

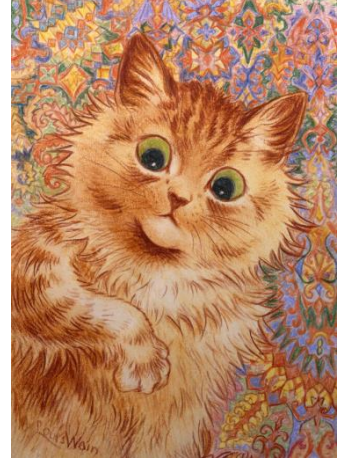


CUTE

An exhibition exploring the irresistible rise of cuteness

25 January – 14 April 2024

PRESS RELEASE



Ram Han, *Save our souls_02 (seal)*, 2022. Copyright Ram Han, Whistle; Xiuching Tsay, *Drunken Gravity*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist; Louis Wain, *Ginger Cat*, 1931. Courtesy of Bethlem Museum of the Mind

Embankment Galleries, South Wing

General admission £18.50 (concessions, child and family tickets also available), half-price tickets for 25s and under on select Tuesdays

Tickets on-sale now via somersethouse.org.uk

Opening January 2024, Somerset House presents CUTE, a major new landmark exhibition exploring the irresistible force of cuteness in contemporary culture. From emojis to internet memes, video games to plushie toys, food to loveable robotic design, cuteness has taken over our world. But how has something so charming and seemingly harmless – adorable, doe-eyed animals, chubby-cheeked babies, flowers, hearts, stars, sweets and other such romantic motifs – gained such traction?

CUTE brings together contemporary artworks, including several new artist commissions, and cultural phenomena such as music, fashion, toys, video games and social media, in this brand-new show examining the world's embrace of cute culture and how it has become such an influential measure of our times. It will seek to unravel cuteness' emotive charge, revealing its extraordinary and complex power and potential.

Presented in partnership with Sanrio, the exhibition will also celebrate the 50th anniversary of one of cute's most iconic and ubiquitous figures, Hello Kitty, featuring a dedicated plushie space, immersive disco and display of Hello Kitty products throughout the decades, including rare and unique items.

Contributing artists announced so far include AYA TAKANO, Mike Kelley, Karen Kilimnik, Nayland Blake, Cosima von Bonin, Hannah Diamond, Ed Fornieles, Juliana Huxtable, Rachel Maclean, Julien Ceccaldi, Paige K. B., Isaac Lythgoe, Alake Shilling, Wong Ping, Liv Preston, Ram Han, Maggie Lee, Bunny Rogers, Andy Holden, plus Somerset House Studios artists Chris Zhongtian Yuan and Sian Fan.

EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHTS

Cute's Cat Avatar and Kawaii

The exhibition's introduction to the culture of cute opens with a celebration of the cat. Riffing off a quote from Tim Berners Lee, the inventor of the world wide web, who when asked to name one use of the internet that he did not

anticipate and answered with a single word - "kittens", visitors are invited to explore how cats have been at the forefront of cute's march to global domination.

Here, visitors can encounter Louis Wain's famous depictions of cats from the late 19th to early 20th century, which marked a shift in public perception of cats as working animals to lovable pets with very human characteristics; Harry Pointer's *The Brighton Cats* series of small postcards from the 1870s, which allowed cuteness to proliferate and reach ever expanded audiences through the birth of photography and mass production techniques; as well as contemporary responses including Andy Holden's *Cat-tharsis*, consisting of over 300 feline figurines collected by the artist's late grandmother, a meditation on the role of cats in culture, and Karen Kilimnik's *The cat sitting in its favourite basket out in the blizzard, the Himalaya*, harking back to the tradition of Romantic painting, yet positioning itself within a renewed moment of cultural sincerity, which is the hallmark of cuteness today.

As part of its exploration of the early beginnings of cuteness, *CUTE* will also spotlight the development of kawaii culture. Featuring artefacts rarely exhibited in the UK, including printed materials, figurines, illustrated handkerchiefs, sketchbooks and more from the archive of the Yayoi Museum in Tokyo, *CUTE* charts kawaii's origins in the design of products from the 1910s to the 1950s geared towards schoolgirls and young women as consumers, which incorporated western motifs such as mushrooms and castles, and depicted a romanticised idea of girlhood. *CUTE* also foregrounds the rise of Japan's female illustrators of the 1960s, who challenged the innocent cuteness expressed by their male predecessors, adding elements of fun and flirtation to their work. Artists featured will include Yumeji Takehisa, Kaichi Kobayashi, Katsudi Matsumoto, Junichi Nakahara, Rune Naito, Macoto Takahashi, Setsuko Tamura, and Ado Mizumori.

