"PRIDE, OTAKU MATSURI"

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

IN

ART

MAY 2007

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INTRODUCTION

In 2005 I applied for and received an Arts and Humanities travel scholarship so that I could attend a martial arts event called Pride Fighting Championship Otoko Matsuri in Saitama, Japan. This trip was intended to help me formulate and gather ideas for a possible thesis topic. My initial plan was to photograph this event and from that, create a body of work. Most likely this would have been an exhibition with a social commentary romanticizing violence and spectatorship as a thing of beauty and honor (Plates 1-6). Upon my return, I realized that this was an impossible subject, far too broad and complex to do justice to.

Out of this dilemma grew a new direction, eventually becoming a case where art imitates life; a commentary on my struggle to maintain the passion of an artist. My method of depicting this struggle was to create a narrative based installation where I could represent the dreamer within all of us, beginning with a nostalgic look at childhood and ending with a revolving-door glimpse of adult life. This exhibition was not meant to be a social commentary, but rather an ironic metaphor for growing up. It represented the obsessions for all things we love and live to see fulfilled, even to our own detriment. It epitomized the obstacles and nuisances which interfere in life, forcing us to desert the things that we’re most passionate about, essentially killing our dream.
BACKGROUND

In December of 2005 I traveled to Saitama Japan to watch Pride Fighting Championship Otoko Matsuri. Like a sunny afternoon in a park, the audience at Saitama, Pride, Otoko Matsuri was a multigenerational crowd made up of some fifty thousand young and old. This was a much more diverse, knowledgeable, and respectful audience than I had experienced at previous mixed martial arts (MMA) events across the United States. This sport in America attracts a different demographic, usually a barbaric and vocal subculture made up of crazies and wannabe tough guys. Otoko Matsuri broke every stereotype of the typical MMA fan, allowing me to sit in silence with the rest of the fifty thousand spectators and experience an art, otaku, in its most primal and pure form. In a strange way, while in that crowd, I began to think about the phenomenon of why we live and why we have to die. Without getting consumed by this thought, I realized that we all share a commonality in that we all journey from childhood into adult life. This thought crept back in when I returned to work on my thesis topic. I began to see that I was interested in creating a narrative for this exhibition that more or less dealt with a coming-of-age theme.

The word otaku is a Japanese term meaning nerd; basically a person who has an unhealthy obsession for any particular theme or subject matter. The Japanese currently use this as a negative term. The roots of the word can be traced back to ancient Japan where it was merely a proper greeting, much like using the
term Sir. The term has more recently become an expression used to identify the obsessive fans of Japanese animation or anime, similar to that of the American subculture of Trekkies and Stars Wars fans. In the United States the term otaku has become a badge or honor, a way for anime fans to refer to one another and basically a way of showing dedication to the genre. However in the broader sense, I borrowed the word otaku to stand in for the word “obsession”. While the phrase Otoko Matsuri in Japanese means men’s festival. I titled my thesis exhibition in a similar way, with the meaning of, Otaku Matsuri obsession festival. Despite the exhibition title, the narrative had very little to do with Pride Fighting. It was merely a way of personalizing the exhibition. Pride Fighting could have been substituted for nearly anything sparking the imagination. However, in reference to my thesis title Otaku Matsuri, I felt a sense of loyalty to using Pride Fighting as my springboard to tell a larger story and also to help bridge the gap of otaku with that of Japanese pop culture.

Rooted in Japanese culture is the warrior spirit of the Samurai. There is nobility in the art of fighting that still remains within their culture. This can be no more evident than in the way Pride is marketed in Japan to all ages. Merchandising is a huge part of the success of these events, where among sports apparel, key chains, and other curious goods, action figures are sold. These action figures are caricatures of the fighters, much like bobble-head dolls. On the packages of the figures there is a mission statement of sorts reading, “This figure
is the selected superstar from the world of sports entertainment. To learn the spirit behind a figure shows you a new perspective for your passion for the fight.” This statement seemed to be an awkward way of condoning violence as a sport to the public. It could be construed as cult-like. However, the statement also creates the notion of passion for consuming knowledge, encouraging us to learn about the sport. It made me realize that there is an otaku for this sport, one that is rather tongue and cheek and made up of a diverse demographic. It is in this area that my interest peaked, steering me towards a topic for the exhibition, one with a universal truth that might be relevant to the average viewer. There is something magical about childhood, there’s a naïveté that makes it seem as though anything is possible. As we get older reality sinks in and we change, we become cynical.

I was drawn to the idea of compulsion for knowledge and immediacy, but depicted in a way that overwhelms and cripples the imagination. This idea seemed like the makings for depicting an existential crisis. However, a dilemma remained in how to convey that theme in an art exhibition. I began looking for source material that might help me relate a coming-of-age narrative, so I turned to illustrated children’s books for inspiration. The book which stood out to me from the beginning was Maurice Sendak’s Where the Wild Things Are, a timeless story and iconic symbol for growing up. Sendak’s book uses a three-part narrative to tell the story of a boy named Max. The book’s protagonist, Max, is obsessed with making mischief. After chasing down the family dog, Max is sent to bed without
supper where he falls asleep in his wolf suit. A forest grows in Max’s room and so begins a journey by ship to the land of the wild things. Max arrives and tames the wild things with his magic, sparking a wild rumpus where the creatures declare Max the king of the wild things. Amidst the celebrating, Max eventually grows tired and longs to return home. He sails home over a year and in and out of weeks back to his bedroom where his supper is still hot.

