

University for the Creative Arts
Research Project Portfolios

Kawaii: Crafting the Japanese Culture of Cute

By Professor Lesley Millar



Project Details

Name of Researcher:	Professor Lesley Millar
Name of Output:	Kawaii: Crafting the Japanese Culture of Cute
UCARO link/s:	https://research.uca.ac.uk/2897/
Output Type:	M – Exhibition; curation of exhibition touring to multiple venues, with publication
Year and mode of dissemination:	James Hockey Gallery, University for the Creative Arts, Farnham, Surrey, UK, October - December 2015 Rugby Art Gallery and Museum, Rugby, UK, February - April 2016
Key Words:	Contemporary craft practices, culture, Japan, kawaii, cute, tradition
Funding:	Arts Council England: £14,031 Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation: £3,000 Japan Foundation: £6,914 Japan Society: £1,000 Rugby City Council: £6,670 Total: £31,615

Synopsis

Kawaii: Crafting the Japanese Culture of Cute is a research output comprising an exhibition curated by Professor Lesley Millar. The exhibition had two iterations, the first taking place at James Hockey Gallery at the University for the Creative Arts and the second at Rugby Art Gallery and Museum.

The exhibition featured 16 Japanese artists selected by Millar who explored the concept of Kawaii through a range of different crafts and media. The catalogue was edited by Millar, who also contributed one of the three essays, inviting others from Jessica Litherland, the Senior Exhibitions Officer at Rugby Art Gallery and Museum, and the Japanese independent journalist Mikako Sawada.

The research in *Kawaii* re-contextualises contemporary craft

practices through the re-mediation of traditional, enduring skills. This was exemplified by works which engage with, and critique, the perception of the ephemeral and transient culture of Kawaii. The project provides new insights by demonstrating that craft, acting as the conduit connecting concept, theory and outcome, becomes the dynamic edge between tradition, new technology, haptic knowledge and the oppositions of Kawaii.

This portfolio of supporting contextual information includes details of the research context, aims and processes that led to new insights, and images of the exhibitions. It also includes a PDF of the *Kawaii* catalogue, and evidence of visitor numbers, external grants, press and publicity in major newspapers, magazines and the media.



Mina Okuhata
TITLE: 'Tusk'
MATERIALS: Shark tooth, resin
SIZE: 0.6 × 0.8 × 0.9 metres



Kazuaki Takashima / Né-net
TITLE: 'ANNETTE JQ'
MATERIALS: Cotton 90%, polyester 10%
SIZE: 145cm x 500cm



Shin Enomoto
TITLE: 'Nobigurumi'
MATERIALS: Fabric, thread, fur, leather

Context

Kawaii is an extremely successful commercial branding which emerged in its current form in the 1970s as both an aspect of consumerist culture and a dominant counter-culture (Narumi: 2013). Since 2000, there has been a huge growth of interest in Kawaii beyond Japan, with events such as Hyper Japan, a biannual exhibition celebrating Japanese culture in the UK which attracts tens of thousands of visitors each year.

However, Kawaii has many more levels of meaning than its most famous manifestation, Hello Kitty. Kawaii is a highly complex set of contradictions while its pervasive nature and commercial exploitation leaves it open to negative interpretation from a non-Japanese perspective. The exploration of these contradictions and interpretations provided the starting point for the *Kawaii* exhibition.

The research for the exhibition revealed that while Japan is synonymous with the preservation of traditional skills, the culture of Kawaii is associated with ephemera and fashion, the exact opposite of the slow, highly crafted artefacts of traditional Japan. However, Kawaii is both a response to, and a reflection of, the traditional social and cultural hierarchies. This research thus re-contextualised contemporary craft practices through the re-mediation of these enduring skills in works which engage with, and critique, the seemingly transient culture of Kawaii.

Drawing upon the work of contemporary Japanese craftspeople (textiles, ceramic, lacquer), this research explored ways in which the popular cultural and consumer-

led practices of Kawaii may be critiqued specifically within a Japanese context in order to offer a point of critical access into a phenomenon that, for non-Japanese audiences, is an often mystifying and seemingly superficial cultural form.

