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Soar Into the Creation of yoshitoshi ABe's Latest Work of Art 'Haibane Renmei'

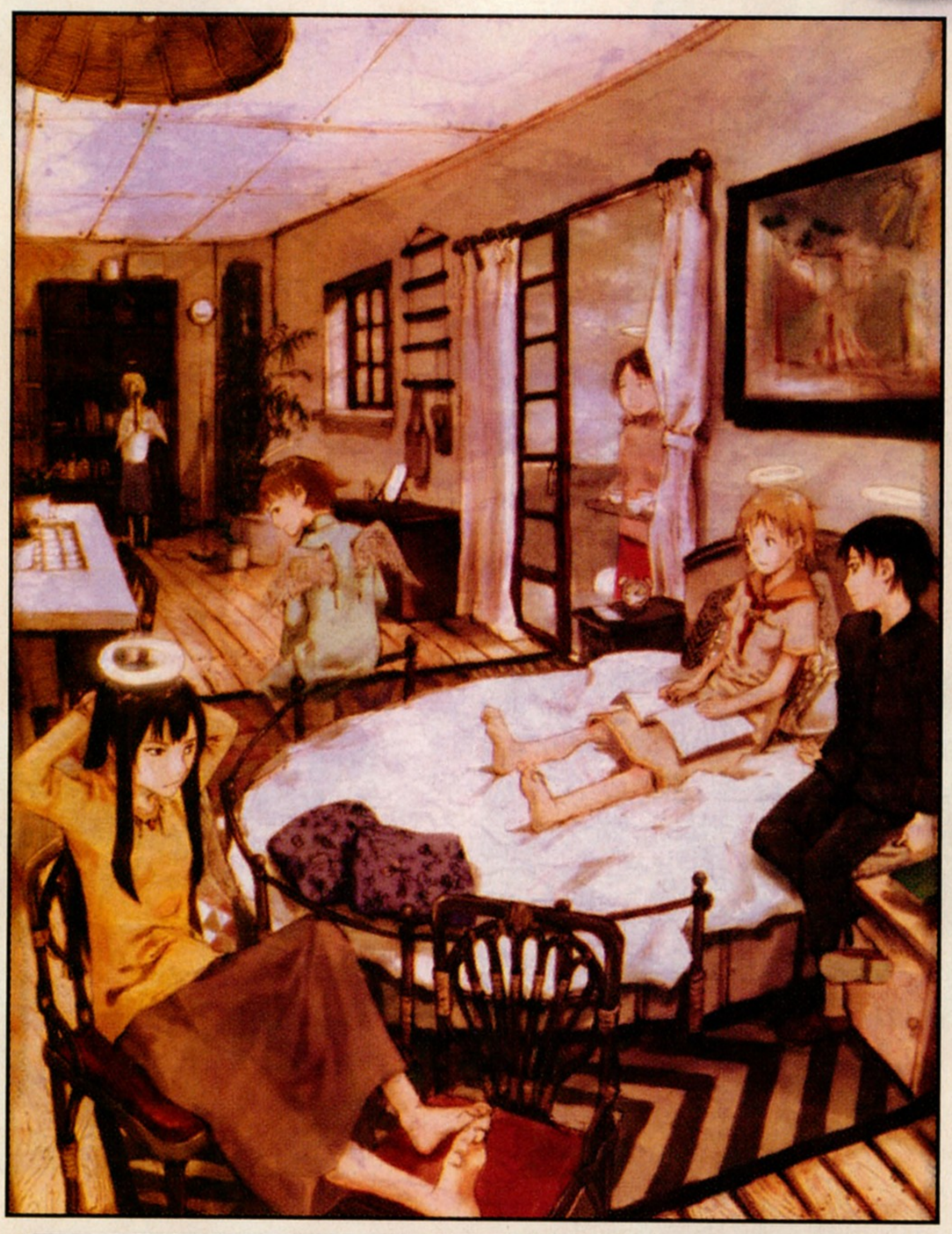
By Robert Bricken

When your friends who've failed to appreciate anime complain that each series looks alike, force them to look at the works of yoshitoshi ABe. Then have them apologize, for his artwork is as distinctive as a group of young angels living amongst men.

