

PROG ART

TAKING HIS CUES FROM PROG ROCK AND HAIR METAL BANDS, MASATO TAKASAKA MIGHT JUST HAVE DELIVERED ART'S GRANDEST GUITAR SOLO WRITES **REX BUTLER**. AND LIKE WITH A GUITAR SOLO, IF YOU CUT AWAY THE SHOWMANSHIP AND DISPLAYS OF VIRTUOSITY, WHAT WE ARE WATCHING IS SIMPLY AN ARTIST MAKING ART. PORTRAIT BY **KIRSTIN GOLLINGS**.

For me, one of the most adventurous selections in the wonderful *Cubism and Australian Art*, staged earlier this year at Heide Museum of Modern Art, was the work of Melbourne-born **Masato Takasaka**. In the final room of the exhibition, devoted to the effects of cubism from 1980 to the present, curators **Sue Cramer** and **Leslie Harding** saw fit to include Takasaka's weird hybrid sculpture-cum-installation *Return to Forever (Productopia)*. Against the paintings and sculptures of **Rosalie Gascoigne**, **Madonna Staunton** and **Diana Georgetti**, which remain so closely wedded to their sources and even on occasions revert to the dreaded green and dun brown of the Australian landscape, Takasaka's tilted surfaces, crazed patterns and acid colours struck this viewer as genuinely eccentric. Along with **Daniel Crooks**'s videos slicing time and space up into finer and finer fragments, it was Takasaka who seemed most authentically to point to the future possibilities of cubism in a digitised 21st century.

Actually, it is surprising that Takasaka's work was chosen at all for a show on cubism. When the artist himself is pressed on the major art movement he feels closest to, he invariably nominates constructivism, and he originally emerged in Melbourne's alternative art scene under the protective wing of Australia's grandfather of hardcore abstraction **John Nixon**. An early Takasaka work like *Untitled (Outdoor Abstract Painting #2)*, a two-colour billboard mounted in an outer Melbourne tract development called Caroline Springs, is a classic exercise in concrete painting, and Takasaka served a long apprenticeship

in artist-run spaces and such self-styled avant garde collectives as Sydney Non Objective and Melbourne's Inverted Topology, best known for leaning sheets of coloured wood up against walls to produce something like a cross between an **Ellsworth Kelly** and an earthquake.

At some point in the mid 2000s, Takasaka's work began seriously to mutate. We could undoubtedly point here to the influence of the architecture studies, later abandoned, that Takasaka undertook at RMIT from 2005. But we might also suggest that it was the outcome of a long-repressed fascination with the baroque and its taste for excessive detail and bad infinity of intertwined forms. This involved nothing so highbrow as research into Bavarian church interiors or the paintings of **Andrea Pozzo** and **Pietro da Cortona**. Rather, Takasaka found confirmation of what he was looking for in the self-absorbed and pyrotechnic musical virtuosity of such prog and hair metal bands of 1970s and 1980s as Yes, King Crimson and Van Halen. It was a declaration of intent made clear in his 2009 show *Post-Structural Jam (Shut Up! We Know You Can Play!)*, in which Takasaka put forward a claim for the guitar solo as the guiding aesthetic for a new art by featuring together in the catalogue both the rock magazines he had collected as a teenager and the art magazines he had collected as an art student.

What Takasaka had belatedly realised was that the music he had always listened to offered an unexplored aesthetic for art. The brilliant technical virtuosity of the players – the guitarist trying to squeeze in as many notes as possible, the frequent





key and tempo changes of the rest of the band – ultimately served no expressive purpose. What the listener was hearing was precisely the sound of the musicians making music, outside of any wider narrative or communicative context. And the music was astonishingly innovative, with its unexpected and difficult-to-play connections, but also strangely repetitive or history-less, without any language of formal assessment. **Damiano Bertoli** in an essay for *Post-Structural Jam* speaks of the pure me-ness of the improvised guitar solo, famously masturbatory in its disregard both of the limits of the medium and the demands of the audience. Indeed, the second half of the title of Takasaka's show, *Shut Up! We Know You Can Play!* comes from the exasperated comment of the singer to guitar whiz **Steve Vai** as he wound up for yet another round of guitar playing on a favourite CD of Takasaka's.