The exhibition also explored the ways in which Kawaii has become a linking element between cultural groupings (e.g. those around Cosplay, Manga, Anime), which defy national and geographical boundaries, each translating/interpreting the phenomenon in its own way. Using contemporary craft to move beyond Kawaii as an end in itself, away from the stereotyping of Hello Kitty and the style groupings and affiliations of the Lolita subculture, was a new approach to Kawaii in both the UK and Japan. The research also examined the use of Kawaii in the sexualisation of young girls (Kinsella: 2014; and Takagi, et al: 2012). The cultural contradictions, connections and differences inherent in Kawaii were thus questioned through material outcomes for the first time.

REFERENCES

Kinsella, Sharon (2014). *Schoolgirls, Money and Rebellion in Japan*. Routledge

Narumi, Hiroshi (2013). Interview between Lesley Millar and Hiroshi Narumi undertaken in Kyoto, Japan in September 2013

Takagi, Yoko, Hiroshi Narumi, Mariko Nishitani, Motoaki Hori (2012). *Feel and Think: A New Era of Tokyo Fashion*. Prestel

*Minako Nishiyama working with
sugar paste to create her melting
roses*





Kawaii exhibition at UCA, Farnham



Chie Kinoshita
TITLE: 'Red Riding Hood'
MATERIALS: Silk, velvet, felt,
ribbon
SIZE: 100 × 80 × 80 cm

Research Aims and Questions

Research aims:

To use Japanese craft traditions as a critical approach to Kawaii, exploring the relationship between these two apparently very different material cultures

To create a contextual framework for the understanding of Kawaii beyond Japan

To consider the ways in which Kawaii has become a linking element between related cultural groupings and activities (e.g. Cosplay, Manga, Anime), which defy national and geographical boundaries, and which each translate/interpret the phenomenon in different ways

Research questions:

How to re-contextualise traditional craft practices through the exemplification of works that consciously engage with and critique Kawaii through the re-mediation of traditional skills?

How to interrogate the cross-disciplinary and trans-cultural appeal of Kawaii and reflect on the narratives, objects and cultural artefacts used as vehicles of translation?

How to translate the research to, and engage with, audiences beyond the academy?

Research Methods and Insights

METHODS

The topic was identified through fieldwork in Japan over many years, with an intensive focus on UK manifestations of Kawaii between 2011 and 2014. Fieldwork included interviews with academics in Japan who study Kawaii, artists who use traditional crafts (textile, ceramic etc.) and members of the public in Japan and the UK.

Visits were undertaken to Kawaii and Cosplay events e.g. Hyper Japan. Millar also visited museums such as the Manga Museum Kyoto and Yayoi-Yumejo Museum Tokyo (the latter dedicated to promoting knowledge about the history of Kawaii).

In-depth discussion was conducted with the Rugby Art Gallery curator, who has a longstanding research interest in Kawaii and who provided much of the UK background material.

The contextual review included investigations into fashion and material culture contexts, alongside an review of Kawaii-specific literature.

The work for the exhibition was then selected through networking with curators, academics, artists and craftspeople in Japan and with Kawaii aficionados in the UK. This process included studio visits in Japan and ongoing discussion. The artists selected all already worked with ideas that could be allied to Kawaii but did not position themselves in this way. Through discussion with Millar, all decided that the idea of using their work to critique Kawaii was a new route that

they were interested to pursue. The exception was Minako Nishiyama, a political artist, who has engaged with the negative aspects of Kawaii for many years. Her input was invaluable for the curatorial understanding of the subject.

INSIGHTS

The exhibition revealed the overlooked relationship in Kawaii between traditional practice, cultural modification and contemporary practice, through a reflective and responsive approach. The project thus demonstrated that craft, acting as the conduit connecting concept, theory and outcome, becomes the dynamic edge between tradition, new technology, haptic knowledge and the contradictions of Kawaii.

Research insights included:

- new understanding in the UK of Kawaii as a counter-culture with more complex layers of meaning than simply Hello Kitty
- new definitions of Kawaii and the ways in which it traverses social, cultural and gender norms and hierarchies within and beyond Japan
- new understandings in Japan of Japanese traditional craft as a means of critical engagement with popular culture.

