

From the collection



Deriving her name from the Korean word for a rabbit, TOKI is the creation of 49-year-old Elam graduate Hye Rim Lee. With her huge, limpid eyes and tiny mouth, TOKI borrows her looks from the world of cartoons and computer gaming, and is herself an animated creation. Despite her associations with Western bunnies, she is less Thumper than Bambi, suggesting not goofiness, but a cutesy innocence and vulnerability with her wide open gaze. The impression of sweetness in TOKI's expression can be quickly dispelled by some of her behaviours, or by a cleverly subversive accompanying soundtrack. At the Gus Fisher Gallery in the exhibition Powder Room, for example, TOKI appeared in a short animation entitled Lash, blinking to the accompaniment of the sound of a whip cracking each time her lids closed.

Sound is very important to Hye Rim Lee. Her undergraduate degree at the Ewha Women's University in Seoul was in music, and she originally trained her soprano voice for an operatic career like her mother's. A botched tonsillectomy which ruined her vocal chords and

the death of both parents from cancer led her to move to Auckland in search of a fresh start in the early 1990s. Initially she tried painting, but after a visit home to South Korea which was bristling with electronic commodities produced by electronics giant Samsung, she began to see the potential of new media, particularly digital imaging. She completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Intermedia at the Elam School of Fine Arts in 2002. A computer-manipulated character played by a human actor appeared first in an exhibition at the Moving Image Centre during her final year. The show was titled "Hello TOKI ;)" - the greeting in English of the creature with the Korean name given the suffix of the emoticon for a wink, using a semi-colon and bracket to represent the human face. Even in the language of her introduction, TOKI was already a hybrid of cultures, human and machine.

Taking emoticons into three dimensions was the basis for the artist's first dealer gallery show in 2003. Smooth TOKI is one of three works that were purchased for the University from that exhibition, the others being titled Mesh and Patch. Each name refers to the process by which the image of TOKI's face is created and completed, from the grid (Mesh) through to the perfect plastic finish (Smooth). With a knowing reference to the Quattrocento artist Sandro Botticelli's Birth of Venus, Hye Rim Lee titled this series, The Birth of Toki: hundreds and thousands.

Writing about this series, the artist reveals that she wanted the series of prints to announce her Frankenstein, drawing on all the implicit associations of genealogy, race, gender and breeding long associated with the notion of birth: "I produced 9 portraits of TOKI's close-up face suggesting 9 traits of personality, or 9

stages of the conception of birth. Through the process of rendering nine times, TOKI reveals herself with nine different faces. She is multi-dimensional and able to shift from being cute to feminine, sexual, angelic or evil."

In South Korea where women undergo plastic surgery as casually as they might get their fringes trimmed (13 percent of the female population admit to having had a cosmetic procedure compared to 3 percent in the United States), feminine beauty has now become a standardised commodity available for purchase. Barbie dolls are not ludicrous toys but ideals to be emulated. Reacting to this culture of extreme make over, the artist writes: "This [Birth of TOKI] project explores the motivation, driven by mass media and advertising, that propels such a huge number of women to undertake invasive surgical procedures. Magazines and television show the objectification of femininity, commodification of beauty and the manipulation of insecurity about self and status."

Lee hopes that her work will be read as a radical critique of both that culture and the norm in the world of computer gaming where female characters act out male fantasies. Rather than being a pawn in someone else's game, Lee's avatar TOKI resists stereotyping and makes up her own rules as she goes along.

Linda Tyler

*Hye Rim Lee, Smooth 2003 from Birth of TOKI series
PVC on vinyl 1000 x 1000mm*