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If Kitty Could Talk, She'd Mouth Off

A project explores how a toy concept reflects women's place in Japanese society

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Hello Kitty is waaaaay late.

It's nearly 9 p.m., and she was supposed to be here an hour ago. But, hey, it's Southern California, and she's apparently stuck in traffic coming from Irvine.

"She's on her way," mutters Jaime Scholnick, a visual artist who's directing her dream project on digital video. It will be the centerpiece of her fall show at POST Gallery, a show she's calling "Hello Kitty Gets a Mouth."

"In the meantime," Scholnick says with an air of distraction, "we're shooting some of the other scenes."

By nature an affable person, Scholnick tries to keep smiling, but in fact she looks stressed. After all, Kitty--a.k.a. Junko Makuuchi, a student at UC Irvine--is going back to Japan for her summer holidays and won't be available after this week. And where would the film be without its star?

Everyone else is there--the cinematographer, the co-cinematographer who tonight is doing lighting, the script supervisor/assistant, plus two friends Scholnick has recruited to play Japanese doctors whom Kitty consults.

Everyone and a modicum of equipment--one camera on a tripod, one floodlight and some cables--are crammed into a narrow hallway on the third floor of American Intercontinental University in Marina del Rey, where Scholnick's day job is teaching art theory and studio classes.

Since it's near the computer room, students keep stumbling by and asking, "What's going on here?" One of them, a Japanese student, is talked into playing a third doctor.

In Scholnick's imaginative reinvention of Hello Kitty, the mouthless cartoon feline and marketing phenom suddenly realizes that she is incapable of making a sound--and is she frustrated! Watching television and poring over women's magazines, Kitty finds a mouth she likes and takes the illustration to three Tokyo plastic surgeons. One by one, they refuse her. Standing in a corner, Nathan Wilson is playing Dr. No. 2, wearing an officious white coat and vigorously shaking his head at the camera. Two angles and half a dozen takes later, he's done. He passes his white coat and stethoscope to Inmo, an L.A. gallery owner who's playing Dr. Shibata.

They're setting up Shibata's "office" in a small room off the corridor. Inmo practices shaking his head and looking stern next to a chart of various before-and-after shots of reconstructive surgery--the approved ones for Westernized eyelids and enlarged breasts.

There's a commotion in the hall--the production's Hello Kitty has arrived. Makuuchi, 24, looks like a teen and speaks in a soft voice, which she now uses to apologize profusely for her lateness.

A relieved Scholnick hurries her into the women's restroom to get her into costume, a cartoon-cute ensemble of white satin blouse with big rounded collar and pink pinafore. Scholnick talked a recent American Intercontinental fashion grad, Belsie Galliano, into making the dress, while Scholnick took on the task of fabricating the shoes and the headpiece, a giant orb covered with white faux fur, with trademark black ovals for eyes, a stubby yellow nose and ... no mouth.

During the costume change, Makuuchi confesses to Scholnick, "Sorry, I forgot." Turns out that if Daniel Brodo, the co-cinematographer, hadn't called when she was discovered missing, Kitty would still be in Irvine.

The Hello Kitty phenomenon hit Scholnick seven years ago. She was 31, with a master's of fine arts from Claremont Graduate University when she went to Japan and began teaching English to adults in the city of Yamagata. The irony is that she left the United States in search of the sublime, inspired by a 1990 exhibition of contemporary Japanese art at LACMA, "A Primal Spirit."

"I thought there would be a connection between living there and making that sort of work," she says. "So I went there, I tried to make very beautiful work, but I was just bombarded with these social issues."

For one thing, she was shocked by the poor treatment of women--and how they accepted their reduced status. "All my students--like 40-year-old women--would come in wearing Hello Kitty," Scholnick recalls. "I finally asked a student one day, Why do you like her? And she said, 'Oh, she's so kawaii, so cute.'" The student, around 35, sported a Hello Kitty T-shirt and handbag, and Scholnick looked more closely at the image: no mouth.

"I was horrified. How could you like a character that doesn't even have a mouth? I started using that character as emblematic of how I felt there. You know, women have to be cute; you don't speak."

