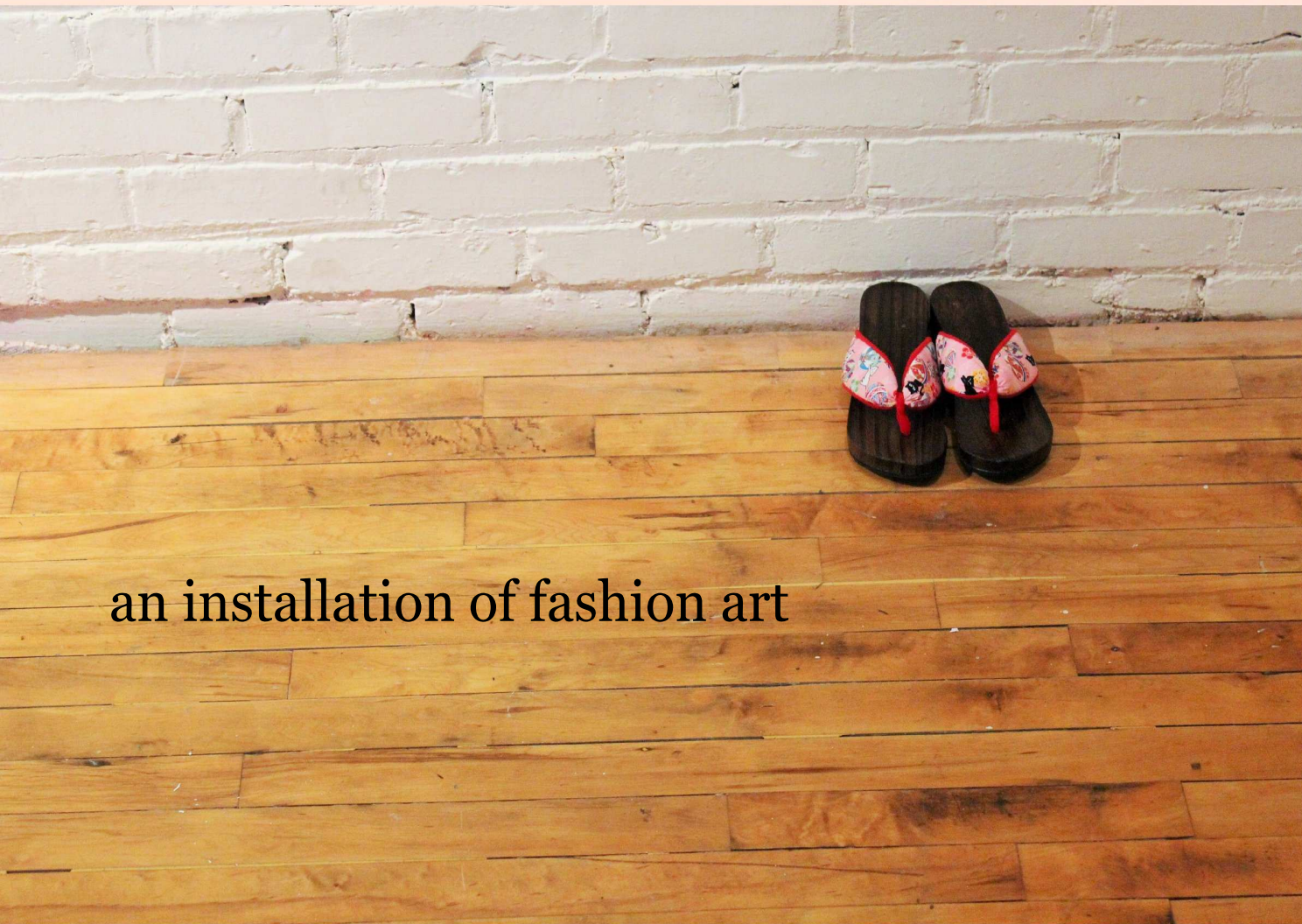


# Wearing Japan



an installation of fashion art

by Kelly L. Koster



# Wearing Japan

an installation of fashion art

Northrup King Building, Minneapolis  
October 2 - 6, 2014

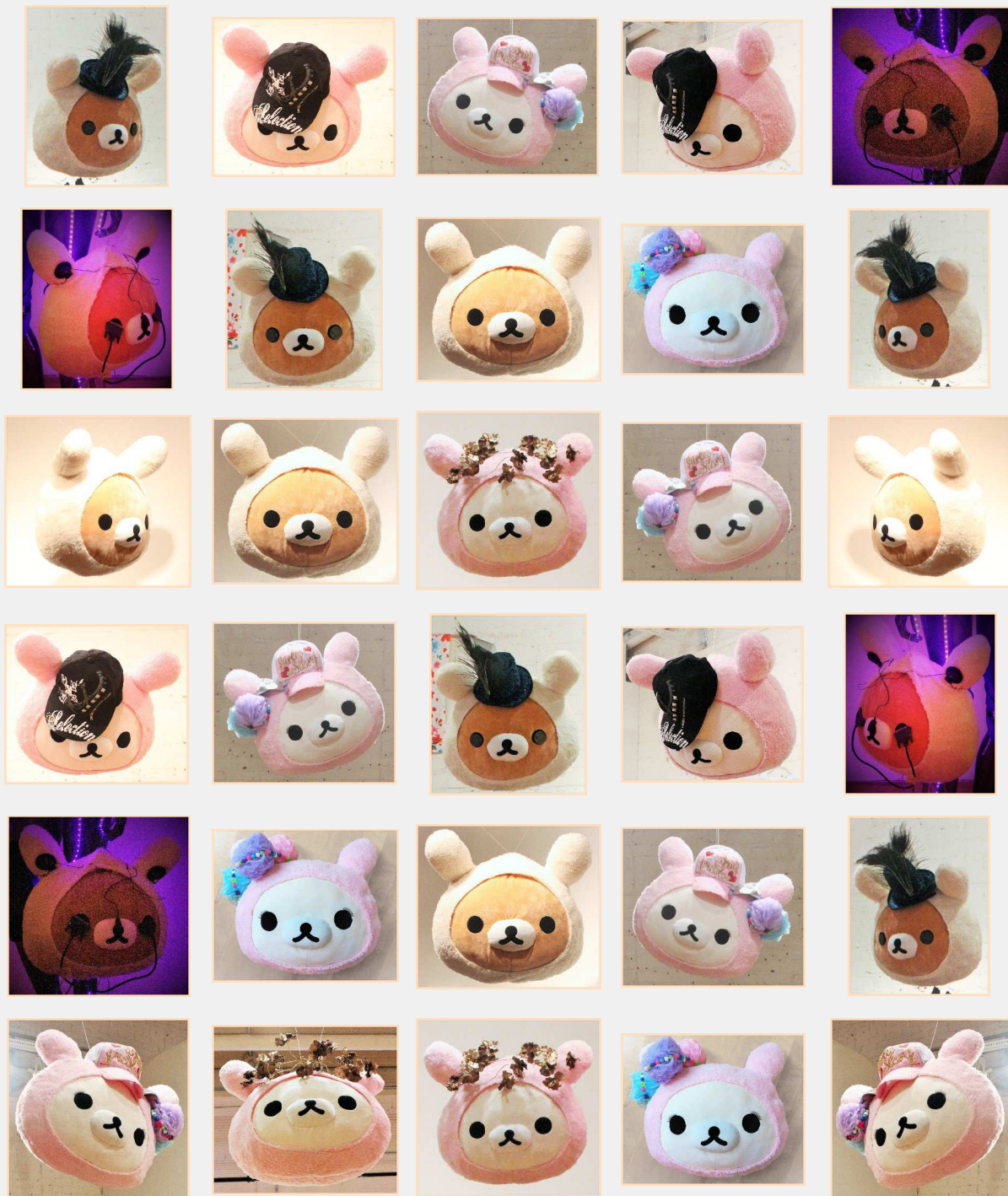
by Kelly L. Koster

© by the author of this book. The book author retains sole copyright to his or her contributions to this book.



The Blurb-provided layout designs and graphic elements are copyright Blurb Inc. This book was created using the Blurb creative publishing service. The book author retains sole copyright to his or her contributions to this book.







## **Yokoso! ようこそ ! Welcome!**

In 2006, I spent a month traveling throughout Japan. I fell in love with the organized neon chaos of Tokyo, the attention to design and style, and the numerous fashion subcultures. Never before had I been so captivated by another country: the “magical” technology, the nuanced social etiquette, and the people who make the densely populated island pulse with so much life.

When I returned home, I began noticing the “Japaneseness” in the U.S.: the proliferation of design, anime, beauty foods, ramen shops, and fashion trends. At times, I felt as though I was wearing Japan. That’s when I knew this place was not a one-time bucket list destination. I returned six times. I climbed Mt Fuji along with groups of elementary school students. I peered into the windows of cat cafes. I bathed nude in the onsen, or communal hot springs. I played in the arcades. I wandered for hours through the underground shopping tunnels. I learned how to make udon noodles. I attended festivals. I sang karaoke with new Japanese friends who are still a part of my life. I kept going back. There was always more to see, and more to come home and notice.

Each time I returned, everywhere I looked, I could spot a glimpse of Japan. Recently, it’s our fixation on cuteness via mini desserts, animal hats, Peter Pan collars, and cat videos (see *Kawaii Controversy*). Of course, the Japan I experienced at home was not Japan, but it didn’t feel entirely American either. The same was true of American things in Japan like hip-hop (see *Hip-Hop Defiance*). They were just “American-ish.” But, nothing in Japan felt non-Japanese, at least from my non-Japanese perspective. What fascinates me is how Japan can take something “Western,” and rebuild it to become uniquely Japanese. Sometimes, it even exports this reinvented idea back to the world. For example, Lolita fashion (see *Steampunk Lolitas and Space Cowboys*). And we love it.

Yet, this isn’t the first time that America has fallen in love. The mid-nineteenth-century Japanism era marked a Western

Japan trips, 2006 - 2014



obsession with kimonos, fans, woodblock prints, and anything “oriental” in feel. Sometimes, we still see remnants of this nineteenth-century exoticism (see *Western Geisha*). But, this is 2014. In our age of global connectivity, when a street photo of Harajuku is just a click away, I wondered, how do other countries impact what we wear and who we think we are?

