

ARTFORUM

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Key Hiraga, *The Elegant Life of Mr. H*, 1970, oil on canvas, 17 7/8 x 15".

Key Hiraga

ORTUZAR PROJECTS

In the work of Key Hiraga (1936–2000), which slid from black line drawings into barking Day-Glo paintings, the human body is the key. Hiraga, who was raised outside of Tokyo, might have been under Dubuffet's sway—particularly in how the Frenchman rendered his famous tomato-splat heads and bodies of the 1950s. By the mid-'60s, Hiraga's paintings became less illustrative. And in 1967, he developed a character: a small man with a bowler hat and Brobdingnagian penis who often appears floating around worlds dominated by ecstatic colors and patterns. The figure is like a Japanese analogue to cartoonist Ralph Steadman's frenetically wrought, Baconesque men and women. Hiraga was loosely associated with the *Buraiha* (or "unreliable") collective of Japanese writers, who saw dissolution and pleasure as ways out of the asceticism and dreariness of the postwar period, a path away from the West. Yet Hiraga's connection to the *Buraiha* was more of a resonant vibration than a definitive vote, as he had nothing explicitly against such influences. His inclusion in the traveling group show "The New Japanese Painting and Sculpture," which opened at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1966, was a major turning point in his career. He also lived in Paris from 1964 to 1974, the period during which most of the art in this exhibition was made.

The artist's bowler man served as the grommet that held together this proper pinwheel of a show. Hiraga called him Mr. K and Mr. H—a coalescent being with a vast erotic appetite that absorbs other bodies. In several paintings, each titled either *The Elegant Life of Mr. H* or *The Elegant Life of Mr. K*, the polymorphous subject is rather tubelike. One canvas from 1970 depicts a squatting Mr. H, all pipey arms and legs. He's outfitted in orange and pink stripes, fishnets, and a garter belt. His long, girthy nose is sheathed in a lavender condom. He's holding another rubber—a gargantuan thing that looks like a dying eel—while fucking someone from behind. In another portrait of him, this time from 1972, he is considerably less gangly and comprises two separate anatomies, male and female. A body without organs? Or is he one enormous, throbbing organ—an endless erogenous zone? The colors hover near blue and pink, slightly less queasy but entirely visceral. In another acrylic from 1972, Mr. H seems to be a sort of crenellated Blue Meanie. Breasts, severed arteries, and a razor blade are placed in peaceful order, like the fresco on a demented mosque. The effect is of *Zap Comix* abstracted and pumped through a pasta stretcher. The figures contain wombs (or are they ovaries?), breasts for sure, and a lovely fine-lined wavy blue hair that recurs in other tableaux.

Hiraga's shaggy anxiety seemed to cool at one point in this show. *Rose and Candy II*, 1978, reaches a visual resting place. It's a single-genital symbol, a woman with no pants raising her tits under a sweater and licking a Popsicle: a sexist cliché, as were a lot of countercultural products at the time (including *Zap Comix*). Hiraga eventually worked his way into traditional Japanese iconography, using images from nineteenth-century wood-block prints. In *Piggyback*, 1981, a woman painted with a ukiyo-e grimace and an orange coiffure is riding a man's shoulders. She seems to be fusing into him, and the characters loop into each other, turning gender into both a question and an irrelevance.

If you wonder where the works of Heinz Edelman, Philip Guston, Richard Lindner, Robert Risko, and S. Clay Wilson intersect, it might be in the art of Hiraga, whose lurid corporeal twang amplifies and recontextualizes the images of many of his contemporaries.

— Sasha Frere-Jones