Perhaps more of a designer than a manga artist, ABe got his start creating doujinshi (non-professional, fan-made manga) and designing video games in the 1990s. His breakthrough came when producers saw his website and asked him to design their anime and videogame series—which became *Serial Experiments Lain*, the dark story of a girl descending into a technological world. As ABe became a revered anime celebrity, Lain was followed by the "fluffier" series *NieA_7* (pronounced "knee-uh under seven"). Now, his newest creation, *Haibane Renmei*, has come to America on DVD from Pioneer.

Renmei, originally one of ABe's doujinshi, is a charming tale of young children mysteriously born anew with wings and halos. It's a somber story yet sometimes deceptively light in tone—an interesting middle-ground between *Lain* and *NieA_7*. After captivating Japanese audiences last winter, Pioneer was eager to license it for America.

When we interviewed the 33-year-old ABe, he was soft-spoken, casually dressed in a T-shirt and slacks—an appearance that belies a mind that created such imaginative works. ABe was happy to discuss each piece, but wants the fans to interpret his art for themselves, and not limit their experience to his own meanings.



THE BEGINNING "*Haibane Renmei* was made in a very experimental way. We started the project without planning the story or the characters. It was very ad-libbed," says ABe, looking at his cover to the doujinshi. "When this drawing was made, the only thing that existed was a description of this room. Kuu's character doesn't have the same look as you see over there or the same costume or anything else. I just realized, but Reki is barefoot. As you can see here, some are wearing shoes, some are not, so at this point I hadn't decided about the shoe thing."

ANIME INSIDER: Let's get the obvious question out of the way. Why do you capitalize your name "yoshitoshi ABe?"

yoshitoshi ABe: I started using a computer way back in 1990, and my online name was AB. Thus ABe.

Fair enough. So where did *Haibane Renmei* come from?

From where all my stories comes from; my own subconscious.

Do you find a lot of angels in your subconscious?

Actually, in my opinion they aren't angels. They are Haibane...the Japanese characters [the kanji] for "hai" means "ash", while "bane" means "wings", so they're really "ash-wings." They have nothing to do with angels that are associated with Christianity.

The segment where Rakka so painfully develops her wings certainly didn't seem divine.

The pain of the wings is a symbol for losing the past, and being reborn into the new world. It also indicates that they have a special existence in that world.

So if they're not traditional angels, is there any kind of religious statement in *Haibane Renmei*?

I neither accept nor deny any kind of religion. I feel that it's okay for anyone to have their own beliefs. I do not believe in one particular religion myself, but I do think that God should exist. But I think that religion is based on each and

everyone's own experiences. And *Haibane Renmei* reflects my own religious philosophy and ethics on birth and life after death.

But Christian art must have influenced the design.

I wasn't specifically conscious of Christianity itself. *Haibane Renmei* has angel-like beings as the basis of the theme, so there a lot of Christian aspects around it, but specifically I didn't specify any religion in the anime. So therefore, during the show when you see other statues or altars, they kept them indeterminable in terms of what religion they belong to. There is a sense of a spiritual issue, of course, and there is a concept of God, but no specific one. I'm not against Christianity.

Understood. Does *Haibane Renmei* have a moral, then?

I'm not sure how to answer. What I want my viewers to feel or know should already exist in my work. It doesn't have to be explained by me.

Then you must want the viewers to feel at least a little melancholy. Both the story and the art style are very muted.