All the above allowed for new understanding and insight about Kawaii, particularly for the Japanese art and craft community who had not previously approached Kawaii in this way.



Aya Kametani

TITLE: 'Ubusuna no Kura' (symbol of the earth)

MATERIALS: Pottery, urushi, gold, clay, brass

SIZE: 10 × 5 × 25 cm (x16)

Gendai Bijutsu Nitouhei
TITLE: 'Excellent Handcart'
MATERIALS: Wood
SIZE: 0.3 × 0.45 × 0.45 metres





Gendai Bijutsu Nitouhei
TITLE: 'Kokeshi Dumb-bells'
MATERIALS: Iron
SIZE: 22 × 6.5 × 6 cm

Research Contribution and Recognition

Dissemination:

EXHIBITIONS

James Hockey Gallery, University for the Creative Arts,
Farnham, Surrey, UK, October - December 2015

Rugby Art Gallery and Museum, Rugby, February-April 2016

Overall visitor numbers for these exhibitions: 10,960

CATALOGUE

Catalogue with commissioned essays from Kawaii experts

Associated activities:

RESIDENCIES

Minako Nishiyama was Artist in Residence at UCA, working
with sugar sculpture from 16 - 29 October 2015, including
delivery of 2 workshops and a presentation

Mikiko Minewaki was Artist in Residence at Rugby, creating
structural wearable jewellery using toys

EVENTS

Four of the visiting Japanese artists plus the curator presented
their work and took part in the 'Kawaii as a Button! Cuteness
in Contemporary Craft Practice' conference at the Japan
Foundation, London, on 30 October 2015; 120 attendees

Alongside the exhibition in Rugby there was a weekend of
Kawaii-related activities including a Cosplay competition and
catwalk organised in collaboration with Rugby Manga Cafe.
There were school and college visits with accompanying
workshops and two curator's tours.

Further information on associated events is available at:
[https://transitionandinfluence.com/kawaii-education-
programme](https://transitionandinfluence.com/kawaii-education-programme)

Research Contribution and Recognition

Influence of research:

MEDIA

The influence of the research was evidenced in the interest on social media (i.e. beyond the academy) in blogs and online articles.

An article on Kawaii baking for Sainsburys cites Millar throughout to define and explore the concept
<https://www.sainsburysmagazine.co.uk/lifestyle/food/kawaii-the-cute-baking-trend>