It is something like this pointless and supernumerary excess, overwhelming in its uncategorised detail, that characterises Takasaka's recent work. *I Like My Old Stuff Better Than Your New Stuff (More Prog Rock Sculptures from the Fifth Dimension)*, originally shown at Melbourne's Ocular Lab, is a riotous assemblage of precariously leaning boxes, striped and tessellated surfaces and origami-ed paper, the whole passing several times back and forth through a series of broken pictures frames. For the *Cubism and Australian Art* show, Takasaka continued using the same reiterative principles, this time combining old work,

studio detritus, abandoned models from architecture school and even packaging and drinks cases from his parents' Japanese supermarket in a kind of self-curated mini-retrospective.

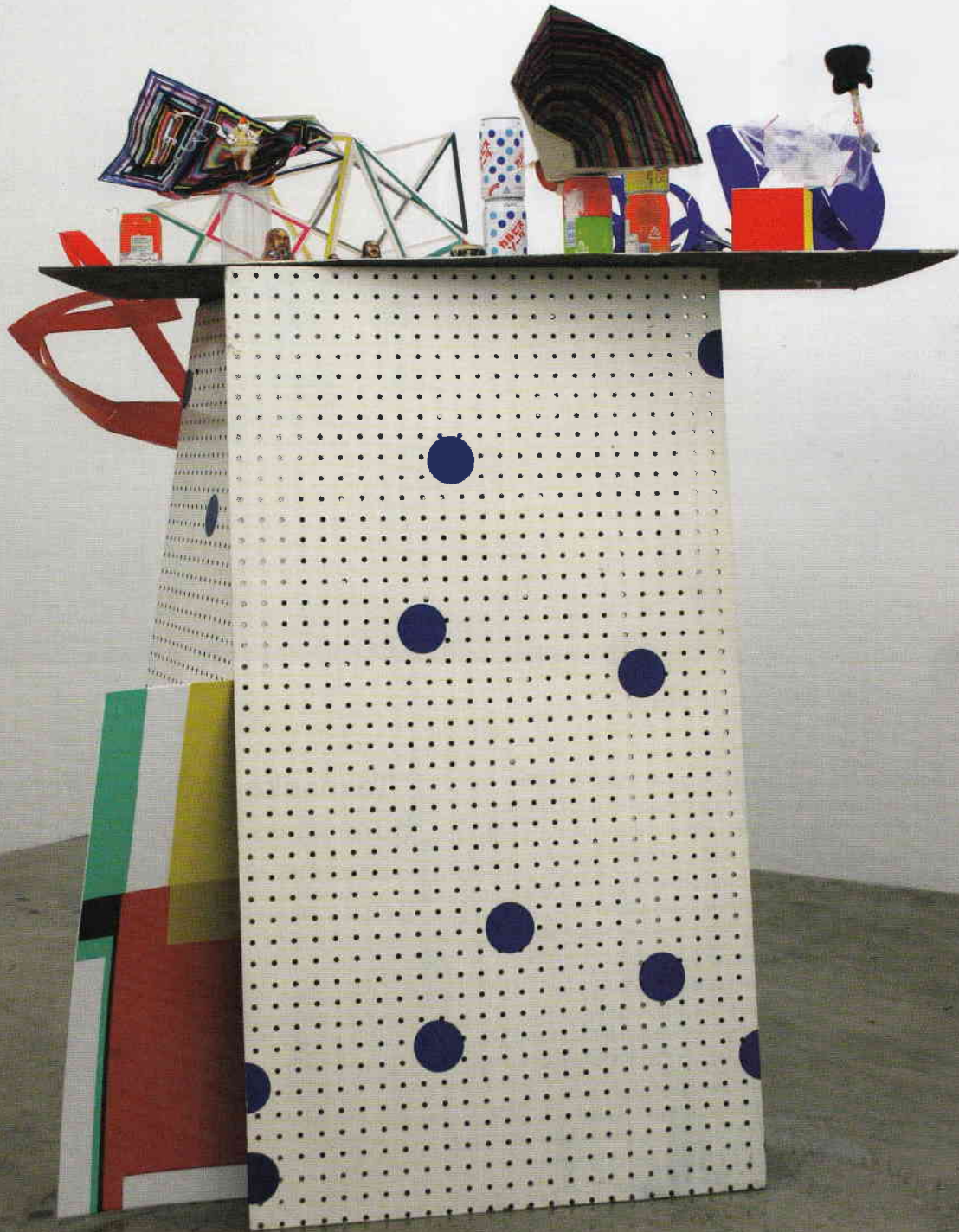
Critics who have followed Takasaka's career have searched hard to describe the exuberant chaos of his work, with its simultaneously formless and cyclical nature. In an art historical vein, they have come up with such terms as "techno-contemporary" or instead speak of "Kandinsky on acid". (And, of course, we can adduce a whole line of artistic precedents for Takasaka's work, from the rawness of dadaist **Kurt Schwitters's Merzbau** to the delicacy of someone like **Sarah Tze**.) When the critics allow themselves to go with the work, they have come up such coinages as "riff-a-rama mini-cities"