WEARING JAPAN focuses on the relationship between Japan and the West, especially America. What happens when America falls in love with Japan? I decided to answer that question visually. I hope you enjoy.

Arigato,

Kelly Koster

This installation is dedicated to my fiancé, life travel partner, business partner, and fellow Japan enthusiast, Nick Hansen, who has supported my graduate education and my vision for this show.

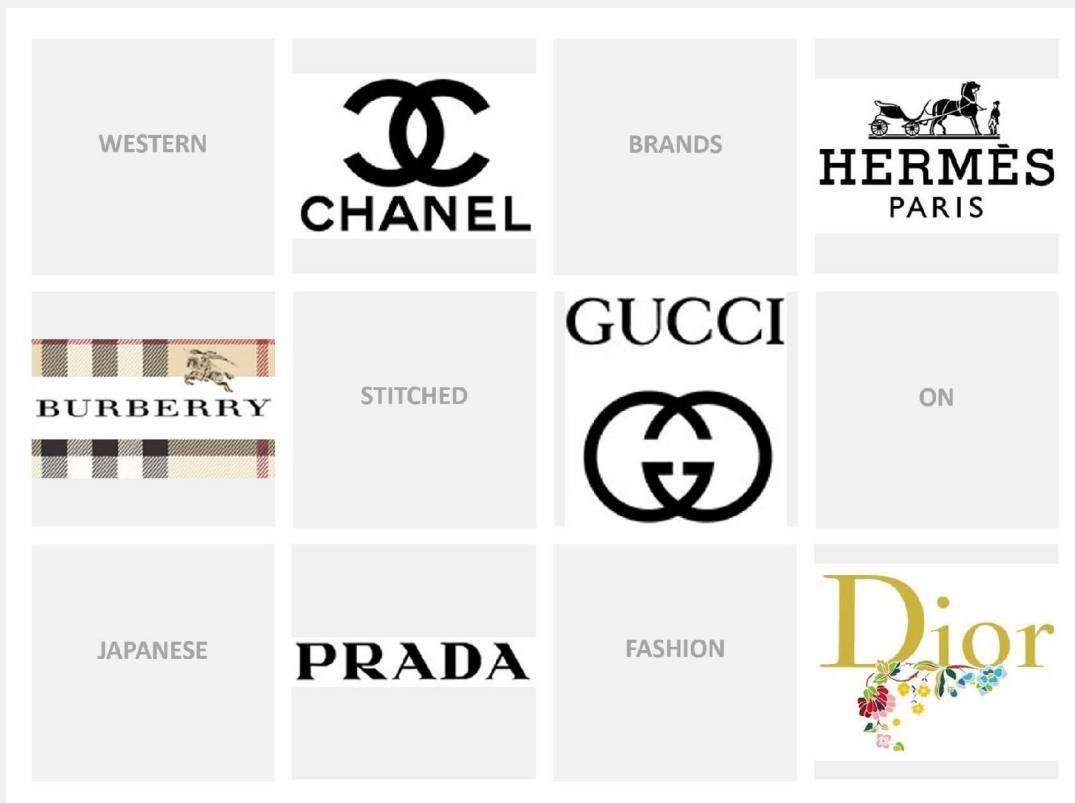
I would like to thank the following people who have been instrumental in helping me reach this point: Dr. Anita Gonzalez, my trusted advisor, for her invaluable guidance; Phil Cigan, for his friendship, translation, and travel companionship; Naoko Takahashi for her friendship and her family for the gifts of antique kimonos; and Fujio-san, Morito-san, and Yuuko-san for their friendship and hospitality over the years.

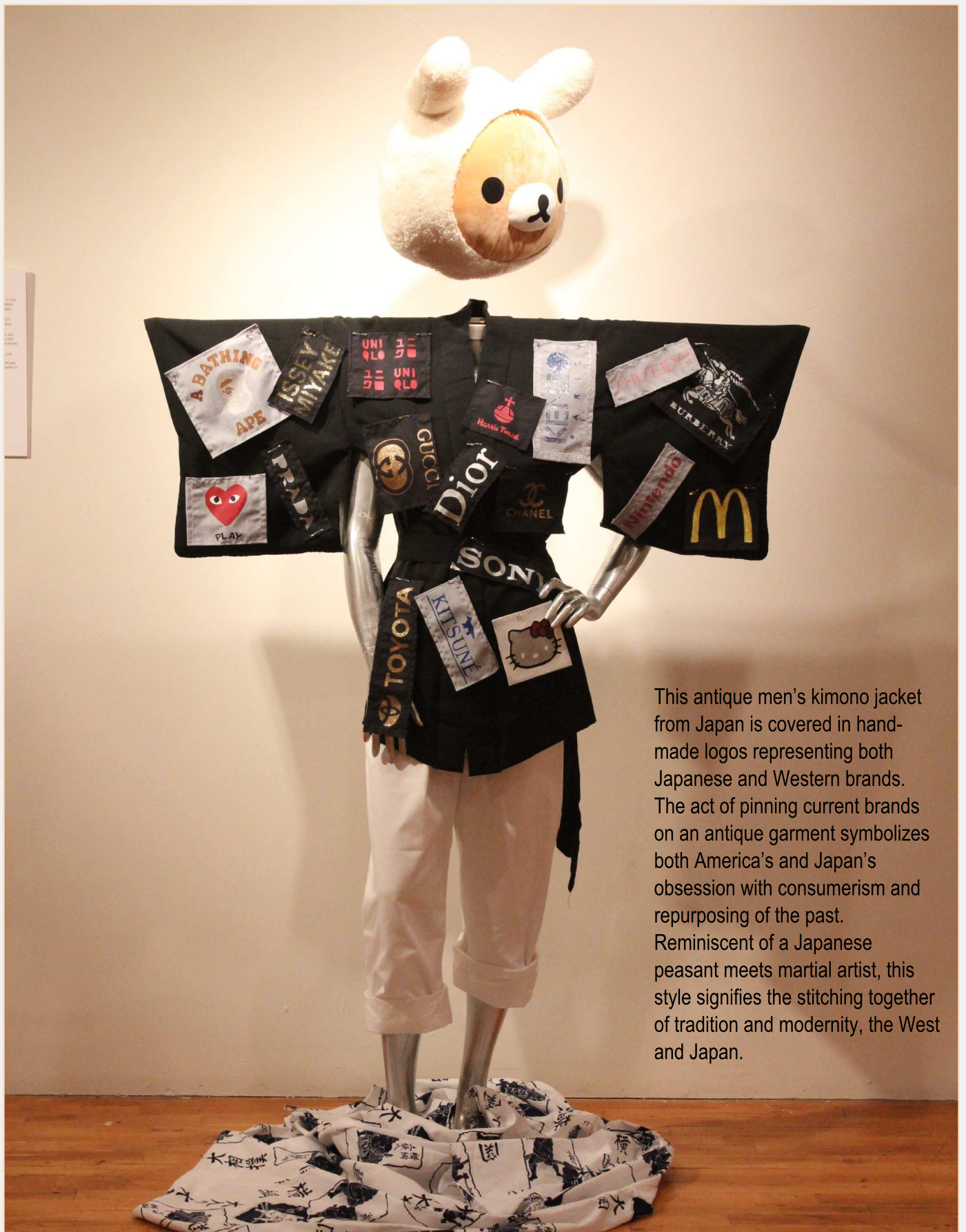
# BRANDING CULTURE

Visually, how do we know if something is Japanese? What does Japaneseness look like? Is it the quality of pre-Westernized Edo-period motifs like geisha, samurai, fans, nature, kimono patterns and ukiyo-e prints? Is it successful contemporary cultural exports like anime, Hello Kitty, sushi, emoticons/emojis, and video games that have reached global trope status?

Visually, how do we know if something is American? What does Americanness look like? Is it classic patriotic themes like bald eagles, stars and stripes, and apple pie? Is it modern cultural exports like fast food, Hollywood, blue jeans, and Disney?

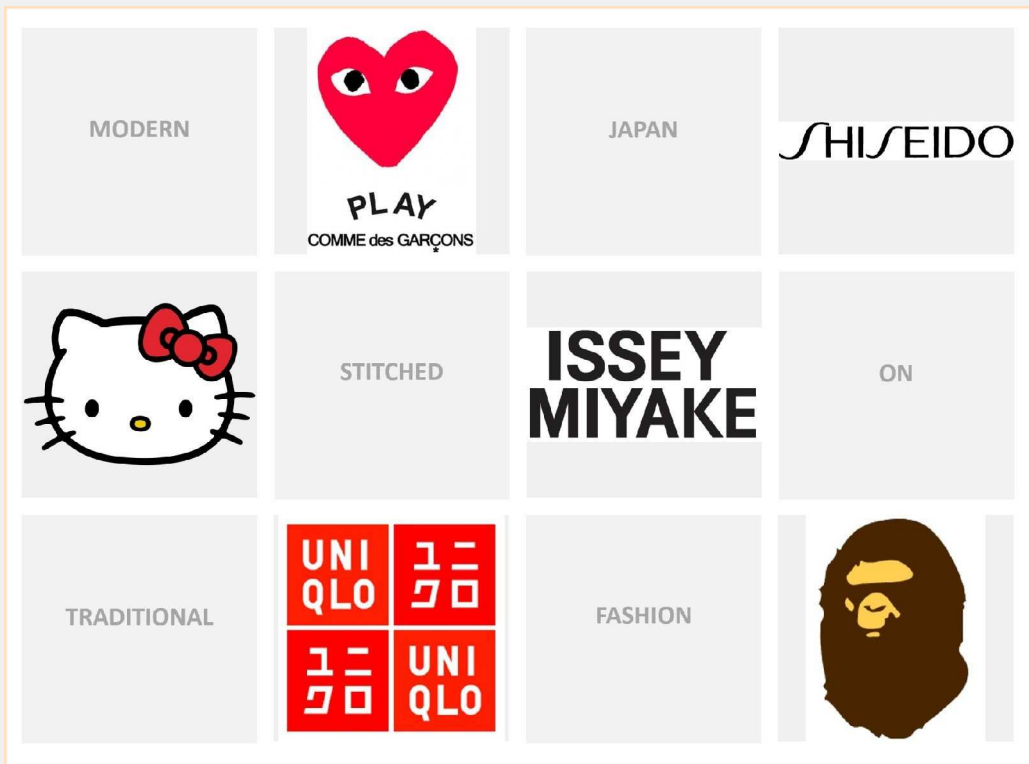
In our current reality of global consumerism, with so much cultural exchange, appropriation, and exporting, culture doesn't stay static. Putting a visual label on it proves difficult. Of course, both America and Japan are more than their stereotypical motifs and cultural exports. But these themes seem to stick, much like brands in our mind.