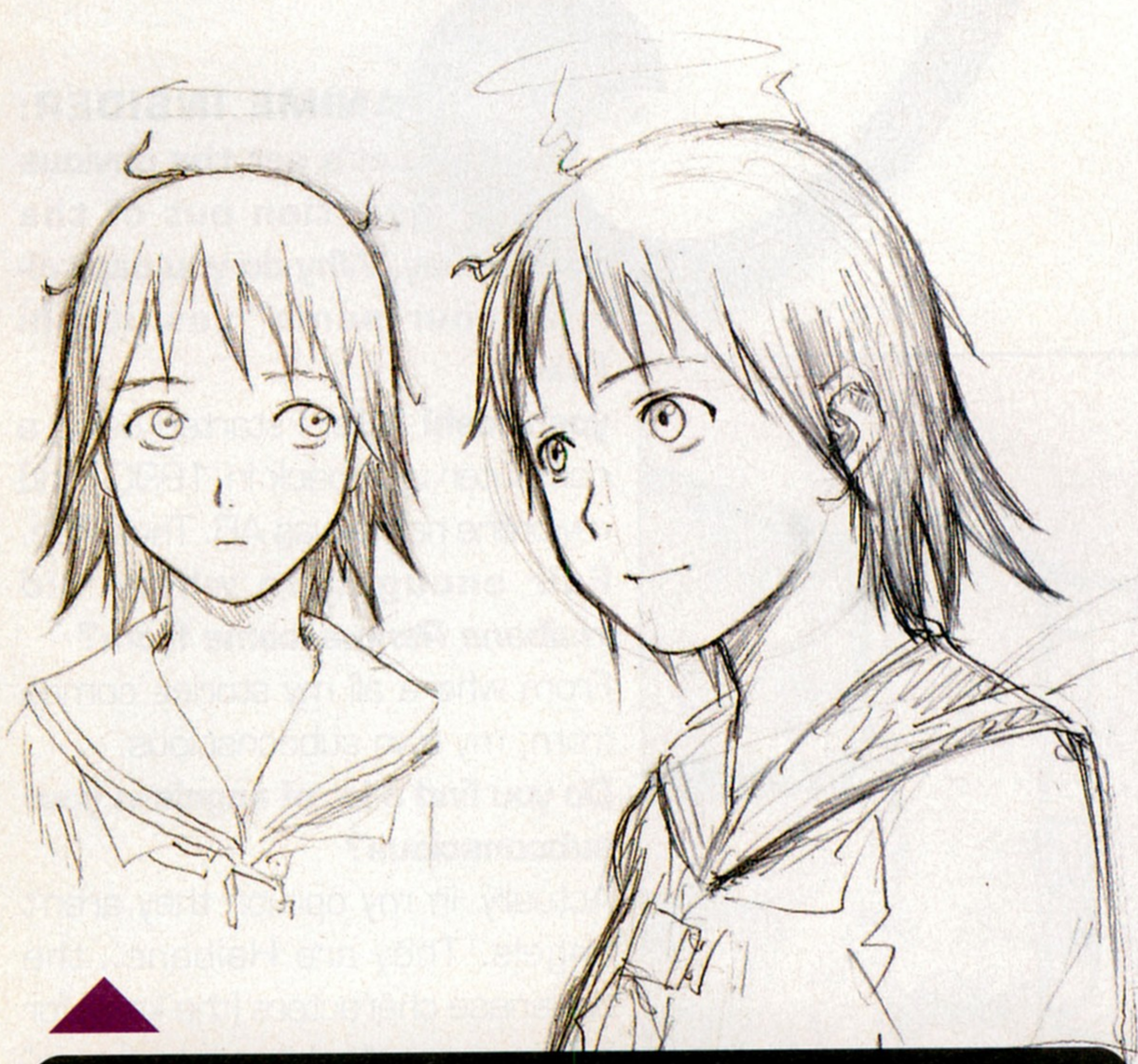
That just happens to be my preference. I don't like anything too bright.

How do you feel about fans calling you an anime "auteur?"