Continuing forward to the 80s and 90s, *CUTE* will touch on the cross-contamination of culture from Japan with those of the US and UK, coalescing around a display of a girl's bedroom, complete with posters, magazines, clothing and toys. Here, visitors will be introduced to the ways cute begins to take on a darker more critical tone, as evidenced by musicians such as Jun Togowa, as well as Courtney Love's band Hole, and Babes in Toyland.

Hello Kitty's 50th anniversary

Bringing us up to the end of the twentieth century will be queen of cute herself: Hello Kitty. This space will be dedicated to her in celebration of her worldwide popularity and unique ability to be familiar and appealing, yet cool and complex. Visitors will be invited to immerse themselves in a complete Hello Kitty environment with a dedicated plushie space featuring the collection of super fan Amy-Louise Allen and a Hello Kitty disco, complete with mirror ball.

Those taking to the dancefloor can enjoy a DJ playlist, curated by American musician and producer David Gamson (formerly of pop band *Scritti Politti*), featuring the sweetest, shimmering pop and disco from the 60s, 70s and 80s, from *The Archies* to *Olivia Newton-John*, *Donna Summer* to *The Human League*, which prefigures the electronic dance music of today's producers who draw on the perfect precision and sparkling electronica of their forbears to create their own hyper-cute dance-pop sound.

CUTE commissions and contemporary artworks

The exhibition's main focus will centre around works by a selection of intergenerational artists. This will include artists whose work mined cuteness toward the end of the twentieth century as a way to explore their own experiences and subjectivities, and those who have grown up with the internet, cute's natural home, who now harness the aesthetic to explore a multitude of emotional and experimental registers; desire and longing, memory and space, ecology and capitalism, difference and belonging.

Highlights include Japanese artist AYA TAKANO's ethereal painting *The Galaxy Inside, 2015*, which depicts androgynous, large eyed-waifs suspended in a space which transcends reality, gravity and its restraints, constructing an alternative universe with a kinder, softer civilisation; Scottish artist Rachel Maclean's 2021 mixed-media work *!step on no petS Step on no pets!*, which presents notes of unease and uncanniness in a twisted fairytale world, where images synonymous with sweetness and innocence disguise a darker story beneath; Nayland Blake's *The Little One* explores the duality of the 'bunny', as a doll seen as cuddly and warm, but as an animal, seen as sexual, wild and fast moving, in a work which addresses the artist's own identity as a non-binary multi-racial artist; and Seoul-based digital artist Ram Han's works from her *Save our souls* series, which draws on her childhood memories of growing up

in the cute-saturated landscape of Korea, cut through with her darker experiences of subcultural media, to create lurid digital imagescapes.

Popular objects, materials and memes drawn from cute's pop cultural landscape will punctuate the space between contemporary artworks. *CUTE* seeks to unlock routes into the understanding of cute's dynamic through five key themes - Cry Baby, Play Together, Monstrous Other, Sugar-Coated Pill and Hypersonic.

Each cluster will be accompanied by a short film commission by visual artist Bart Seng Wen Long, capturing how subgenres of cute manifest in contemporary culture today, from gaming, internet memes and viral TikTok trends, to music videos, Instagram filters and more.

Crybaby unpicks how cuteness often appears helpless and vulnerable, pulling at our heartstrings and encouraging us to have tender feelings towards it. Exhibits demonstrate the powerful attraction of this aesthetic, from Margaret Keane's popular depictions of weeping waifs and strays, to crying figurines and toys, such as Susie Sad Eyes dolls, as well as products from the kawaii culture of Yami or 'Sickly Cute', and 'Crying Make-Up' Tik Tok tutorials.

Touching on cuteness's inherent playfulness, Play Together, will showcase how, by inviting us to become childlike again, cuteness can provide a sanctuary from life's anxieties and encourage a sense of belonging and community, sharing and empathy. Visitors will see artefacts and memorabilia from games such as Animal Crossing, classic toys including Tamagotchi and Sylvanian Families, and fandoms such as the My Little Pony's adult-based Brony fan group.

Monstrous Other addresses cute's darker side. Cute's ability to shapeshift between opposites such as old and young, ugly and adorable, masculine and feminine, human and unhuman has enabled it to slip easily into the realms of the uncanny and the grotesque. On display will be objects including robotic pets, popular toys such as Furby, characters including Gloomy Bear and Sumikko Gurashi, and film franchises like Gremlins, alongside fashion from Japan's Gothic Lolita sub-cultural fashion community.

