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Monsters and metamorphosis

Tufts exhibit features mythic Japanese beasts

By Cate McQuaid

Are monsters more real to the Japanese than they are to Americans? In this age of vampires, zombies, and wild things ruling at the box office, it's impossible to say. But the Japanese Shinto religion, which is ancient and widespread in Japan and pervasive in the culture, has animism at its core. Beasts are imbued with mythical powers. They carry the freight of human fears and hopes, and as metaphors, help us do the work of transformation.

"Sacred Monsters: Everyday Animism in Contemporary Japanese Art and Anime," a smart and enchanting exhibit at Tufts University Art Gallery, taps Japanese artists who have beastly imaginations. Several full-length anime films with monsters are available for viewing. Both kids and adults will find plenty to like.

Curators Amy Ingrid Schlegel and Jonathan Barracato have filled the first gallery with "Noah's Ark," five human-size monsters designed by the fashion design duo TOKYO KAMEN that recall the big, furry critters in "Where the Wild Things Are." These have heart-shape faces and bulbous mirror eyes, but they're as adorable as they are monstrous.

Cuteness carries a lot of weight in contemporary Japanese aesthetics. Some of the most interesting pieces in "Sacred Monsters" are both cute and daunting. An artist who goes by the moniker of Mr. has created "Strawberry Voice," a fiberglass doll's head that stands nearly 10 feet tall, with red hair and a sweet smile. Chipper anime scenes appear in her eyes, and one eye flips open to reveal a child's bedroom inside the head. This might be read, on one level, as a simple embodiment of a girl's consciousness. On another, it fetishizes that very thing; I could almost hear the ominous theme from "The Twilight Zone."

Chiho Aoshima's digital prints feature perky, anime-style scenes that straddle opposites: life and death, growth and decay. The skull at the center of "The Fountain of the Skull" has the big-eyed sweetness of most anime characters, but it's also a leering emblem of death. Other artists delve into the world of hybrid beasts, not uncommon in the Shinto belief system. Tomokazu Matsuyama paints the mythical kirin - a blend of deer, dragon, and unicorn - in a series that melds vastly different approaches to art, setting gestural, abstract brushstrokes against textile patterns from 19th-century Japanese prints.

There's plenty more to see. "Sacred Monsters" is beautifully installed. Each artist addresses a different theme, but they all grapple with metamorphosis. The exhibit works as a mythic journey, a creepy fairy-tale trek through the deep, dark woods that ultimately leads to Mr.'s "Strawberry Voice." A safe haven? Maybe not.

Subtle layering

Half of the lights have been turned off at the Howard Yezerski Gallery, because Peter Tollens's paintings shine under the natural light from the windows - maybe especially on a gray day. Tollens paints apparently monochrome works that shift with whispers of other colors just beneath the surface. The gallery's track lights bounce off the paintings, but when the lights are off, the nuances of the more hidden tones show the panels to be deeply subtle and engaging.

"Orange-Red" has an ember-like glow on the unlit wall. Both the color and the brushwork give it that energy. Tollens works in short, stuttering strokes, and the accumulation of blunt marks creates a sense of layers, and the suspicion that there's something beneath. Here, along the edges, a deeper red bleeds through, and shadowy greens and browns. With all this activity, the surface seems alive, as if it was shimmering or crumbling before our eyes.

All Tollens's paintings seem alive. They're not static under changing light, and even in unchanging light, they offer an interested eye constant surprises.

Wilcox turns inward

Sculptor Leslie Wilcox recycles old and unfinished works for "Canniballistic," her exhibit at Boston Sculptors Gallery. The title is a play on words that suggests the sculptures are not only consuming themselves (cannibals) but causing some violence in the process (ballistic). The punning doesn't quite work - there's nothing really violent in evidence here - but the exhibit is intriguing.

Wilcox works in wire mesh. She draws a diagram of the original piece on the wall beside the result. The overall sense is one of turning inward, of winnowing. Works that started as architectural have been pleated and folded into something softer. "Finiale (Floor)" began as a broad-shouldered trapezoid with a circular head, and now it's much narrower, even more figural, with folds dropping down the column as if it were a long dress. The circle on top is narrow, like a candle flame.

Also at Boston Sculptors, Nancy Selvage renews her investigation into the tension between surface patterns and interior glimpses in the 20-foot-long "Biopsee." It's an undulating, two-size monolith of steel mesh painted in black and white, with deep holes containing surprises inside - one interior looks like the cross-section of an intestine, another looks vaguely fetal, but milky white. It's as if the microscope slide has become gigantic, and we're still squinting at its mysteries.