. This also enlightens us that artistic creation should not be conducted in isolation; we should seek commonalities from the inner emotions of the masses and create art that cares for the human heart.

Indeed, Japanese contemporary art represented by Ayako Rokkaku is a successful paradigm, yet it inevitably contains some negative factors worthy of our vigilance. From Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara to Ayako Rokkaku, as established artists, they have clearly become an artistic trend, causing an excessive proliferation of "manga style" and "kawaii style" in Japanese contemporary art. While this art concerning personal emotions certainly provides comfort, the collective pursuit of ease and leisure will lead to the absence of grand narrative themes, and excessive entertainment will gradually dissipate national cohesion and sense of responsibility. Japanese scholar Kenichi Ohmae painfully observes the "foolishness phenomenon" among Japan's younger generation, believing that Japan as a nation is collectively declining precisely because of the overall "infantilization" from economic, political, and cultural perspectives, as well as the tendency to follow trends and lack deep thinking.^[8] Grand narrative, as a holistic artistic narrative, emphasizes fervent attention to and deep reflection on human history and reality; Japanese contemporary art's manifestations and development trends clearly lack attention to these aspects. Therefore, in artistic creation activities, while individual artistic spirit is manifested, we should also pay attention to issues of thematic significance and the people's character. For Chinese art creators, to achieve contemporary value amidst distinct era imprints and the tumultuous waves of globalization, one must hold "matters of national importance" in one's heart, paint the great beauty of the nation, and depict the form of national consciousness.^[9] Only thus can contemporary art creators achieve new breakthroughs and developments in the unity of individuality and commonality.

5. Conclusion

In the wave of contemporary Japanese Neo-Pop Art, Ayako Rokkaku has infused her unique "free" creative artistic concept and the artistic form of creating a "children's theater" into her artistic practice, becoming a highly sought-after creator in the art market. Rokkaku's "free" artistic concept, characterized by spontaneous painting and experimentation with multiple media, presents us with an art world full of childlike innocence. Influenced by preceding avant-garde artists, Rokkaku introduces "theatricality" into her creative activities, creating a "children's theater" through on-site finger

painting, naive young girls, abstract backgrounds, and Japanese-style colors, bringing the audience an aesthetic experience akin to returning to childhood. Ayako Rokkaku has achieved a win-win situation between artistic quality and the art market through her unique artistic style and care for childlike innocence, worthy of study and reference by contemporary artists. At the same time, the development trend of Japanese contemporary art reflected in Rokkaku's art also harbors the drawback of an "infantilization" tendency, lacking holistic attention to human history and reality. This enlightens us that contemporary art creators should seek breakthroughs and innovation in the unity of individuality and commonality.

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