

The Birth of POI

Kyoko Sato, Independent Curator

Poi was born from the darkness. In 2012, Poi appeared in the dreams of artist Yusuke Ochiai. The ears were long like that of a rabbit and gazed at him. He conveyed without using words the following; "Just do it. Believe in yourself. Do not give up." and "I love you." Poi came to Ochiai to teach "love." The next day, Ochiai drew the figure of Poi on canvas. It was at this moment that Poi was born into this world.



Happiness, 2015



Hope, 2017

The simple appearance of Poi reminds me of the infant Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. There is a legend that, when Buddha was born, he walked seven steps and said "Holy am I alone throughout heaven and earth" with his right hand pointing to heaven and his left hand pointing to earth. Buddha walked seven steps, but Poi has more energy and jumps instead (*see paintings "Happiness", 2015 & 2016, and "SunRise*

12 + 1", 2014.) Also, in the "Hope" series, the left palm points to the sky, and the right hand turns to the ground. It appears to be trying to grab both sides. It is similar to the figure of infant Buddha at birth. (*See sculpture "Hope", 2017.*)

The direct interpretation of Buddha's words is that he is the sole precious existence in the world, but generally, it is interpreted that we all are born to be precious entities. We are all unique in this world since our birth, and there is a meaning as to why we are born. In turn, each person searches for their role to play in life. Those who understand their role and follow them shall truly be happy and lead a successful life.

Buddha appeared in this world to lead innumerable people, and in the same way, Poi appeared to lead Ochiai. For this reason, he was

drawn on the canvas and became a sculpture so that he can be shared with many people. Poi became art to spread love and make people happy.

Speaking of love, we should not forget about the beauty of sex. The painting "*SunRise 12 + 1*" expresses this theme. Women have been represented in the form of goddesses who give birth to all things since ancient times. Examples, such as the Greek Goddess Aphrodite, and Egyptian Goddess Isis and Hathor, show how many different civilizations connected goddesses with fertility. In the aforementioned painting, Poi was born from twelve goddesses. And of course, he also implies the nature of sexual pleasure. The title "*12 + 1*" refers to the twelve goddesses and their progeny Poi, together, they add up to 13, which for some is a number associated with myth and spirituality.



Headbanging into the toilet, 2014

Poi shares pleasure with Ochiai using color. When Ochiai was a child, he was fascinated by the vivid blue color of toilet detergent, and proceeded to dip his head into the colored water. In a separate occasion, he even proceeded to paint his own body with this blue colored liquid. He fell in love with such beautiful colors and the feeling they gave him urged him to absorb such colors into his body. "*Headbanging into the toilet*" and "*Painting myself*", 2014 (two other new paintings of this series are included in this exhibition) are based on that experience and express how Poi enjoyed and absorbed these magic colors.

Poi also ventures out into the streets of New York, searching for the place where he belongs. He transformed into a series of miniature sculptures, and found various spots on traffic lights, fences, the street, and in the hearts of many people. It is similar to the concept of *Jizo* statues that are seen on the streets of Japan. *Jizo* Bodhisattva is a deity whose role is to protect people until the appearance of *Maitreya* Bodhisattva 5.7 billion years after Buddha's death. Similar to this, Poi was placed on the street to watch over people and help them to achieve happiness.

Poi's appearance draws from a long line of cute characters in Japanese pop culture, also known as *kawaii*. For example, The 'God of Manga' Osamu Tezuka (b. 1928-1989) is famous for creating the first cartoon in Japan, *Mighty Atom*, or *Astro Boy*, which was produced in 1951. A few more notable mentions are *Hello Kitty* from the Sanrio Company created in 1974, Hayao Miyazaki's animated film "*My Neighbor Totoro*" produced in 1988 and more recently, the cute character *Funassyi*, who appeared as the official mascot for Funabashi City, Chiba Prefecture in 2011. Ochiai's Poi was born out of this tradition of Japanese character culture. Poi has a very cute, funny appearance, and resembles a rabbit, with a whiskered beard similar to that of a middle-aged person.

The existence of these characters is not limited to Japan. Characters in literature have fascinated us throughout history and we see the need to empathize with them and incorporate them into our daily lives. It can be said that what is unique to Japan are its cute characters which have been expressed in a somewhat primitive but *kawaii* or *cute* style and as a result, are easy for children as well as adults to accept.

Poi was born from the mind of an artist as a messenger of "love" and became artwork. Artworks are created by an artist, but are meant to be shared with others and hence change from being personal to universal. Poi had to become art for that reason. I hope the myriad of people who view Poi will feel the love he represents, realize the source of their own happiness, discover their reason for being and receive the courage to pursue their purpose of life.