Sugar-Coated Pill looks at how cuteness is often used to soften the unpalatable. From far-right extremists to Big Pharma, cuteness has been co-opted in propaganda machines to disguise and control its messaging. But cuteness is also used as a form of critique. As well as images of far-right propaganda and cuddly toys produced by pharmaceutical companies to market their products, on display will be artefacts from activist groups such as the Russian art collective Pussy Riot, who subvert cuteness to protest against Putin's regime, as well as cuddly plushies of weapons of mass destruction from video games such as Portal.

Hypersonic sees post-internet cuteness take on its most exuberant form. In today's globally connected, hyper-capitalistic world, cuteness has become accelerated, maximalist, super glossy and futuristic. This section will feature works from artists and designers such as Super Nhozagri Kingdom, Xiuching Tsay and MSCHF which reflect this shiny new confidence and point towards cuteness' radical potential to help us find new ways of being human.

Hannah Diamond

In a new commission, multidisciplinary artist Hannah Diamond presents an immersive visual and sonic music installation, inspired by a girl's sleepover, featuring a curated collection of videos from the likes of *SOPHIE*, *Charli XCX*, *A.G. Cook*, *GFOTY*, *Kyary Pamyu Pamyu*, *felicita* and more, as well as from Diamond herself. Diamond brings her own affirmative vision of hyper pink girlhood to showcase the best of the super cute electronic dance music, which centred around the now-defunct *PC Music* record label and music collective.

Games arcade

A video games arcade curated by *Now Play This* Producer Nick Murray will adjoin Diamond's installation space. The arcade will showcase ways artists and independent game designers use cuteness to evoke feelings of joy, excitement and nostalgia, as well as tackle unexpected subjects unflinchingly. Games available to play will include Peachy Keen Games' *Calico*, where the player is tasked with re-building a town's cat café and fill it with cute and cuddly creatures and Cantusmori's *Froggy Pot*, a poignant visual novel where the player must help a character dressed in a frog onesie, suffering from depression, out of a boiling pot of water.

Exhibition design

The exhibition is designed by award-winning architects AOC Architecture, with internationally renowned stage designer Chloe Lamford, and graphic design by Graphic Thought Facility.

Catalogue

CUTE will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with essays by internationally respected cute scholar Joshua Paul Dale, professor in the Department of English Literature and Culture at Chuo University in Tokyo, Isabel Galleymore, poet and Lecturer in Creative Writing at University of Birmingham, and writer and art critic Gabriella Pounds. The book is designed by Graphic Thought Facility.

Further exhibition details and accompanying public programme to be announced.

CUTE is curated by Claire Catterall, Senior Curator at Somerset House.

NOTES TO EDITORS

Dates: 25 January – 14 April 2024

Tickets: General admission £18.50 (concessions, child and family tickets also available), half-price tickets for 25s and under on select Tuesdays

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ABOUT SOMERSET HOUSE

Step Inside, Think Outside

As the home of cultural innovators, Somerset House is a site of origination, with a cultural programme offering alternative perspectives on the biggest issues of our time. We are a place of joy and discovery, where everyone is invited to Step Inside and Think Outside.

From our historic site in the heart of London, we work globally across art, creativity, business, and non-profit, nurturing new talent, methods and technologies. Our resident community of creative enterprises, arts organisations, artists and makers, makes us a centre of ideas, with most of our programme home-grown.

We sit at the meeting point of artistic and social innovation, bringing worlds and minds together to create surprising and often magical results. Our spirit of constant curiosity and counter perspective is integral to our history and key to our future.

ABOUT SANRIO

Sanrio is the global lifestyle brand best known for Hello Kitty who was created in 1974, and home to many other beloved character brands such as My Melody, Kuromi, LittleTwinStars, Cinnamoroll, Pompompurin, gudetama, Aggretsuko, Chococat, Bad Badtz-Maru and Kerokerokeroppi. Sanrio was founded on the philosophy that a small gift can bring happiness and friendship to people of all ages. Since 1960, this philosophy has served as the inspiration to offer quality products, services and activities that promote communication and inspire unique consumer experiences across the world. Today, Sanrio's business extends into the entertainment industry with several content series, gaming offerings and theme parks. Sanrio boasts an extensive product lineup which is available in over 130 countries. Sanrio hopes to bring smiles to everyone's faces with their vision of "One World, Connecting Smiles."

To learn more about Sanrio, please visit www.sanrio.eu and follow on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.