Where the Wild Things Are is an important element of popular culture and it seemed to be an appropriate book to act as a structural and thematic guide for the exhibition. An advantage of using this as source material is its longevity; nearly all western people under fifty are familiar with this story. The book is enduring and remains a staple in elementary schools. In terms of the book’s narrative, many interpretations exist. However, my feeling is that it is a coming of age story that is rooted in childhood fantasy and obsession, much like otaku. Max is obsessed with being deviant to the point where he dresses as a wolf so that he can torment the dog, essentially living out his fantasy. When Max is punished one form of fantasy ends; he then dreams of a new reality where he is the King of the wild things. Max’s dream epitomizes his need to consume and dominate the world around him. No matter how much he indulges in the fantasy, the dose never seems quite strong enough. Max becomes immune and longs to return home, essentially killing his dream. His awakening represents his choice to move on, and to basically grow up.
CREATING THE EXHIBITION

Bringing Pride Fighting and Wild Things together and coming full circle, I focused on creating action figures, much like the figures that Pride distributes. However, I needed a way to represent the three part narrative of Where the Wild Things Are. So, I decided to put the action figures on hold, and I then began looking at the University of Hawaii Commons gallery (Figure 1) & (Plate 7). Initially, I built a scale model of the gallery and then played with various designs for the space. I realized that in order to emphasize my narrative, the exhibition had to be an installation; the emphasis of the show had to rest on the use of the space as a whole, not just the works within. Almost immediately I decided the space should have three rooms, each being a building block in this narrative. I wanted this installation to have very little light so that I could capture mood. In order to make that happen, I had to design the space so that the light from the windows would be nearly blocked out. I created a façade blocking out the windows which also provided a teaser or lead in for the show (Plate 8).

This facade allowed a place for the exhibition signage and created a sense of mystery about the exhibition. To reinforce this mystery, I created a signage poster based on pulp magazine covers from the 1930’s and 1940’s, usually depicting noir mysteries (Plate 9). However, making a façade in the Commons gallery was both a strength and a weakness like a double-edged sword. Typically the Commons gallery works well as a space because it provides instant access,
allowing viewers to see the shows without necessarily having to enter the space. The façade avoided this, forcing the viewer to enter and interact with the exhibition. In addition to the façade, an entrance corridor was added to help keep the light out of the gallery. In the corridor I placed a series of three speed bags to suggest fight training and to help represent the three part narrative to the exhibition (Plate 10). The corridor also contained a Japanese screen style window, recessed within one of the corridor walls (Plate 11). The screen made it difficult to see into the adjoining room, adding to the mystery of the space. The façade and corridor were painted a particular shade of blue to seem dreamlike, which was in reference to Where the Wild Things Are. This color worked well because it seemed like a toy-store blue, which helped convey a sense of nostalgia.

After designing much of the gallery space, I began creating the “action figures”. Creating these figures also helped reinforce the nostalgic environment I was creating for the psychological aspect of the exhibition. I based two of the figures off existing Pride fighters, Kazushi Sakuraba and Quinton “Rampage” Jackson. The third figure was modeled as a sleeping referee; it was the iconic figure based on the sleeping creature from the cover of Where the Wild Things Are (Plate 12). It was my intention early on to create a replica of the Pride ring for the action figures; however I eventually chose to build it out of cardboard, as it seemed more like a child’s building material. At this point I came up with the idea to create a room which represented Max’s dream of the island jungle where he is
king of the wild things. I decided to represent this idea as a cardboard jungle of sorts, a playground. I designed the space so that it would have an elevated floor and a drop ceiling, adding to the scale of a somewhat surrealistic children’s world (Plate 13).

The room was covered in cardboard sheets from floor to ceiling, with a series of three burlap Pride fighting paintings; featuring Lego replica images (Plate 14). There was also a series of seated paper cast figures seemingly emerging from the walls as spectators (Plate 15). In addition, the room featured a paper cast ring card girl (Plate 16), cardboard cameras, which acted as lighting for the space, and a series of slide viewers. The slide viewers featured recreated illustrations of *Where the Wild Things Are*, blended with Pride fight imagery, to make a formal comparison of the two opposites (Plates 17 & 18). This room as a whole was meant to seem like a conjured up fantasy world, with materials and aesthetic that would seem as though a child had created the space. The room was representational of the island of the Wild Things in the sense that it was a playground. In Max’s world it was an island filled with palm trees and creatures, whereas in my representation, the world was more like a attic space crossed with a broadcast venue for filming Pride fights, peopled with action figures. The action figures were the representation of the Wild Things. Whereas in the book, Max controls the wild things as King, my character controlled the action figures much
like a puppet master. This notion of being in control and playing God is the idea that I was trying to portray so that I could compare it with otaku.