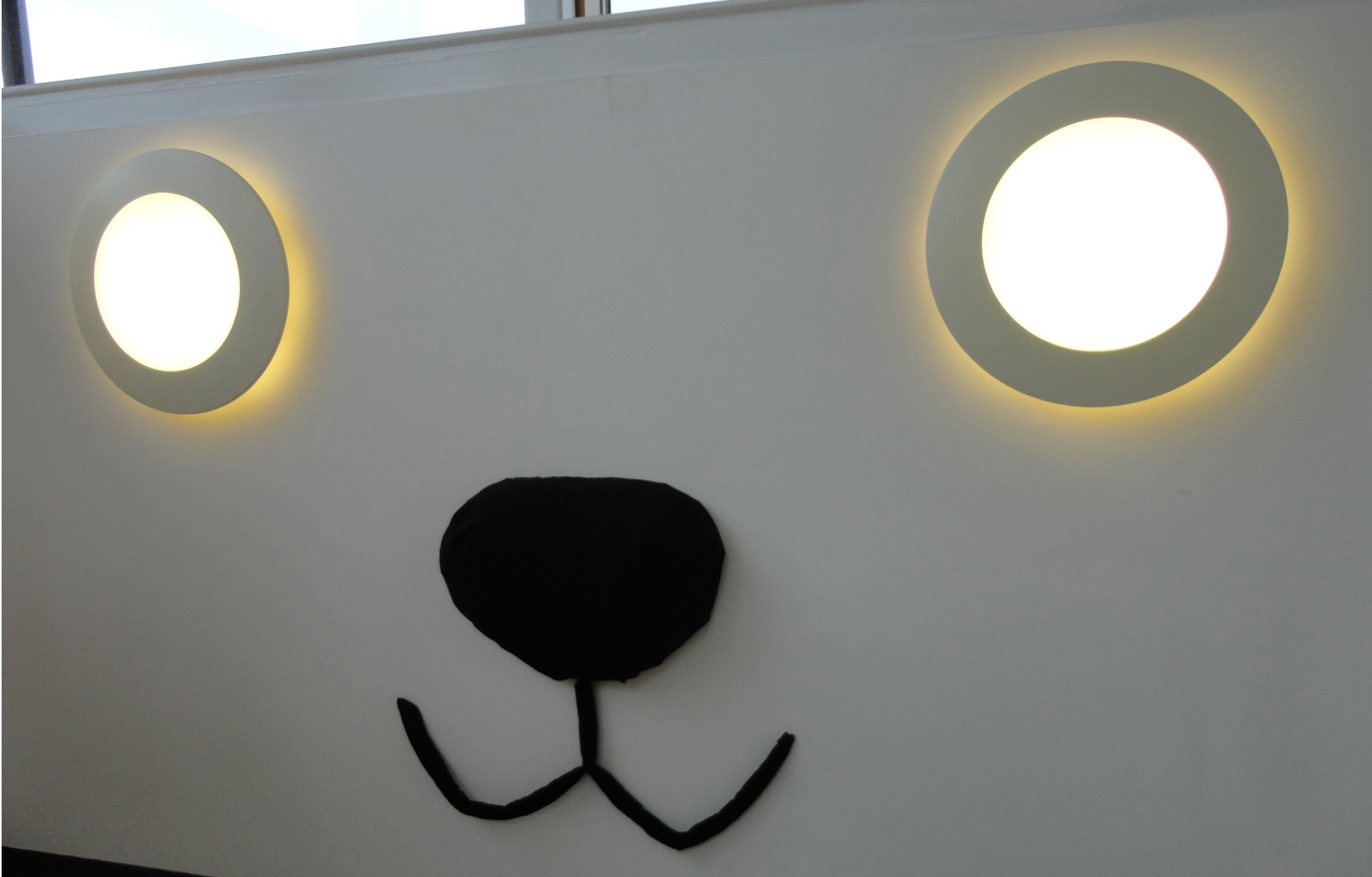
Cakes and Sugarcraft website covered the exhibition, with particular interest in artist artist Minako Nishiyama
<https://www.cakesandsugarcraft.com/cake-chat/view/kawaii-exhibition>

The exhibition in Rugby was widely discussed in the local press
<https://rugbyobserver.co.uk/lifestyle/rugby-gallery-celebrate-japanese-culture-cute/>

IMPACT

This research underpins the Impact Case Study Innovative Textiles Curation: Enabling Arts Organisations to Deliver Institutional Strategies.

It led to impact for Rugby Art Gallery. As the curator attests, the exhibition helped the gallery to achieve several of its aims in 'bringing international work to Rugby and providing an opportunity for local residents to engage with arts that they would not usually have access to'. The gallery 'developed a focus of including high quality crafts exhibitions in the programme' and started 'to develop UK wide relationships that built networks to enable those types of projects to come to Rugby [...] Being part of the project offered RAGM a chance to have a greater ambition than usual.'



*Entrance to Kawaii at Rugby Art
Gallery and Museum, Rugby*

*Gendai Bijutsu Nitouhei
TITLE: 'Everywhere Teddy'
MATERIALS: Plastic, fabric
SIZE: Installation*

Chika Ohgi
TITLE: 'Transient Petals'
MATERIALS: Kozo paper (hand-
made by Chika Ohgi), linen yarn,
dyestuff
SIZE: 315 × 560 × 315 cm





*Kawaii at Rugby Art Gallery and
Museum*



Senior Exhibitions Officer of Rugby Art Gallery and Museum, Jessica Litherland, with the Mayor of Rugby



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Graphic Design:

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FRONT COVER

Gendai Bijutsu Nitouhei

TITLE: 'Please Hug Me'

MATERIALS: Barbed Wire

SIZE: 0.3 × 0.3 × 0.5 metres

BACK COVER

Entrance to Kawaii at UCA,

Farnham, featuring Minako

Nishiyama's installation of posters,

flyers and tissues