This antique men's kimono jacket from Japan is covered in hand-made logos representing both Japanese and Western brands. The act of pinning current brands on an antique garment symbolizes both America's and Japan's obsession with consumerism and repurposing of the past. Reminiscent of a Japanese peasant meets martial artist, this style signifies the stitching together of tradition and modernity, the West and Japan.









KITA

KOTA

PRADA



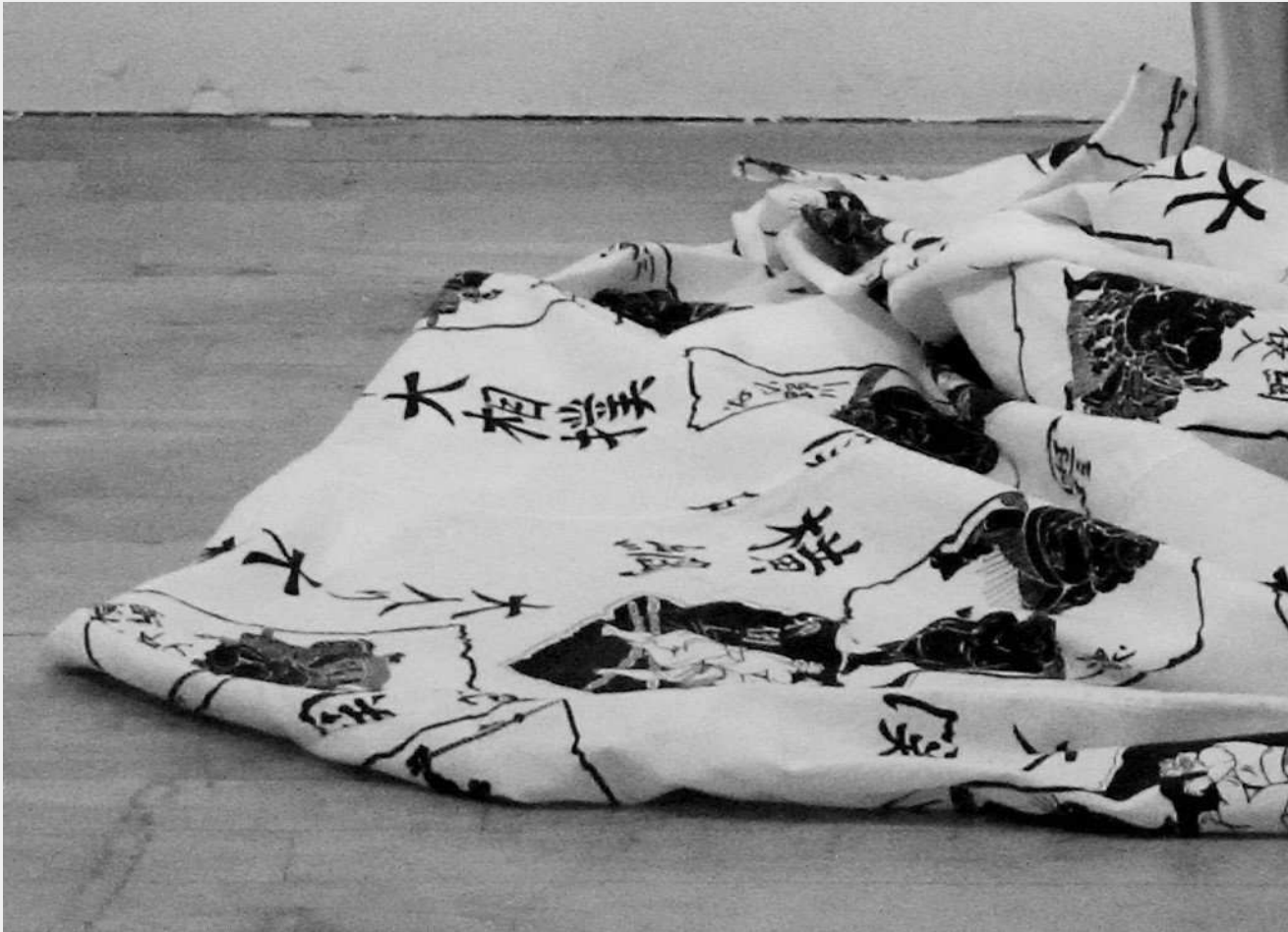
PLAY



BRANDING CULTURE









# WESTERN GEISHA

During the nineteenth century Japanism craze, art dealers, photographers, and painters were exposed to *ukiyo-e* or woodblock prints of the Edo-era which often depicted scenes of Japanese courtesans and geishas from the pleasure quarters. Artists like Monet, Whistler, and countless others painted white women wearing luxurious kimonos and kimono-like garments within a sexualized boudoir type setting. To these Western artists, kimono was synonymous with geisha even though it was, as its literal translation reads, “a thing to wear” for most Japanese women. Obtaining a kimono became a status symbol in Europe and America, symbolizing ones worldliness and taste for exotic things.

Today, we still see remnants of the exoticised “white geisha” in the form of kimono-like costume a la pop artist Katy Perry’s 2013 AMA performance or kimono inspired couture from fashion houses like Dior. Both Perry and Dior reference traditional Japanism which, in each case, treats the kimono as performance art form rather than ready-to-wear garment.

But, the kimono is not just costume. Thanks to the kimono, Western women were liberated from their petticoats and corsets in the early 1900s. French designer Paul Poiret created the first Western fashion garment to drape from the shoulder into a unified form rather than cinch from the woman’s midsection which bisected her into two projected forms of breasts and bottom. Poiret is credited as revolutionizing Western dressmaking which shifted the emphasis from the skills of tailoring to those of draping.

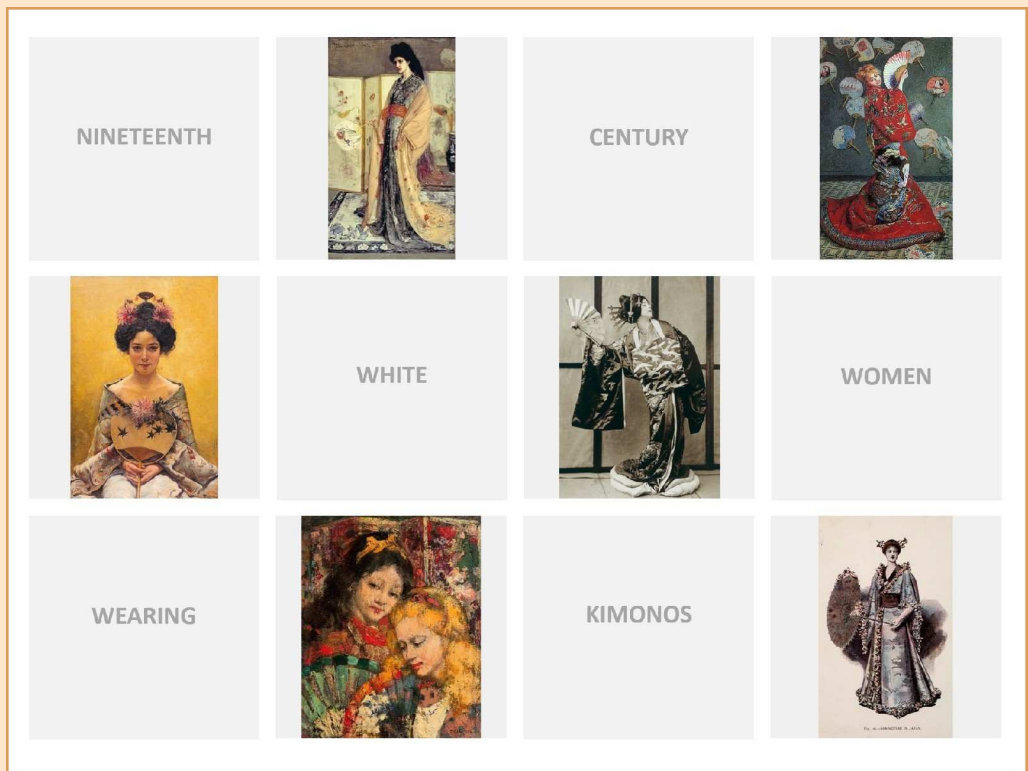




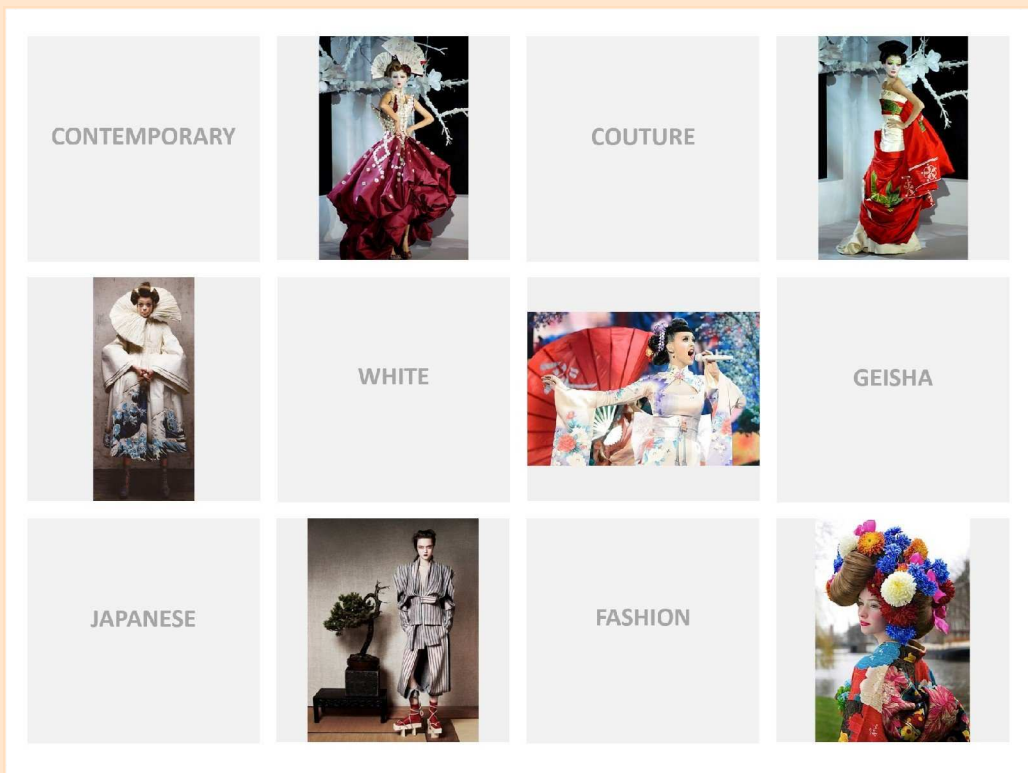
This antique kimono from Japan is mixed with Chinese, ancient Greek, and Nepalese elements and styled in a sexualized fashion that is uncharacteristic of how kimonos are typically worn. It is symbolic of the pan-Asian Orientalized manner in which Western artists fashioned Japan while also keeping the integrity of the kimono intact. It is meant to spark dialogue on cultural appropriation vs influence. Where do we draw the line?