From left::

Masato Takasaka, *Return to Productopia*, 2009. Cardboard, wood, plastic, MDF, acrylic, paint, paper, soft-drink cans, tape and discarded product packaging, dimensions variable. Installation view, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne. PHOTO JOHN BRASH

Masato Takasaka, *Smile! Bauhaus babushka sundae boogie woogie (model for a prog rock SCULPTURE PARK)*, 1999-2007. MDF, vinyl, marker on foamcore, soft drink cans, acrylic, paper notepad from Bauhaus Museum giftshop, plastic wrapper, cardboard, polycarbonate sheeting, marker on paper, Metallica babushka dolls, toy guitar, sundae keyring. Installation view at The Narrows, Melbourne. PHOTO JONATHAN DONCOVIO

COURTESY: THE ARTIST





or, following Takasaka's own lead, describe him as "playing guitar in five dimensions". Perhaps the best categorisation so far is **Helen Hughes's** "never-endism," which nicely captures the expansiveness and seeming limitlessness of the work, both physically outwards in reach and metaphysically inwards in compression and intensity.

So far the one angle that has not been seriously explored is Takasaka's connection to – particularly Japanese – architecture. In the bent, crumpled and endlessly interacting surfaces of his recent work, after all, we see something of the possibilities opened up by the computer modelling of materials first explored by such pioneers as **Frank Gehry** and **Zaha Hadid**, and now carried on almost to infinity by such über-hip Japanese practices as **café co.** and **Atelier Bow-Wow**. Takasaka notably refers to himself as **Studio Masatotectures** – and he is not being entirely ironic when he does this. After all, his sculptures, if seemingly like scaled-down life worlds, invite imaginary occupation. Or, to put this another way, like so much contemporary architecture they resist for as long as possible any such occupation, insisting like any great guitar solo that they are seen for exactly what they are. •

This quarter Masato Takasaka's work will be exhibited in *Edge of the Universe* at Shepparton Art Gallery from 27 November 2010 to 6 February 2011 and *Dot Dot Dot* at Lismore Regional Gallery from 3 December 2010 to 29 January 2011.

"Takasaka notably refers to himself as Studio Masatotectures – and he is not being entirely ironic when he does this."



DANNY LACY

CURATOR, SHEPPARTON ART GALLERY

Born in 1977 Melbourne-based **Masato Takasaka** completed his studies at the Victorian College of the Arts in 1999. Drolly self-described as a post-structuralist baroque pop neo-constructivist artist, he has exhibited widely in artist run spaces and has undertaken many collaborative projects.

With titles such as *The Meaning of Loaning*, *Window Shopping* and *Productopia*, Takasaka's sculptures are constructions of pre-loved recycled stuff. Form, space and architectural concepts in his work are compounded with notions of nostalgia, re-use and consumption. **Danny Lacy**, curator at Shepparton Art Gallery, has included Takasaka's work in the forthcoming exhibition *At the Edge of the Universe*. The exhibition comprises old works from the collection alongside new contemporary works on loan. Takasaka's *Edge of Insanity* drawings are included in this exhibition because as Lacy says: "They literally reference 'edge' in the title and structurally reference a threshold or limit of perception in the way the flat plane is dissected and distorted."

Naturally for an artist of Japanese heritage, who lives and works within the context of an Australian culture, Takasaka makes reference to his social duality in the work. Lacy cites this cultural complexity. "Perhaps most understated though is the social element within Takasaka's practice. The use of Japanese packaging from the artist's parents' business and the use of sculptural elements from past art projects, give Takasaka's work a social underpinning that adds depth to the work."

For the viewer the most exciting aspect is the ephemeral and precarious nature of his sculptural work. As Lacy says: "Aesthetically it's eye catching and brilliantly constructed to possibly collapse at any moment."

Prue Gibson

From far left:

Masato Takasaka, *Post-structural Jam (Shut up! We know you can play!...)*, 2009. Installation view, Y3K Gallery, Melbourne. PHOTO: JAMES DEUTSCHER

Masato Takasaka, *I like my old stuff better than your new stuff (More prog rock sculptures from the fifth dimension)*, 1999-2007. Mixed media. Installation view, Ocular Lab, Melbourne. PHOTO: ANDREW CURTIS
COURTESY: THE ARTIST