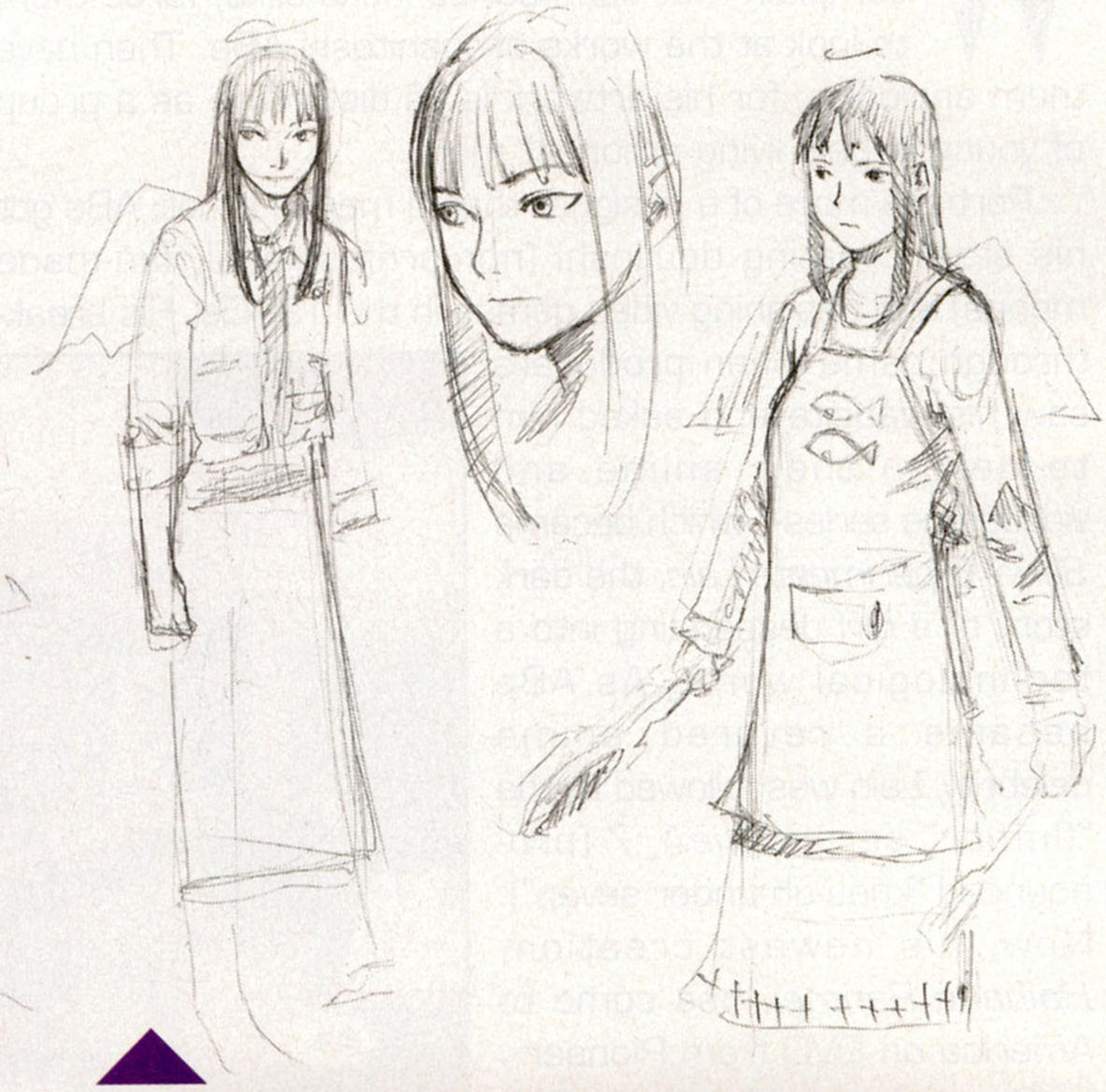
I don't think what I create is "art." I think it's more of an illustration. Maybe they like to call me an auteur because I went to art school. The only difference between me and other artists is that while manga is often constructed as [a straight visual representation] by most people, I try to use drawings as [composed pictures]. That's the only difference.

You once said that drawing was a kind of therapy for you. How so?