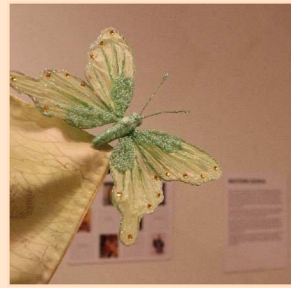


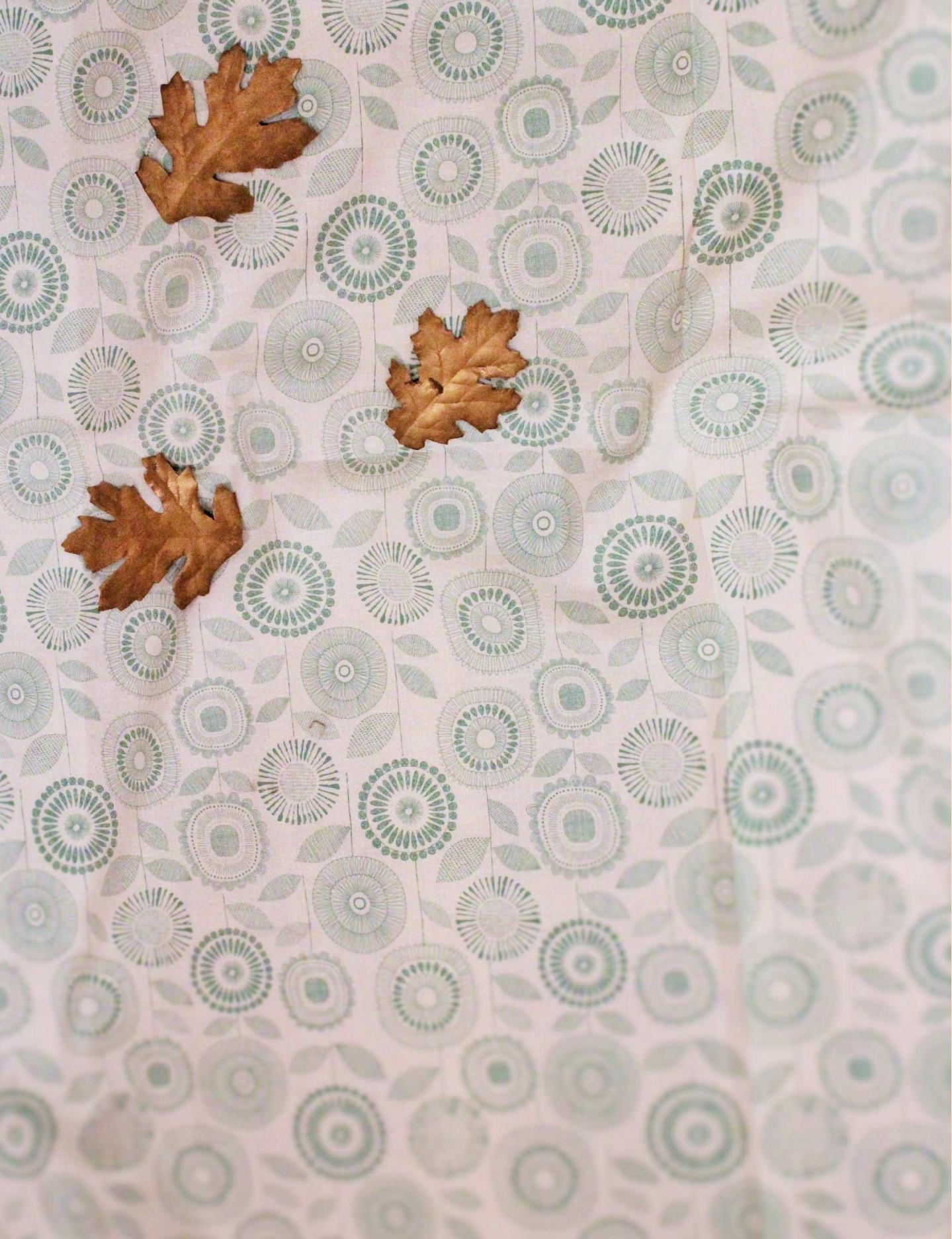
















Cotton yukata, contemporary



Cotton yukata, contemporary



Linen yukata, antique



Cotton yukata, contemporary



Cotton yukata, contemporary



Cotton yukata, contemporary



# KAWAII CONTROVERSY

Hello Kitty has reached global icon status and is associated with Japanese *kawaii* which means cute in an adorable and lovable sense. In Japan, being cute is a social norm, and applies to the young and old, to men and women. There are many ways to be and wear *kawaii*: baby cute, nerd cute, princess cute, punk cute, sexy cute, etc. Sex appeal and cuteness go hand in hand in a country fixated not necessarily on youth but on the innocence and carefree nature it represents.

In the U.S., although we see Hello Kitty everywhere, we coo at internet animals, and we watch pop stars like Ariana Grande don cat ears for every day dress, America has a complicated relationship with *kawaii* style. At what age should young women abandon cutesy ideals and styles? This has sparked a dialogue about modern American feminism and what it means to dress like a grown woman. *New Girl* actress Zooey Deschanel received criticism for calling herself a feminist while wearing bows, Peter Pan collars, and frilly dresses. Her critics felt she was infantilizing herself. Actress Emma Watson's speech to the United Nations on viewing gender as a spectrum rather than two opposing sets of ideals made headlines. However, shades of femininity on this spectrum are still culturally complicated.

This piece is a Westernized interpretation of Japan's sexy cute *kawaii* style. It symbolizes extremes colliding. The black mini dress and lace thigh-highs are meant to feel sexually suggestive while their adornments feel little-girlish, a combination that raises many eyebrows in America. The colors and candy-land feel are inspired by the bright self-expressive world of Harajuku, a district in Tokyo known for its youth culture and extravagant fashion.







KAWAII



KITTY

CUTE



FASHION



CAT

CULTURE



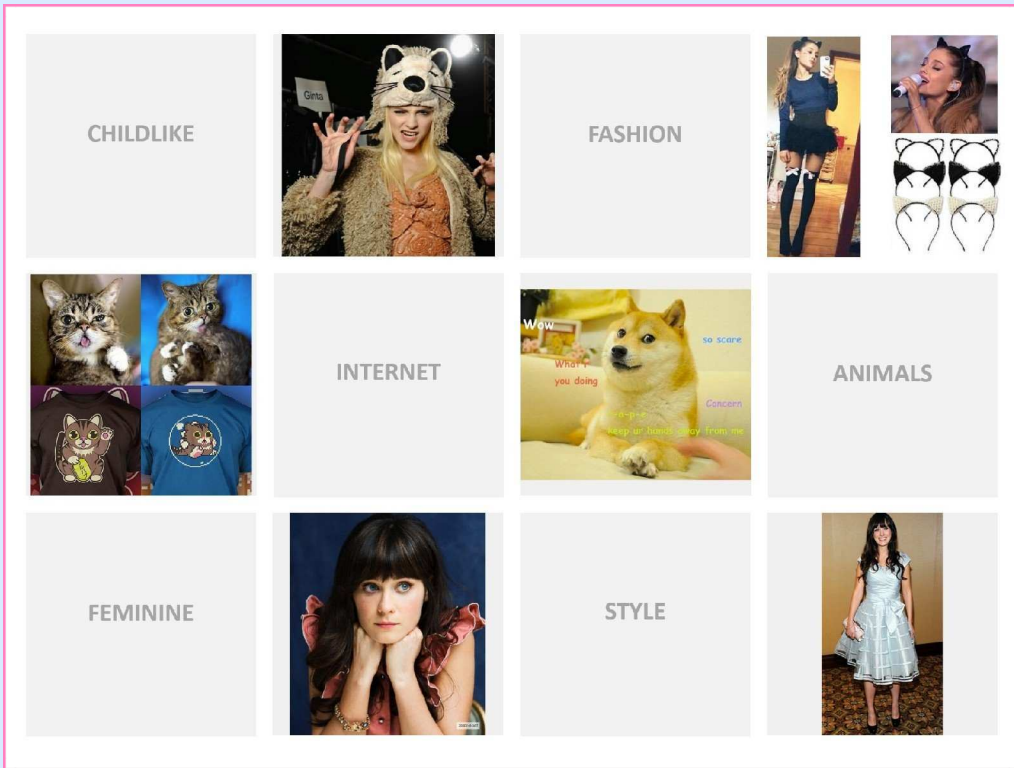
To be taken seriously, American women today cannot be too sexy, too cute, too assertive, too masculine, or too anything. If we dress in extremes, it is usually for an occasion like Halloween where it is acceptable to become someone else. How do we draw that line between costume and dress? Where do women situate themselves? Just as traveling to foreign places helps illuminate ones sense of self and sensibilities, applying Japanese *kawaii* fashion to American culture reveals more about the U.S. than Japan.





