ZEN to KAWAII
THE JAPANESE AFFECT
ABOUT THE EXHIBITION Japan has long played muse to artists — providing inspiration and influencing major artists and art movements since the 19th century. A rich artistic exchange remains as strong today as it did in the past with artists increasingly looking to Japanese traditional and pop-culture as source material.

Much of the appeal of Japanese culture can be traced to Zen influences on its arts such as architecture, poetry, calligraphy, gardening, the tea ceremony, and ikebana (flower arrangement). Artists have sought the aesthetic elements embodied in traditional customs that value simplicity, asymmetry, naturalness and beauty in the understated and everyday.

While the appeal of these traditional art forms holds strong, Japanese pop-culture also provides inspiration to artists. This is a culture that values manga (comics) and anime (animation), where high and low art forms have equal status and technology and the handmade are both preferred mediums. ‘J-Pop’ has given currency to a global visual language that values all things kawaii (cute) — shiny surfaces, playfulness, brash colour, the super sweet, anthropomorphic animals and imagined worlds.

Zen to Kawaii: the Japanese affect includes seventeen artists and traces a nuanced Japanese aesthetic that has influenced their sensibilities and informed their work.

Artists include: Peter Blake, Peter Callas, Eugene Carchesio, Michael Doolan, Benedict Ernst, Marea Gazzard, Ghostpatrol, Max Gimblett, Natalya Hughes, Hitesh Natalwala, Raquel Ormella, Pip & Pop, Reg Preston, Scott Redford, Kate Rohde, Sandra Selig and Matthew Sleeth.
ABOUT KAWAII  Kawaii draws on old traditions. Long before Japan
turned out Hello Kitty bag-charms it gave us netsuke, dainty miniature
sculptures that functioned as fasteners for garments during the Edo
period (1603-1868). They could be as adorable as any plastic kitten.
Even the love of manga has old roots — in the cartoonish woodblock
prints that flourished in the 17th – 19th century. However, it is since the
1970s, when high-school girls started mimicking childlike behaviours,
that the term kawaii has become a cultural phenomenon and part of
the mainstream. Kawaii finds expression in almost everything — from
fashion, product and industrial design, to mascots of multinational
companies and government policy. Its status was firmly cemented in
the mainstream when in 2009 the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs
appointed three young women as Japan’s international ambassadors
of cute. The ‘kawaii ambassadors’ travel the world promoting Japan
and its cute culture. The cult of kawaii is a national aesthetic and a key
Japanese export that is holding a powerful sway in global culture.
ABOUT ZEN One of the greatest impacts on Japanese culture came with the introduction of Zen Buddhism from China in the early Kamakura Era (1185–1333). Zen’s contribution to traditional Japanese culture was profound and extended well beyond its religious role. While Zen monks produced quick gestural paintings to express their religious beliefs, it was cultural activities such as the tea ceremony which were integral to the development and dissemination of a distinctive ‘Zen’ aesthetic. This aesthetic sensibility placed an emphasis on simplicity and the natural world and is best expressed by the term wabi-sabi. This concept is used to express a sense of rusticity, naturalness and age — concepts that remind us that beauty is fleeting. For example, a misshapen vase is considered more beautiful than a pristine one. While the latter may please the senses, the former stimulates the mind and emotions. This aesthetic concept has had an enormous impact on Japanese traditional and contemporary culture as well as wielding a significant influence for those looking to Japan for inspiration.

Max Gimblett
Mirror mirror on the wall
1993
Ink and synthetic polymer paint on handmade paper
QUT Art Collection
Gift of the artist
PETER CALLAS is a pioneer of the use of the electronic image in Australia art. Over the last two and a half decades he has utilised a wide variety of electronic and digital media to create an ongoing series of cultural ‘portraits’. The locations vary and they are often created during sustained periods of residence. His persistent themes have been to address the issues of multicultural and transcultural identity and the ‘reanimation’ of history.

Callas’ first almost entirely animated work Kinema No Yoru introduces the motif of the menko playing card, which are a popular toy amongst Japanese children. In the set of cards at Callas’ disposal, the colourful and graphic appeal of the menko is undermined by a darker ideological bias.

“Disjunctive images of war and territorial conquest (human bombs, brave feats, gas masks) thus convey more about Japan’s colonial aspirations than of the game’s competitive nature in the simple winning and losing of the iconic cards. The introduction of political and propagandist imagery reflects the artist’s profound scepticism toward notions of universal truth and authenticity of experience.”

EUGENE CARCHESIO often works on an intimate scale, and deals with concepts of stillness, spirituality and the sublime. In this work, he locates the sublime within the mundane. His work *Dead leaves of Brisbane* is aligned with the Japanese concept of wabi-sabi, which is based on acceptance and contemplation of imperfection and impermanence. The work follows on from *Dead leaves of Tokyo*, which he made during a three-month residency in Japan in 1999. The artist tells the story of how the watercolour works came about during his time in Japan:

“One day I saw a leaf on the footpath near where the flat was, and for the sake of doing something, I picked it up and brought it up to the apartment. I realised it was such a terrific thing to do — it was like a ‘de-stressing’, because it was a very concentrated look at the leaf and the shadow. After a very heavy day of walking and looking and dealing with an extremely large metropolis,... it was terrific to come back and meditate on this simple thing”.