Scholnick channeled her outrage into artwork. In 1997, she had a one-woman show at Gallery Kobo Chika in Tokyo. The show's title, "Kawaii/Kowai," was a play on two Japanese words that sound similar but have nearly opposite meanings--kawaii means cute, and kowai means frightening. The multimedia works included cat dolls bound together with yarn, cat dolls in cages, and cat dolls with blackened eyes, a reference to domestic abuse.

"I remember one of my students came in with sunglasses," she recalls. The woman had been beaten up and was making an attempt to hide her bruises. "She hadn't even married this guy yet, but she was 30, and she would put up with anything."

A Japan Times critic acknowledged the show's social commentary but said that Scholnick was "wise to lighten her potentially heavy explorations of cross-cultural experiences with humor."

In 2000, Scholnick returned to Los Angeles, and, in between teaching jobs, she began a series of drawings that melded Hello Kitty imagery with guns and ammunition--again, an extreme juxtaposition of kawaii with kowai. Then, while browsing a Web site for Hello Kitty products, the idea for a video came to her.

Her rambling downtown studio, which also serves as her apartment, is strewn with components of the project. On the floor, the letters "h-e-l-l-o-o-o-o" are spread out on a piece of green felt--she is doing stop-motion animation to insert between the live-action sequences.

Since her return to L.A., Scholnick has had a one-woman show in the smaller gallery at POST as well as participated in a couple of group shows, including last year's "Big Plastic" at the Pasadena Armory for the Arts. When she approached POST director Habib Kheradgar, about "Hello Kitty Gets a Mouth," he signed her to open the gallery's fall season.

The final video, about 15 minutes long, will be the centerpiece of an installation, shown in a Hello Kitty bedroom (by Scholnick) on a Hello Kitty television set (ditto), which is currently in the middle of the artist's room, on its pedestal. Hello Kitty's head frames the screen, fur-covered with the signature three black stripes--whiskers--on either side.

Tacked on the walls are a dozen or so sketches. When the gallery walls are freshly painted, Scholnick will begin drawing murals on them. One will be based on a work done in colored chalk on a sheet of black gessoed paper about 8 feet wide. In the lower right-hand corner, a life-sized creature wearing a crumpled Hello Kitty hood is pointing a handgun skyward, ready to shoot.

Scholnick became focused on "Hello Kitty Gets a Mouth" at the end of last year. With the story percolating in her head, she flew to Japan at Christmas and visited Puroland, the Sanrio Co. theme park that features characters in its animation pantheon, including Kitty. Contained in a sprawling three-story building, Puroland has rides, live performances and tons of merchandise.

"I spent the whole day there," says Scholnick, who had her video camera in hand. While in Japan, she also shot exteriors--street scenes, views from moving trains, a plane taking off--to splice into the final work.

When she returned home, she began signing up cast and crew, volunteers all.

She storyboarded the script with her friend Margaret Adachi, a former assistant film editor. She talked Brodo, a fellow teacher at American Intercontinental, into being director of photography--although on the second day of shooting, he brought along his friend Eric Whittaker, a professional cinematographer from Canada, and the project so enchanted him that Whittaker took over the filming.

The others have been recruited in the same serendipitous fashion--Inmo, who has an eponymous gallery in Chinatown, is a friend; Makuuchi a former student; and John Buuck, the editor, a friend of another American Intercontinental colleague.

Asked about the famous character she portrays, Makuuchi admits, "When I was little, I really didn't like Hello Kitty because it's too girly. I never liked pink."

However, the more Scholnick considers Kitty, the more she can relate to her.

"Hello Kitty is kind of me," she finally admits.

As someone often accused of being nice, perhaps too nice, Scholnick understands the impulse behind kawaii. "You can't be too aggressive, you have to be so nice and cute," she says. "There is a part of me that hates that, but it's the truth."

When Hello Kitty gets a mouth, Scholnick says, and finds her voice, "it's really everywoman."

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Scarlet Cheng is a regular contributor to Calendar.

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"HELLO KITTY GETS A MOUTH," POST Gallery, 1904 E. 7th Place, Los Angeles. Dates: Sept. 21-Nov. 2. Open Thursdays-Saturdays, 12-6 p.m. Admission: Free. Phone: (213) 622-8580.