KAWAII CONTROVERSY

SERIOUSLY

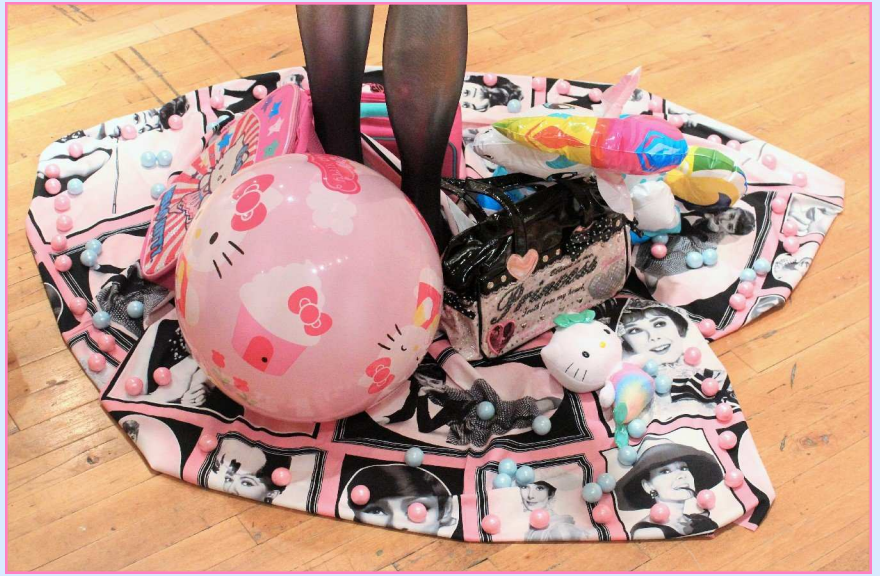
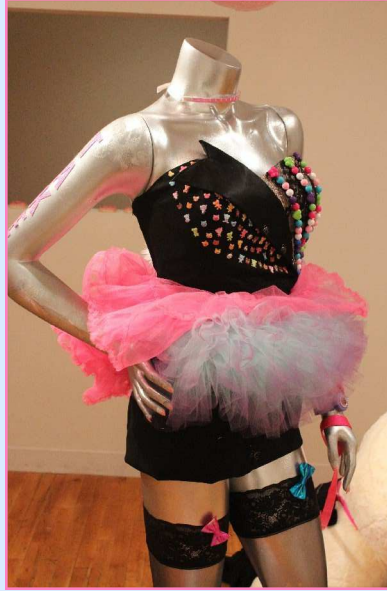








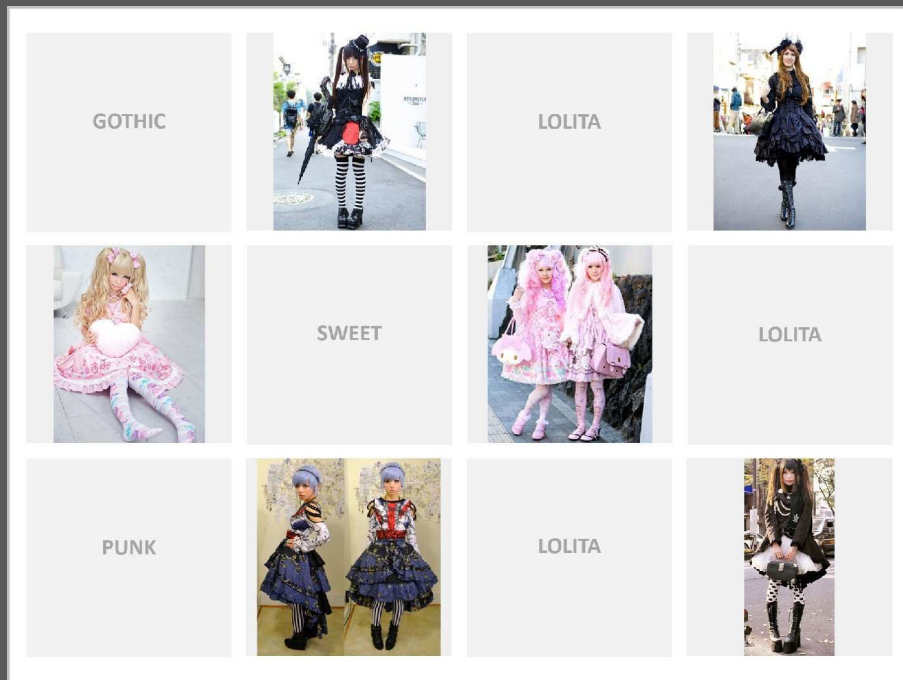




# STEAMPUNK LOLITAS

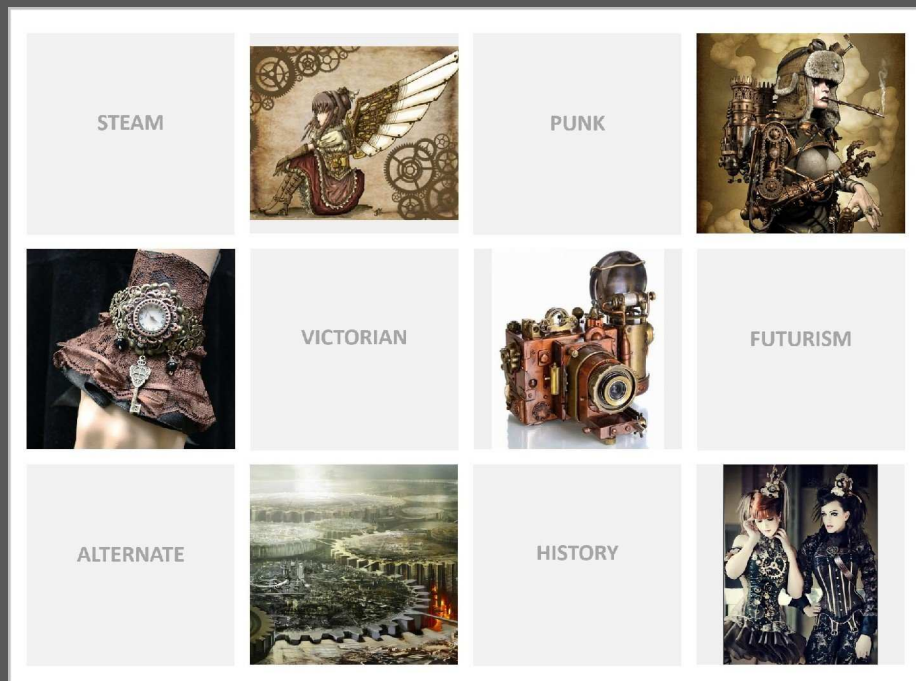
If something is conceived within Japan, does that guarantee its Japaneseness? In this piece, steampunk, Lolita fashion and space cowboys converge to illustrate a nuanced chain of global and historical mashups.

The Japanese Lolita style of modest knee-length petticoats, corsets, and high necklines originated in the streets of Harajuku in the 1990s and has now expanded to several sub-styles including gothic, sweet, classic, and punk. Yet, behind the Lolita subculture of Harajuku is a Victorian/Rococo era aesthetic and controversial novel that is clearly very Western. However, the Lolita style is now arguably more closely associated with contemporary Japanese street culture than Victorian era Britain. Japan took a nineteenth century Western style, repackaged it to feel very Japanese, and exported it back to the West and around the world. The Lolita subculture has expanded globally with followers in cities from London to Sao Paulo. Many Lolita loyalists consider the alternative style as a part of their identity and daily dress. They become offended by cosplayers, or people who only wear a Lolita look occasionally, treating it as a chance to dress in costume as their favorite anime character.





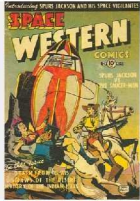





Steampunk is a sub-genre of science fiction inspired by Victorian era England and presupposes an alternate history built on steam and spring-propelled gadgets instead of electricity or computers. Many Japanese anime and manga are steampunk themed and focus on outlaw type characters, or a protagonist that doesn't fit in with society. Some are set in the Edo era "Floating World" (1615 – 1868) but equip characters with futuristic technology and supernatural magic.



# AND SPACE COWBOYS

Like steampunk, Space Cowboy is another sub-genre of science fiction that uses nineteenth century futurism but sets the scene in space where rugged outlaws challenge the loosely governed order of the solar system using a mashup of Wild West chaps and ray guns. Both American and Japanese works like the cult hit *Firefly* and popular anime series *Cowboy Bebop* have applied space as the final frontier with Wild West characters.



SPACE		WESTERN	
	FINAL		FRONTIER
GENRE		MASHUP	

This piece represents the Japanese and American interest in fastening futuristic ideas onto premodern times, often borrowing from one another's pasts to create an alternative future. It also represents both culture's fascination with outlaws, whether fictional space cowboy or someone who opts out of social norms like a Lolita loyalist.