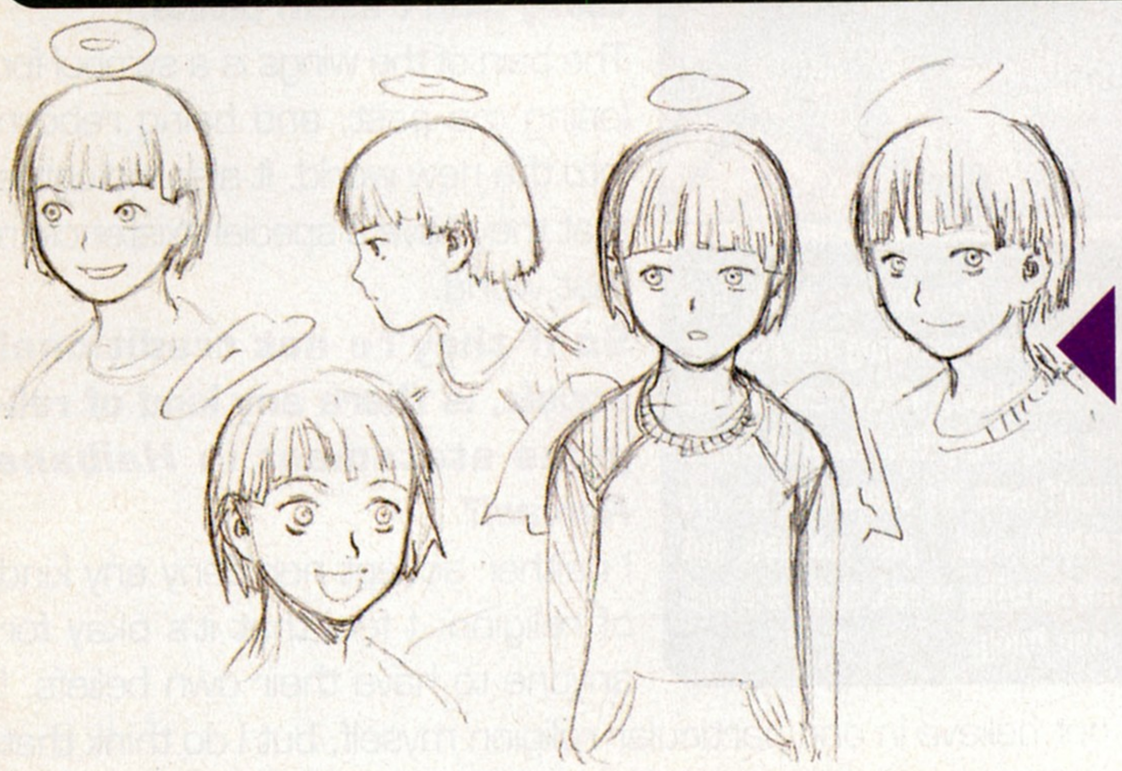
When I draw a line, or color the pictures, I can tell that my inner thoughts or my feelings come out on paper. By recognizing what you feel inside by seeing it for yourself, I assume that could be therapeutic to anybody.



RAKKA Rakka is the main character of *Haibane Renmei*. The first episode starts with her birth from a giant egg. As she explores the world of the Haibane, so do the viewers. "It was actually very difficult to develop the main character Rakka," says ABe. "Since she essentially started as a blank slate, it took her the longest time to really truly develop as a character. A lot of the character design came about spontaneously as I was going through this ad-lib process. I added her static-electricity hair as an after-thought."



REIKI TAKES CHARGE Like any ABe series, there's more going on below the surface. "At the very beginning, Reiki took on the role of being the leader who takes care of the group," says ABe about the girl who informs Rakka–and the viewers–about the Haibane's world. "Later on, the reasons why she's behaving this way are revealed–she's atoning for unspecific sins. If there's anything behind her constant smoking, she may feel uncomfortable being praised and being looked upon as good, when she feels she's just trying to live or exist. So, perhaps maybe there's a subconscious desire in her to express that she's uncomfortable being looked upon as good."



KUU GETS PERSONALITY With no set characters from the beginning, they evolved over time. "Kuu changed the most from the beginning of the anime to the end," reveals ABe. "In the doujinshi, Kuu had no lines, so it's definitely a big difference in the anime. At the beginning I really didn't know how the character fit into the scheme of things and he didn't even have a whole personality. I originally imagined him as much more of a mature character–but while we were devising the anime, he started taking on the role of being one of the youngest."

From the Director of *Metropolis* and *X: The Movie*

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How is it that your designs for *Haibane*, *Lain* and *NieA_7* stand out as so different from the average anime?

In Japan, I am known more as an artist whose character designs are rather simple and don't stand out too much. For some reason, I get these comments that they are unique every so often, but there is no one single character that I have created that seems to stand out. Besides, each character comes from so many different ideas and meanings that they can't really be compared together.

Can you tell us about your newest project?

