

WHERE I WORK

Tomoo Gokita

BY ASHLEY RAWLINGS
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TOMOO GOKITA playing a piano backwards, at his studio in Tokyo, 2010.
Photo by Yoshimitsu Umekawa for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

Out in Chofu, a quiet suburb 30 minutes west of Tokyo's buzzing center in Shinjuku, Tomoo Gokita is leading me to his studio, hidden down a warren of rickety wooden houses and scruffy vegetable patches.

Located across the street from his family home, a single-room storehouse has been Gokita's workplace for the past seven years. "I found it by complete chance," he says. "I'd walked by so many times but never really paid much attention to it. One day I looked inside, spoke to the owner, and I've rented it ever since."

The interior is the typical painter's enclave: large canvases leaning against the wall, cans of gesso stashed in corners, paint-splattered shoes on the floor. Gokita's desk is a sea of clutter, overflowing with tubes of paint and glue, dozens of pens, tins full of brushes, cigarette lighters, an ashtray and stacks of magazines. The counterbalance of abstract vigor, precise lines and quirky appropriated imagery that characterizes his work is reflected in the scene. One end of the desk is flanked by a bronze Roman bust wearing a stack of fedora hats, while a lamp at the other end spotlights a single sheet of paper bearing the meticulously drawn figure of a bodybuilder.

It's exactly the kind of working environment one would imagine for an artist who is both low-key and extroverted. As we began our conversation the artist was the epitome of laid-back cool—dressed in a white T-shirt and dark blue jeans and surrounded by shelves holding thousands

of records and CDs, he slumped back into a soft armchair, lit a cigarette and cracked open a beer. A few months later, when his friend Yoshimitsu Umekawa turned up to photograph him, he was in the mood to strip down to his underwear and bound around his studio, perching on the edge of his desk and on the stool in front of his piano.

Gokita is an astounding draftsman who honed his technical skills while working as a graphic designer in the 1990s. It was a childhood love of drawing manga that led him into design, he explains. He was inspired by artists who had a similar background in graphic design, such as postwar avant-gardist Tadanori Yokoo, but it took him time to find his own artistic direction. "I didn't know what I was doing. I'd just do anything. And I began to be bored by designing for clients—I wanted to draw and paint my own things."

Though he'd shown at a few small galleries in Tokyo, his career breakthrough came in 2005, when New York-based artist Taylor McKimens discovered a book of Gokita's work, *Lingerie Wrestling* (2000), and invited him to take part in "Stranger Town," a group show at Dinter Fine Art. The exhibition presented eight American and Japanese artists whose work traverses painting, comics, illustration, zines and music. "Taylor just asked me to submit something lighthearted," Gokita recalls. "I had no expectations whatsoever and exhibited a bunch of work on paper. But the show did really well and a lot of galleries approached me." Solo shows at New York's ATM Gallery, Tokyo's Taka Ishii Gallery and Los Angeles' Honor Fraser Gallery quickly followed.

Since then, working on an increasingly large scale, he's become renowned for a signature style that marries pop-cultural archetypes with surreal, noirish flights of fancy. His figures, taken from film, television, advertising and pornography, typically have their faces and parts of their bodies obliterated by blobs, twists and smears of paint. His still lifes are equally ominous.

But alongside the larger canvases, Gokita has sustained his earlier, small-scale graphic approach. He shows me a grid of more than 100 drawings and paintings on paper spread out on the floor. The subjects are random, ranging from wrestlers to a rose, a galleon, geometric patterns and loosely drawn scribbles. "I need to keep doing lighter work like this," he says. "It's a more diaristic form of drawing. I get nervous in front of the canvas—it's tiring."

The challenge for a painter whose work is such a fine interplay of precision and abandon is to know when to step back. "Sometimes you get to a certain point with a painting and it looks good, but you think you can improve on it, and what happens next is a disaster! But recently I've come to understand when to stop. Once I like the look of a painting, I turn it to face the wall. I don't look at it again for a couple of days." It's an important sign of maturity, and remarkable self-restraint, when an artist who channels such a vast array of imagery can moderate his greatest passion.

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