

What's your idea of happiness?

Artists near and far give their answers at 'Bliss Express'

by Alex Chun

Oct 5, 2006

ASK a group of young artists from across the globe to respond to a simple question -- "What is happiness?" -- and not surprisingly their answers, as they appear on canvas and digital prints, are as varied as they are personal.

Take commercial illustrator Yuko Shimizu and her retro- futuristic rendition of an astronaut holding a radio to her ear. "Growing up in New York, I was fascinated by the macho guys carrying boomboxes, and I was obsessed by space travel," the Tokyo-born Shimizu says from her Manhattan studio. "Looking back at those happy childhood memories, the astronaut image is how I imagined space travel in the 21st century would be."

Then crossing over to the other side of the Atlantic there's another commercial artist, Paris-based Stephane Tartelin, whose response to the question resulted in a portrait of alcohol-guzzling anthropomorphic animals. He refers to the piece as an "ode to beer" and notes with a touch of humor that this particular interpretation of happiness, which features the words "oh yea" scrawled in the background, requires little explanation.

Tartelin and Shimizu's images are just two of about 70 illustrations of happiness that make up the "Bliss Experience" group show opening Saturday night at Alhambra's Gallery Nucleus.

The show, which also marks the release of a 280-page book of the same name, features a combination of emerging and more established international artists from as far away as Japan, China and Korea. It is also the brainchild of 21-year-old University of Alberta student Althea Chia, who published her first book, "IO: Art of the Wired," two years ago.

"I love art books, but I don't like reading a year of an artist's life and I don't like reading abstract philosophy," Chia says. "While putting 'Bliss Experience' together, I was gunning for something less lofty, something innovative in its simplicity and complexity, and I thought, what better than happiness?"

Through the book and the show, Chia, who was born in Singapore, hopes to show that the U.S., and more specifically Los Angeles, doesn't have the monopoly on the young artist scene. "When you go to the bookstore, there's not a lot of Asian pop culture being covered there, so I'm hoping to bring some attention to the genre," she says.

For "Bliss Experience," Chia canvassed the globe via the Internet and through referrals looking for "evocative Asian artists who had very individual styles." In short, she was looking for 21 interpretations of the phenomenon of happiness, and she found them in California, New York, Paris and across Asia.

Of those artists, the most recognizable name belongs to Seonna Hong, 32, who has had numerous gallery shows and won an Emmy Award in 2004 for her background animation work on "My Life as a Teenage Robot" for Nickelodeon.

Hong, who lives in La Canada Flintridge, says she was drawn to the project by both the lineup of artists involved as well as the thoughtfulness of the theme. "You know the saying, 'Ignorance is bliss?'" she says, offering up her interpretation of "Bliss Experience." "I've understood it in different ways as I've gotten older and gained different experiences. I now see it as multidimensional: sad, understandable, frustrating and comforting."

Those sentiments come through strongly in her works, which frequently portray idyllic images of small children and animals juxtaposed with the bleakness and dangers of the real world. For the show, Hong has contributed an image titled "Blindside," which features a young girl bent over and poking at a railroad tie, oblivious as a black train rushes toward her.

Though the remaining artists are far from household names, many are known within the graphic arts communities for their commercial or graphic novel work. Paris-based artist Bengal, for example, has garnered a following for his color illustrations posted on Internet artist boards and for his collaboration with writer Jean-David Morvan on the French graphic novel series "Meka."

Here in the U.S., images by Brooklyn's Marcos Chin (who shares a studio with Shimizu) are hard to miss if you live anywhere near New York City: He's largely responsible for the ubiquitous Lavalife dating service posters plastered throughout the subways.

For the show, Chin contributed five pieces, including one featuring a quartet of young girls sporting antlers and decked out in Marc Jacobs gear. "That was a fun, happy piece I enjoyed doing at the moment," says Chin, who is quick to note that the image was not done for the clothing designer. "I enjoyed the opportunity of not having to put the clothes on a model, which can get mundane.

"It was a way I could break away from the norm and do things on my own terms. That for me is what happiness is all about."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.