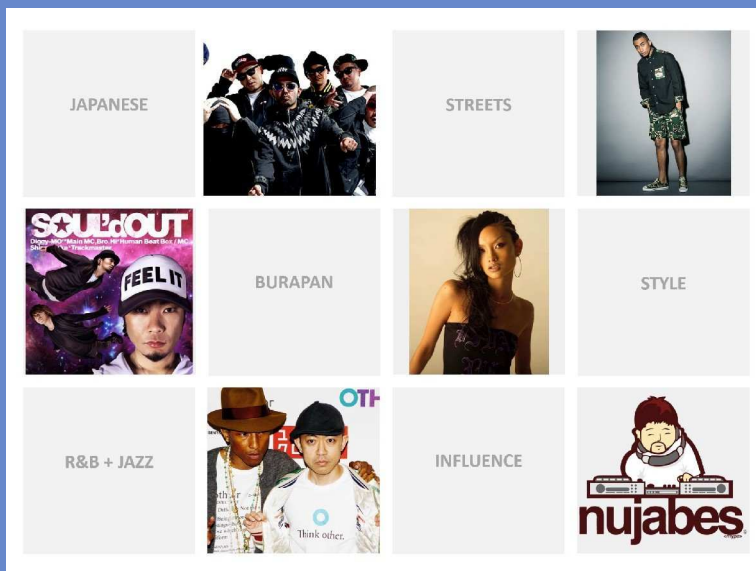


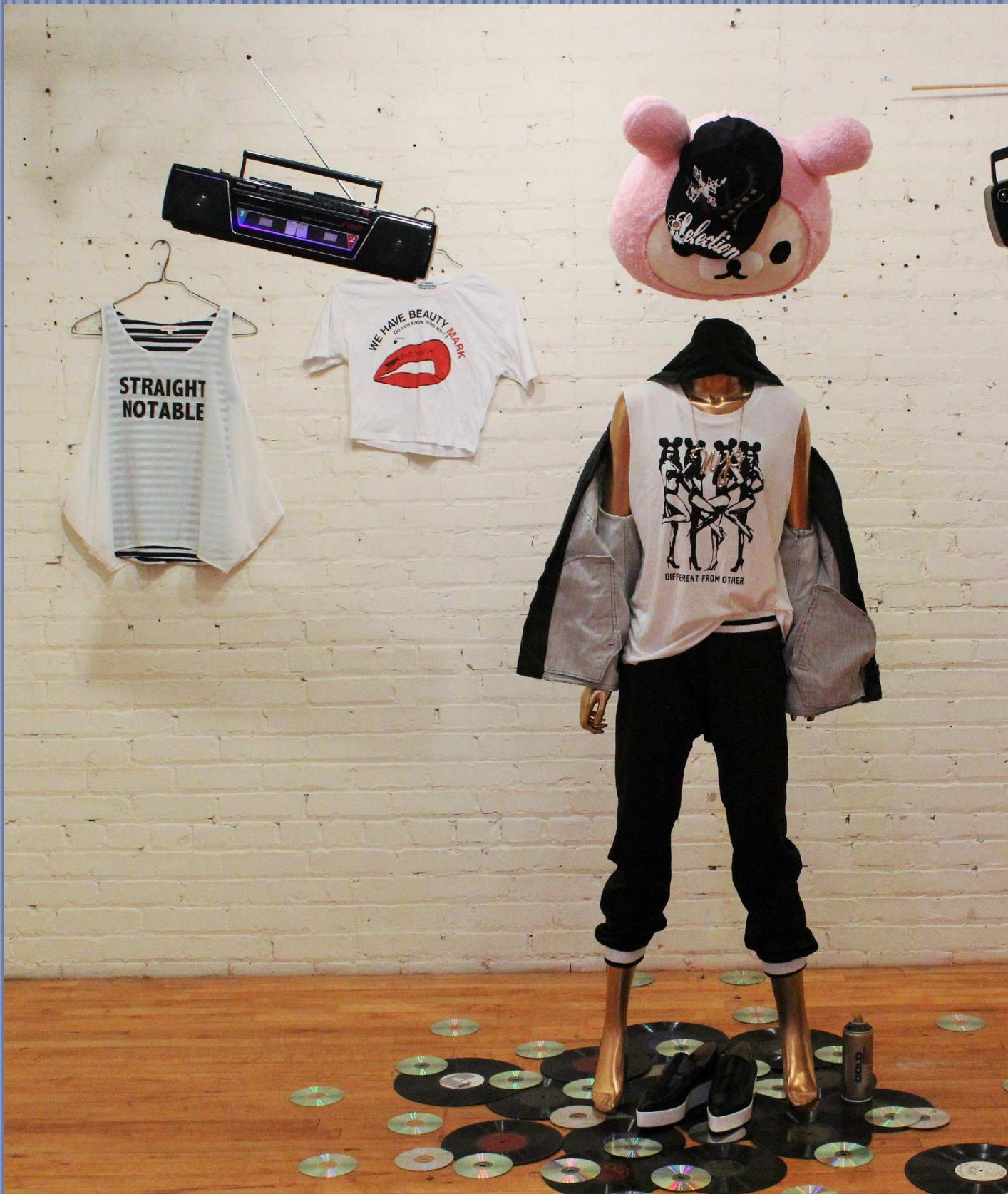
# HIP HOP DEFIANCE

Japanese youth began experimenting with hip-hop in the 1980s as a way to defy mainstream Japanese society. Artists like Soul'D Out and feminist rapper Hime, which translates as “princess,” coopted *burapan* style which is the Japanese emulation of black American culture. This involves going to tanning salons, wearing dark makeup, corn rows, afros, dread locks, and dressing like black hip-hop artists such as Grandmaster Flash. “Bura” is short for “burakku” which means black and “pan” is a slang word for *pansuke* or prostitute. “Pan pan” is slang to describe lower class Japanese prostitutes who serviced black American soldiers during the war.

While this phenomenon may seem highly insensitive, Japanese *burapan* artists saw themselves as using hip-hop to challenge the status quo in a highly homogenous society, even though their message was often mimicking American themes like street violence which was almost non-existent in Japan. However, dancing in the street was, and in some places still is, considered highly inappropriate in Japanese culture. Breakdancing, or “Soul Dancing” as it was termed in Japan, introduced street dance and made it more acceptable.

Current Japanese hip hop draws from a range of genres including jazz, R&B, and techno, and has evolved away from mimicking black artists to embracing a Japanese style focused on subjects specific to Japanese culture and society. Recent subject matter has included the Iraq war, Fukushima and the nuclear disaster.





STRAIGHT  
NOTABLE

WE HAVE BEAUTY MARK  
Do you know what it means?

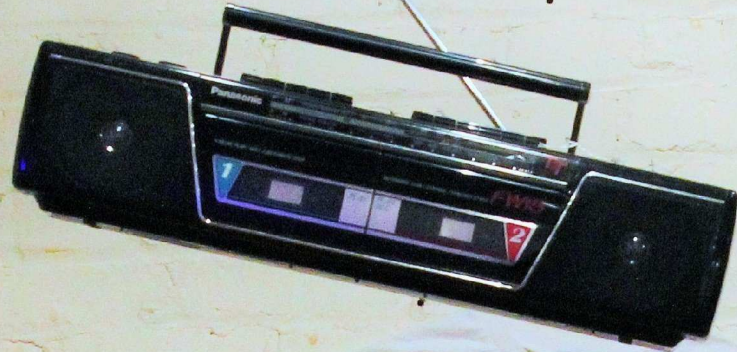
DIFFERENT FROM OTHER

GOLD

This piece represents Japanese hip-hop style for mainstream streetwear, and was created using garments from an Osaka based boutique offering "Harlem Style" apparel. The look includes references to Pharrell's I AM OTHER campaign, Minnie Mouse, 1980s soul or break-dancing, and the theme of standing out amongst sameness.

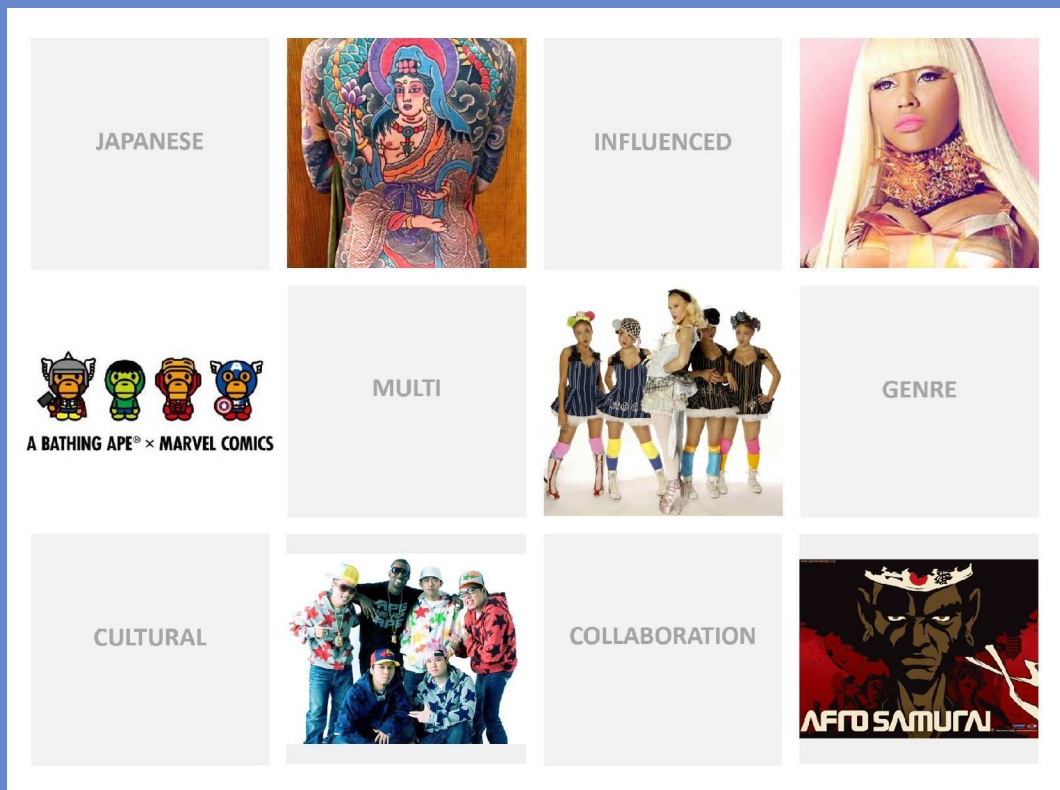






Now, global collaborations between Japanese, European, and American hip-hop artists like Pharell and Kanye West are pervasive and have become a prominent force in the fashion industry. Japanese hip-hop artist Nigo founded A Bathing Ape, or BAPE, a popular lifestyle and streetwear brand. Nigo is the co-owner and head designer for Pharrell's clothing brand Billionaire Boys Club. Samuel L. Jackson co-produced and starred in the 2007 anime series *Afro Samurai* by Takashi Okazaki with a music score by RZA from Wu-Tang Clan.

Current American hip-hop and pop artists like Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj both reference Harajuku hip-hop style, while Gwen Stefani's Harajuku Lovers brand is an explicit Westernized version.





**DIFFERENT FROM OTHER**

Japanese fashion magazines like *egg* and *Popteen* cater to young teens interested in *Ganguru* style, which involves tanned skin, brightly colored blonde or red hair, heavy makeup, and takes inspiration from American hip-hop culture. This trend peaked in the late 1990s but still remains in pockets of the Shibuya district in Tokyo.







# CYBERPUNK DYSTOPIA

Cyber punk is, at its core, about radically changing the social order in a high-tech, low-life context. The blurring between humans and machines is a topic both Japan and the West have pursued in literature and film. Japan, being a hyper connected and tech-innovative culture has produced many works including the human cyborg dystopian 1989 manga/anime *Ghost in the Shell*. Set in the mid twenty-first century, the story follows a female cyborg protagonist whose body has undergone extensive prosthesis after an accident and whose brain has been replaced by a cyberbrain, or technology that allows her to interface her biological brain with various networks. This level of cyberization makes her vulnerable to attacks by skilled hackers. *Ghost in the Shell* played an important influential role in the 1999 American cult film *The Matrix* which was adapted into a collection of anthology anime films called *Animatrix*, which involved Japanese, American, and Australian directors.

