

Uncovering a Tokyo discovery

by LG WILLIAMS

In the artworld people do one thing: They look. And, today, an entire generation of art lovers, art dealers and makers is flying across the globe, from country to country, just to — you guessed it — look. They are looking at art, but what are they looking for? A discovery.

Art world discoveries are as certain as they are rare, and, luckily for us, here in Tokyo, we have one right now.

Tokyo Wonder Site, a self-professed “art center dedicated to the generation and promotion of new art and culture from the heart of Tokyo,” just held “WAKUWAKU SHIBUYA presented by Ichiro Endo” (the exhibition closed on Feb. 13). At first glance, this large, three-room exhibition didn’t appear to present anything new in its introduction of a cast of kids riffing on *anime* culture in every conceivable way.

Honestly, I have yet to connect with anime in any form, in the comic-book mainstream or artistic explorations. Still, during the fun, super-crowded opening party, a beautiful pink anime-like apparition did lift my spirits: A freshly groomed, impeccably dressed, 6-foot tall, deep-throated “Kawaii Transvestite Princess” (aka the usually disheveled artist Toshikuni Yamaguchi). S/he handed me a plastic glass of vintage gallery wine and pointed out a fine artwork by the artist unit.maker (aka Ryuhei Takada) Quick note to alert readers: Every high to mid-tier salaryman in Tokyo should immediately buy one of the matter-of-fact drawings by this winner of the Silver Award at Geisei #11 in 2008.

In another room, lying inconspicuously on the floor among more directionless anime images — as if those in the first two rooms weren’t enough — was a huge heap of white fabric that turned out to be the artwork “Bad Cloth” by Haruya Nakajima and the Shibuhouse Art Collective. Despite its current incarnation, this laundry pile was not another run-of-the-mill, performance art remnant, something an artistic drama queen might have called, for instance, “This Is All That Remains Of My Daddy At The Imperial Hotel” — No, “Bad Cloth” was the entangled carcass of an impressive artwork with a remarkable history.

Shibuhouse was first formed in April 2008 by Keita Saito, Haruya Nakajima, Taiki Masuzawa when they came up with the idea of an “art-refuge-haven-sanctuary-safehouse”. Ten months ago, Nakajima and the now 19-strong group decided to cover their two-storey house in central Tokyo with a sheet, according to Tamura Masamichi, director of TANA Gallery Bookshelf in Kanda Ward (Full disclosure: I recently held an incredible though sparsely attended exhibition at TANA). Shibuhouse member Piko (aka Tomomi Yamashita) spent three days sewing 10 20-meter rolls of fabric together to make the customized covering. Once completed, 10 members carried “Bad



Cloth” to the grounds of Tokyo University, where the colossus was unfurled so that members could paint on the Shibuhouse’s emblem, which was first designed in December 2009 by Masuzawa.

At noon on Oct. 15 last year, seven members from the collective — Haruya, Toshikuni, Taiki, Ayano, Shoko, Keita and Yuki the cameraman — hoisted the sheets up, over their shared house. Imagine an entire two-story, intercity Tokyo neighborhood house suddenly disappearing within minutes, cloaked in a white “house coat”. The photographs of “Bad Cloth” are compelling, while the video record of the renegade event is something that puts US Cable TV Channel Bravo’s artist reality show, “Work Of Art: The Next Great Artist”, utterly to shame. The video of “Bad Cloth” is artistic-reality *plus* art, and bold step away from the group’s anime-inspired work.

Just five hours after the completion of the artwork, the artists heard a loud knock on the door. Outside were two tough-looking, casually dressed men eager to speak with them. The gentlemen insinuated that they were yakuza and told the once-jubilant now-terrified artists that they had 24 hours to vacate the premises, which they proceeded to do. One can only wonder what the yakuza-cum-art-critics thought of the art.

Less than 100 lucky pedestrians in a city of 32 million people probably got a glimpse of this surprising event. Hopefully, a smart local art museum will snatch the piece up for its collection so that the rest of Tokyo can see “Bad Cloth”. Shibuhouse is next scheduled to wrap the Telephonebooth Gallery (again, for the sake of disclosure, I should inform readers that I not only introduced them to the gallery but I also recently held another incredible though sparsely attended exhibition there), in Kansas City. Telephonebooth director Tim Brown said via email that all that he needs to make this an international artwork is “a few plane tickets and some meal coupons.”



Venue: Shibuhouse

(T&T bldg 2F, 3-18-5 Higashi, Shibuya)

Admission: Free

More info: Visit shibuhouse.com