

## Art For Tots: Misaki Kawai Dreams Up a Sculptural Wonderground For the Children's Museum of the Arts in SoHo

Email

Print

Save

Like 1

Tweet 0

+1 0

Pin it

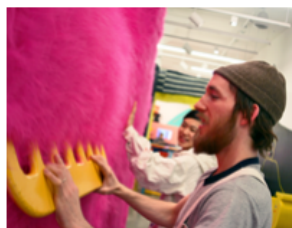


Photo © Kyle Chayka

Misaki Kawai at the Children's Museum of the Arts

by Kyle Chayka

Published: March 16, 2012



Combing the giant, fuzzy pink dog / Photo © Kyle Chayka

Japanese artist **Misaki Kawai**, best known for her childlike drawings of goofy characters, cartoon animals, and anthropomorphized objects, looked very much at home on Tuesday in a paint-splattered jumpsuit standing next to a giant, fuzzy pink dog twice her height. She had just finished grooming the creature, part of her installation "Love From Mt. Pom Pom" at New York's **Children's Museum of the Arts (CMA)**, with an oversized wooden comb.

The CMA was founded in 1988 with the aim of inspiring and supporting the next generation of artists. As in, artistically precocious children. In October of last year, it moved into a new, 10,000-square-foot space in SoHo. Kawai's new installation is the largest solo exhibition that CMA has ever shown, filling the institution's central gallery with a menagerie of creatures great and small. This delightful circus ranges from the abovementioned unmissable dog to smiling banana-stools, snake-tables, and floor-to-ceiling, cardboard-and-paint figures whom curator **Prescott Trudeau** refers to as "yoga gymnastics dudes." (Kawai pointed out their sweatbands.)

Energetic and unpretentious, "Mt. Pom Pom" provides a perfect centerpiece for a museum devoted to kids, but the project is also in keeping with Kawai's personal sensibilities. It is, in other words, a perfect fit. In a temporary studio at the Woolworth Building, Kawai worked with a team of volunteers that included local children to complete the objects in the show. "Their wobbly hands were great for me," she said, laughing.

The artist's rough, faux-naif style follows an aesthetic called "heta-uma," a Japanese term that Kawai translates as "bad technique, good sense." Pioneered by the Japanese graphic designer **King Terry**, heta-uma is characterized by the rough lines, deliberately awkward shapes, and twisted poses, all themes that are visible throughout the CMA installation.

Trudeau, the small museum's only full-time curator, explained that he chooses artists to work with based on their ability to appeal to a variety of audiences — the most important, of course, being the very young — and to create installations that can stand up to the abuse of daily activity. "The mission of the museum is to make art more accessible for children," he noted. "Our galleries are unique because when you're exhibiting here you have to expect that the art is going to get looked at and experienced in a different way than anywhere else." In Kawai's case, the art will get jumped around, sat on, and even worn, with a selection of fanciful costumes available for kids (of any age) to try on.

The Children's Museum boasts a permanent collection of 2,000 pieces of art, mostly works on paper, all made by children, ranging throughout the 20th century. It is also an active space for art-making, with two studios, a media lab, a sound booth, a ball pit — yes, a ball pit! — and a daily schedule of storytelling sessions and art activities, led by local teaching artists. The entire museum is participatory in nature, privileging the power of creativity over art's ability to overwhelm and awe. "It's about the process, not the results," pointed out the museum's early childhood center director **Tom Burnett**.

Back in the main gallery, Kawai continued grooming the big dog, enthusiastically swiping at its fur alongside husband **Justin Waldron**. "What is it?" one visiting mother asked, a perplexed expression crossing her face. Kawai looked up at the creature and grinned. "Hmm, I wonder. What do you think it is?"

***"Love From Mt. Pom Pom" runs at the New York Children's Museum of the Arts through June 10***