This chain of Japanese and Western influence goes full circle as *Ghost in the Shell* was originally inspired by Hungarian British author Arthur Koestler's 1967 non-fictional work *The Ghost in the Machine*. Koestler's work argues that humanity's tendency toward self-destruction is a result of the human brain's evolution of building upon, but retaining earlier primitive brain structures.

FUTURISTIC



DYSTOPIA



HUMAN

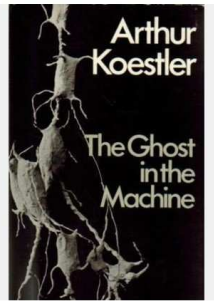


ANDROIDS

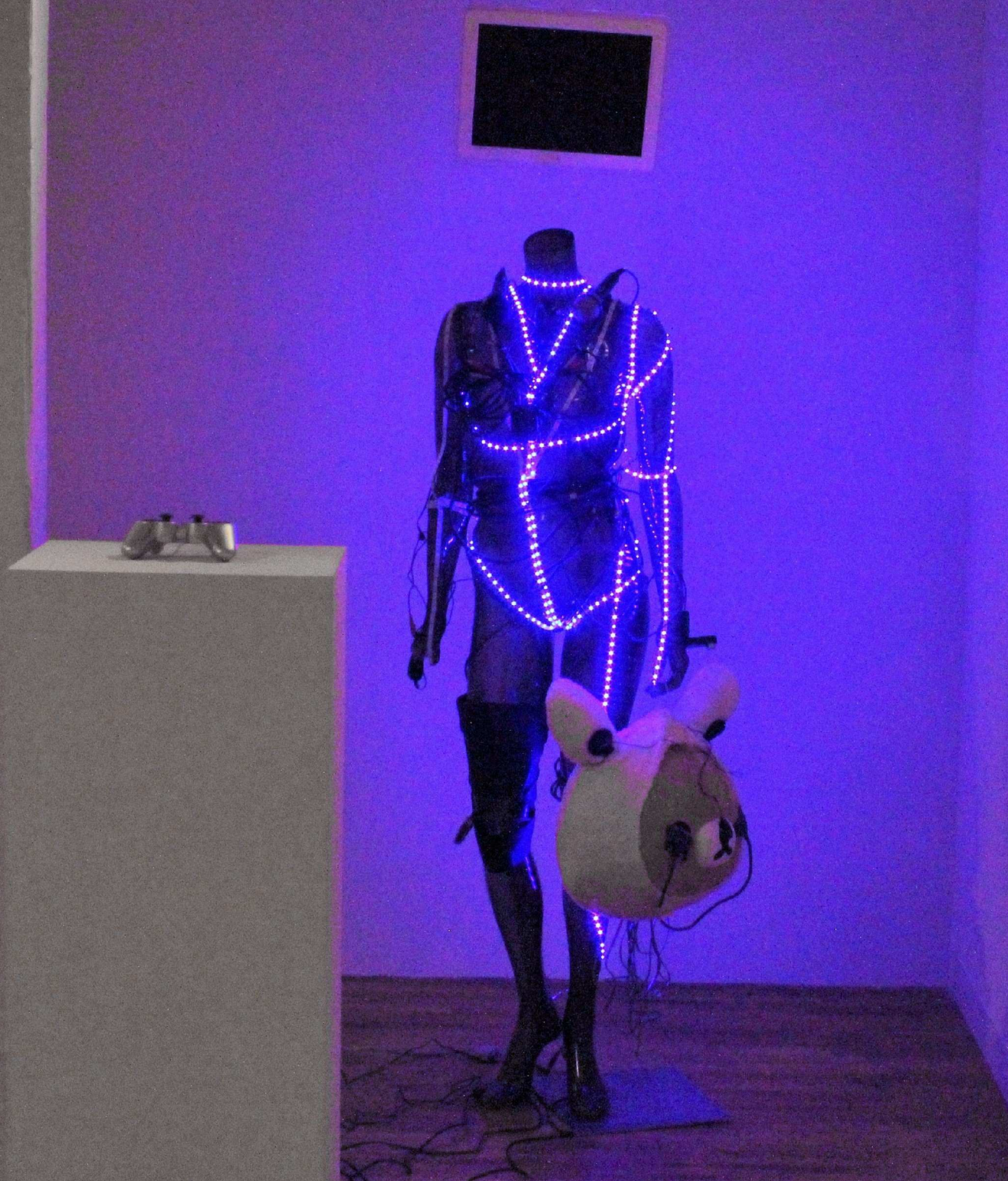
CARTESIAN



DUALISM



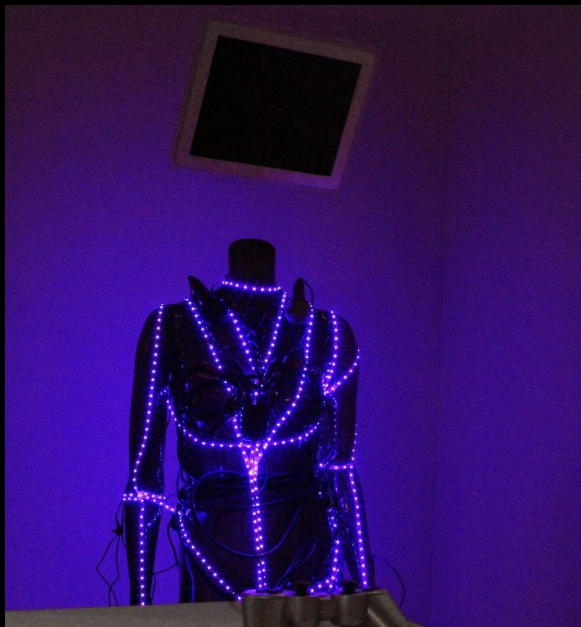
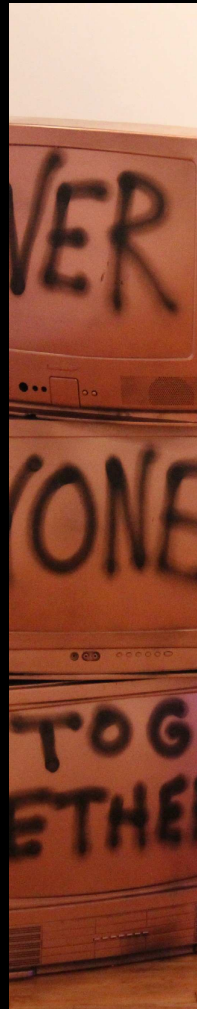
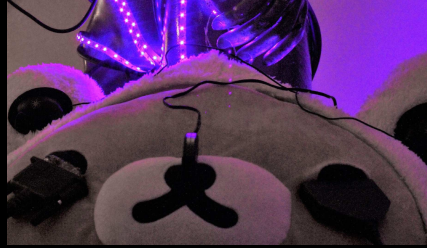
This piece, a mannequin fashioned in translucent black paint and entangled in wires that plug into her body, represents the relevance of cyberpunk in a “post-cyberpunk” world.