At the edge of this cardboard room were two doorways, a room to the right, and a room to the left. The first room on the right contained a bedroom set. The room was the same color of blue as the entrance and façade, meant to emphasize the dreaminess of the space. The bedroom set was made up of a dresser, a floor lamp, and a bed; the emphasis was on the bed and the window just above it. The bed had a hole cut through it and within it water and a toy ship were placed (Plate 19). This was meant to represent the first act of Where the Wild Things Are, which symbolizes Max’s fantasy and the beginning of a dream. The ship added to the notion of a journey, and indicated the need to indulge in a fantasy world. The ship also pointed the way out of the room, acting like a marker to help guide the viewer through the installation. The ship and water went hand-in-hand to make it seem like a metaphor for a wet dream, an indicator of coming of age, which is a notion that is also reinforced by the bed sheet stains. The dresser contained two Lego kits as well as a copy of Where the Wild Things Are. This allowed the viewers to make a direct connection to the story; it also added to the perception of this as a child’s room. To reference Pride fighting, I painted imagery on the base of the lamp, and I placed fight programs from actual events inside the dresser drawer. Both elements were subdued in this space, meant more as clues or puzzle
pieces. Only viewers who investigated the space thoroughly would find these elements and possibly make some further connection.

The last room of the exhibition contained a punching bag, as well as a blue wall box, and a life-size ship (Plates 20 & 21). The room was painted in an eggshell white and was intended to symbolize purity and awakening. The space was also meant to convey this notion, with its rather spacious and minimal aesthetic. This room was distinct in that it was a relief to walk into, as opposed to the rest of the exhibit which was rather claustrophobic, and at a child’s scale. The room was symbolically the third scene of Where the Wild Things Are, where Max grows tired and eventually returns home. The room was meant to represent growing up, being lost, off course, and needing our ship to steer us back in the right direction. The punching bag was meant to represent life and the struggles that we all encounter. The blue wall box was meant to seem as a toll booth, containing an assortment of Lego pieces and ticket stubs from the exhibition. The ship was built into the wall as though it magically penetrated the surface. The ship carried within it palm leaves, which added to the notion of awakening. Because the palms were the only natural elements, they made the viewer conscious of the world outside. This room, along with the rest of the exhibition, was meant be read as a whole. There was no object or body of work present here, it was all one and the same, an installation. This helped add to the perception of this as a living space rather than an art exhibit.
CONCLUSION

This exhibition opened January 2, 2007; reactions for Otaku Matsuri were mixed. Although there was a great buzz surrounding the exhibition, I found that it was difficult to get people coaxed into the experience of it. Many people enjoyed it as a surreal space, but without really grasping the narrative. I did find that utilizing the façade helped to pull in viewers. The mystery seemed to work well with the space. As source material, Where the Wild Things Are played very well. Many viewers instantly recognized it as a context for the exhibition, especially younger viewers. Older viewers and Japanese viewers had trouble; never really knowing the story or what it had to do with otaku or Pride Fighting. I did however, leave a copy of the book in the exhibition so people could refresh their memories or discover it for the first time.

Other confusions existed because people didn't know what Pride Fighting or MMA was. They seemed to think that it was boxing or professional wrestling. Because of this confusion, some viewers got hung up on what it had to do with the rest of the exhibition. The slide viewers were placed in the exhibition to mitigate this dilemma; however, the problem with this was that the slide viewers were underused, and people didn't seem to realize how to turn them on, or that they were allowed to interact with the work. I have never liked instructional narrative in terms of dealing with art. My view going in to the exhibition was to take it or leave it. I like the idea of people discovering something without being told; it
makes the experience much more potent. I continue to believe in uninstructed viewing even while being mildly frustrated by some misinterpretations of the exhibition.

The other concern with the exhibition was in regard to the viewer’s room-to-room path. There was a bit of confusion as to the order in which the viewers were supposed to navigate the spaces. I had several viewers comment on this dilemma. Many liked the fact that they weren’t forced to view the show in any particular order. They seemed to think that this open-ended quality added to the dreamlike ambiance of the installation, much the same way as dreams, which don’t operate chronologically. In the end I would have to agree with that assessment, I felt that given the imagery of the rooms and the puzzle pieces therein, that the exhibition was capable of being decoded regardless of viewing order. What it came down to was the viewer’s ability to slow down and observe. In this area I felt that the show was successful. Like a whirlpool of obsession, I had many repeat viewers who kept being drawn back into the exhibition, some looking for new clues, and others just enjoying the solitude of the space.
29'-8" (~ 9')

Glass Window

KEY

- 8' wall
- 4' wall
- 2' wall

Edison Outlet (floor)
Edison Outlet (concealed)
Track Lighting

ALL WALLS ARE 14' TALL

COMMONS GALLERY

University of Hawai'i Art Department
show: date scale

designer:

1/4"
Plate 3
Plate 6
Plate 8
Plate 9
Plate 16