Benedict Ernst mixes high and low, East and West, tradition and the contemporary in his work. On the surface, his practice is concerned with Japanese traditions, such as garden design and suiseki (stone appreciation); however it often has underlying messages of social critique. These messages are communicated through Ernst’s use of consumer waste as materials, such as polystyrene, Kit Kat wrappers and scraps of timber and cardboard. Ernst’s works draw connections between the ‘Floating World’ culture of 17th – 19th century Japan and western consumer culture of today.
Natalya Hughes
Happy durian disaster
pattern
2009
Watercolour and pencil
on paper
Courtesy of the artist and
Milani Gallery, Brisbane

NATALYA HUGHES draws heavily on imagery from the Japanese art of ukiyo-e – pictures of the floating world. Originating in the city of Edo (present-day Tokyo) in the seventeenth century, trademarks of this traditional genre include images of beautiful women, courtesans, actors and scenes from the Kabuki theatre.

Sourcing imagery from Japanese books which use ukiyo-e illustrations, Hughes scans and digitally manipulates the picture to create a blueprint for her canvas. The exposed parts of the female body are removed, leaving only their ornate costumes which hold the shape of the figure but now appear to be floating. Hughes’ restructured images invite us to reflect on the absent women as disembodied spirits and to imagine and rebuild their vanishing forms. In this way, the viewer plays a role in reinstating the presence of the lost figures in the painting.
GHOSTPATROL is a Melbourne based street artist who creates fantastical worlds of anthropomorphic creatures which reference childhood nostalgia and pop-culture but exhibit a sinister undertone. He works across mediums; from pasted posters to soft sculpture, watercolours and printmaking. His works hold the same magical quality as the acclaimed Hayao Miyakazi’s enchanting animated films so it’s no surprise to learn that Japanese manga is a major influence.
HITESH NATAWALA explores issues of migration and of what it is to live in the post-colonial diaspora. His carefully constructed collages draw upon vast visual references, from Indian movie magazines to European post-war architecture and Japanese manga. His works tackle issues concerning the experience of cultural loss, disorientation and the search for community, but propose a realigned global community being formed through dynamic and expansive social processes.
Nicole Andrijevic and Tanya Schultz work collaboratively as Pip & Pop, producing multidisciplinary works that include installation, drawing, painting and photography. Utilising materials such as sugar, sand, plastic, found objects, confectionary, origami, and crystals, they follow the mantra more is more. Pip & Pop create fantastical terrains that unashamedly celebrate excess, abundance and utopian dreams and desires that arise from within a contemporary culture of mass consumption.
> The term ukiyo-e literally translates to ‘pictures of the floating world’ and is a genre of Japanese woodblock prints and paintings produced between the 17th and the 20th centuries. Research ukiyo-e and identify the main motifs and themes depicted in this art form.

> Some artists in the exhibition draw on elements of ukiyo-e in their own work. Identify one artist and artwork in the exhibition. Discuss the similarities and differences between traditional ukiyo-e and this artist’s work.

> Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) was a very famous ukiyo-e artist. He produced an iconic series of woodblock prints titled 36 views of Mt Fuji. Another artist in this exhibition, Matthew Sleeth, has appropriated this idea and created a series of works titled 12 views of Mt Fuji. In contrast to Hokusai’s depictions of Mt Fuji - where the mountain is the focal point - Sleeth presents it as obscured by the landscape. Discuss why he has chosen to depict Mt Fuji in this way.

> In addition to working in the form of ukiyo-e, Katsushika Hokusai also created manga featuring images of men making funny faces and sticking chopsticks up their noses! Today, manga is the term used to broadly describe comics and print cartoons originating from Japan. Manga has become very popular in the West. Looking at the artists in the exhibition, who do you think has been influence by manga and what attributes of their artwork lead you to believe this?

> Read the section about Zen at the beginning of this booklet. Looking at works in the exhibition, compile a list of artworks you consider to exhibit wabi-sabi traits.

> The Japanese term kawaii has become a popular internationally for referring to something that exhibits cute attributes. List the works in the exhibition you feel are kawaii and discuss what is cute about them. Think about colour, shape, medium and scale.

> Some artists in this exhibition, such as Scott Redford, chose to work in different mediums depending on the artwork they are producing. Research an artist in this exhibition who works in this manner and discuss why this may be the case. Argue the positives and negatives of working in this way.

> Raquel Ormella encourages you make your own postcard from rubber stamps and paper she has supplied, thus creating a participatory artwork. Debate whether the artwork exists/is it an artwork without interaction of the audience.

> Some of the artists in this exhibition (Eugene Carchesio, Raquel Ormella and Sandra Selig) have spent extended periods of time in Japan. The artworks they have created in response to these trips reflect on their personal interpretation of Japan. Have you ever been overseas or to a new and exciting destination? Think about elements of that place that you remember fondly and vividly. Create a cultural portrait of this place based on these recollections.

> The works in this exhibition were created by Australian artists. Do you think if this exhibition was exhibited in Japan it would be read in the same way as it is in Australia? If not, how would it be read differently?

> Can you find other Australian artists not included in this exhibition [or artists from countries other than Japan] that create artworks about or influenced by the culture and aesthetics of Japan?