EVER

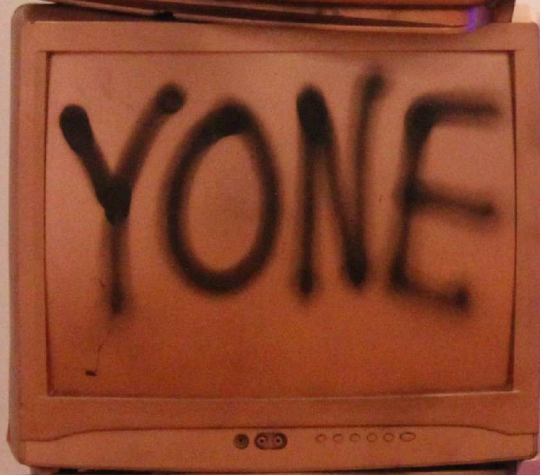
YO





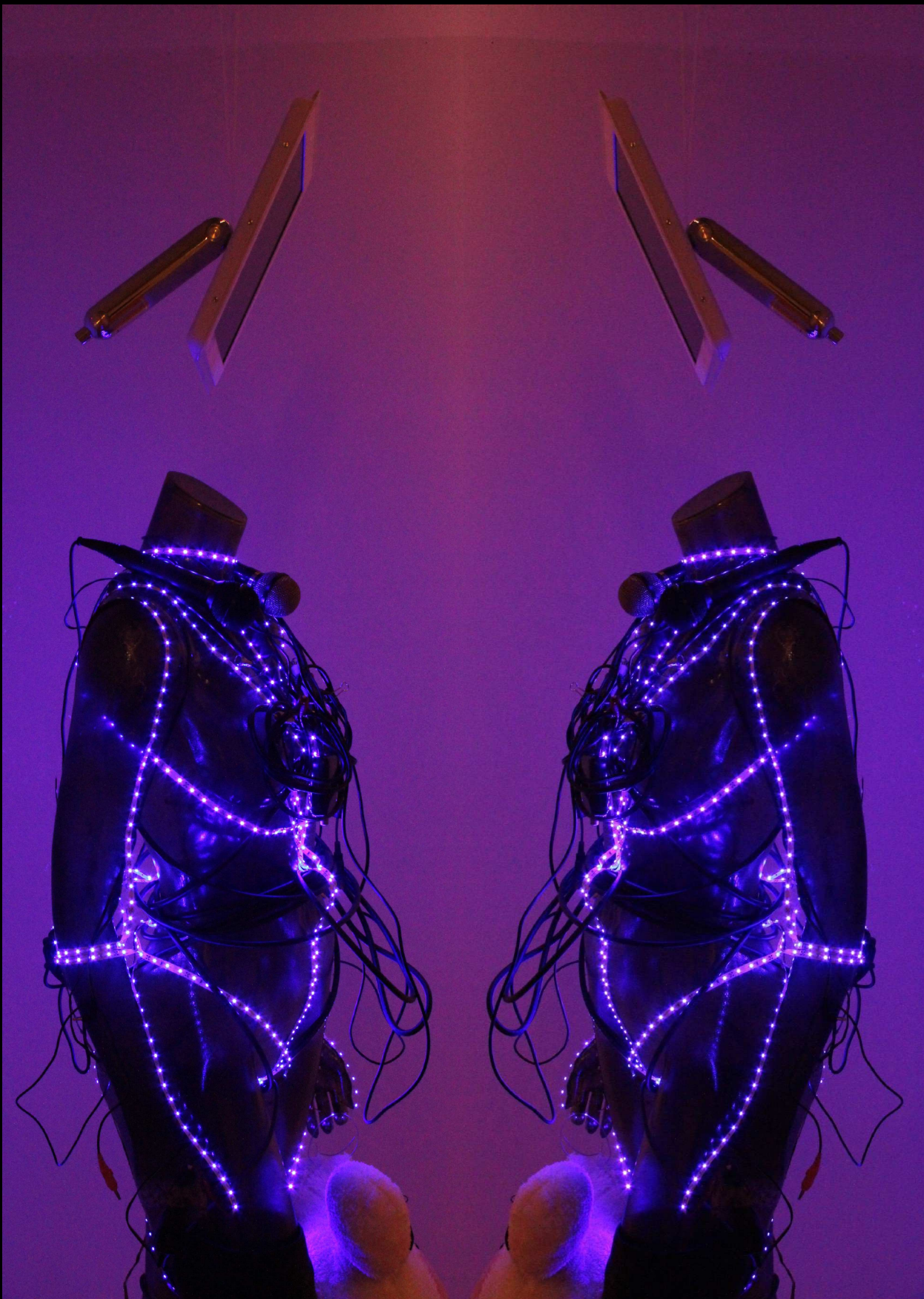
VER  
NONE  
TOG  
ETHE

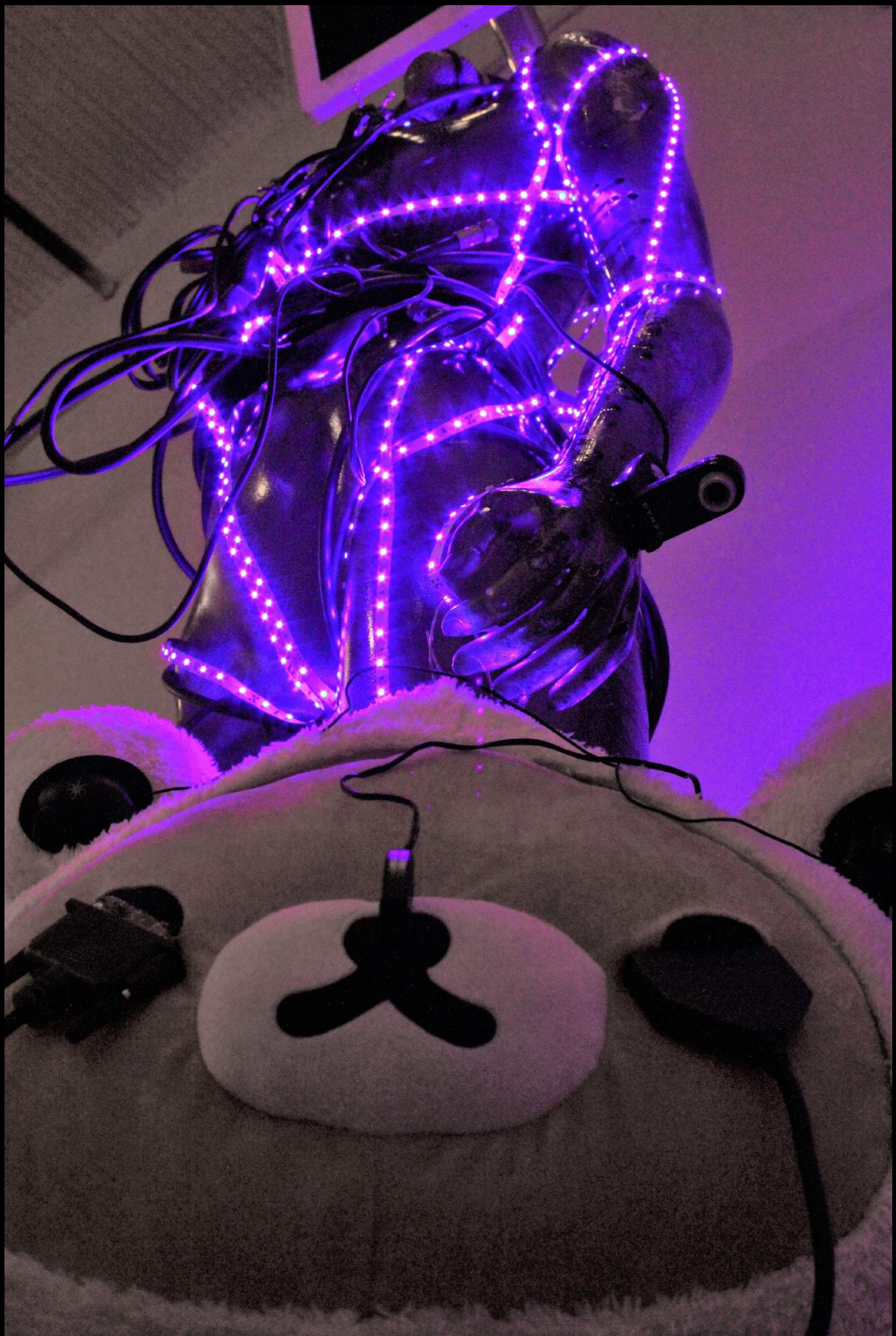




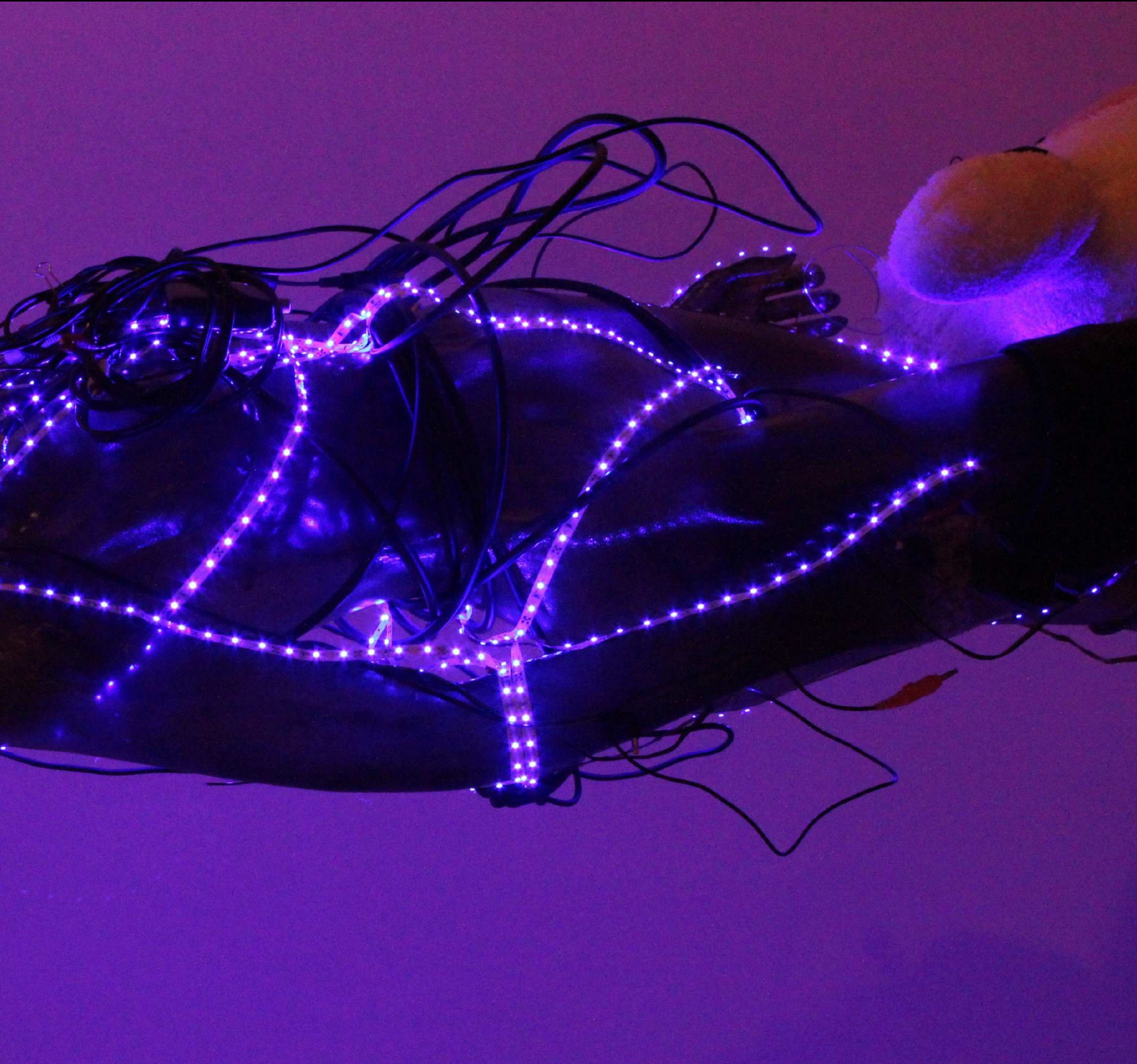
America's surveillance state, tech fashion like Google glasses, medical devices and fitness trackers as invasive body modification, internet addictions, and increased dependence on networks are all in parallel with Japan's super connected society, especially its *hikikomori* or shut-in subculture and extreme *otaku* or computer nerds who prefer cyber girlfriends over real ones. Given current trends, Japan may represent a window into America's future.















The designer, in Kathmandu, after a trip to Japan

Kelly considers herself a cultural observer first, designer second. Her main technique for WEARING JAPAN is upcycling or deconstructing and reconstructing already-made apparel to keep with the theme of borrowing and reinvention. She created handmade stencils and hand painted fabric. She personally sourced her materials locally and abroad from places like Kathmandu, the Minnesota State Fair, and of course Japan.

Materials from Japan include antique and contemporary kimonos, Osaka style “hip-hop” apparel, Tokyo arcade winnings, all things Hello Kitty, and much more.

Kelly is the Co-Founder and Chief Design Officer of a new travel apparel brand Anywhere Apparel. She is an avid lover of international travel but finds herself always returning to Japan. WEARING JAPAN is part of Kelly’s thesis project for her Master of Liberal Studies degree at the University of Minnesota.