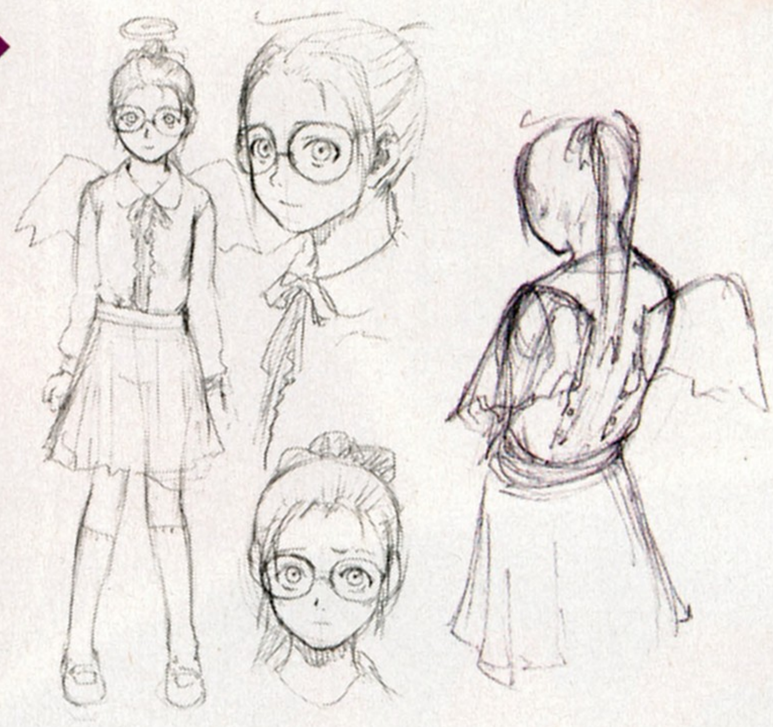
Currently, I am a character designer for the anime called *Texhnolyze* [about an armless boxer and clairvoyant girl in a dark, technological city; it's just been licensed by Pioneer Entertainment for a 2004 release]. After I am done with that, I would like to take a little rest and rejuvenate. I've been working non-stop recently.

All your series have very eclectic subjects. How do you choose them?

You know, I don't think my projects are eclectic; I just draw whatever I can. Plus, I hardly ever watch anime myself so I don't have normal ideas of what typical anime should be anyway.

Coincidentally, Managing Editor Robert Bricken's favorite song is "Angel" by Aerosmith. And he hatched from an egg.

MISSING HIKARI "Unfortunately, in the actual anime Hikari didn't get to have a really big part in it, but she's one of my favorite characters," admits ABe about this design sketch. "Her design relies a great deal on the animators to all of develop into all different details including the expression, or how her hair is, and different aspects of this particular character. The voice actress we used for Hikari both wear the same glasses, so that was a nice coincidence."



WINGING IT Viewers might notice a discrepancy in the Haibane's wing size. "The wings are supposed to be small, but the director asked to make them bigger to make a really strong impression when Rakka first gets born," confesses ABe. "I agreed, but when I saw them, they were much bigger than I envisioned. Even in my drawings, though, they vary...they started out little but then gradually got bigger and bigger until I realized I'm [drawing them that way], and then I shrunk them. But then I made them bigger again. It's kind of a cycle."

VITAL STATS

yoshitoshi ABe



BORN: August 3rd, 1971
BASE OF OPERATIONS: Tokyo
SCHOOL: Japanese painting department of the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music
NUMBER OF COMPUTERS AT HOME: Seven.
FAVORITE ARTISTS: "For manga, Yukinobu Hoshino (*Saber Tiger, 2001 Nights*); for painting, Kyousuke Chinai and Toshio Tabuchi."
WHAT HE'S BE DOING IF HE WASN'T AN ARTIST: "I can't *imagine myself being* anything else."
HIS CHILDHOOD TRAUMA: "As a child, I was prohibited to read manga." ■ RB



ALL IN THE FAMILY
"In this picture I tried to express a little bit of the feel of each character" explains ABe. "Maybe somebody's a little careless, maybe someone's over-worried. It actually shows the whole relationship between Rakka and the whole group. She's at the bottom and lost in thought, Kana's bright-eyed, looking directly at you. The shadow is Reiki, who's not seen, but actually overlooking them all, saying 'Well, maybe it's about time to get going."

