

## Cutting Through Cute to the Real Japan By CAROL KINO

ONE thing is certain about the artist known as Tabaimo: her animated videos have never followed the fashion for kawaii, or cuteness, that has ruled Japanese contemporary art for years. Instead, they focus on the anxieties bubbling beneath the surface of everyday life.

Her first installation, "Japanese Kitchen" (1999), made at the tail end of her nation's so-called lost decade, shows a housewife cooking while an untuned violin plays and the radio broadcasts news about teenage suicides and job cuts; before long, a politician is spinning in her microwave, spouting platitudes, as she scrubs young girls' legs like carrots and chops off her salaryman husband's head. "Japanese Bathhouse-Gents" (2000) tackles changing gender roles: in one scene, businessmen are soaking in their suits in a giant tub when a naked woman suddenly scales the bathhouse wall that separates the sexes and plops down among them with a big splash. Elsewhere, Tabaimo has evoked Japan's commuter trains, urban cityscapes and public toilets.

Yet although she has become a star inside and outside Japan, with dozens of biennials, triennials and museum shows to her credit, Tabaimo, 36, seems surprisingly untouched by the acclaim — at least judging from a recent interview at the James Cohan Gallery in Chelsea, where her third New York solo show, "danDAN," continues through Oct. 29.

Even as a student at the Kyoto University of Art and Design, one of Japan's most prestigious art schools, "I really didn't think about becoming an artist," she said, laughing, as she spoke through an interpreter. "I wanted to become a graphic designer. But when I tried to look for jobs, that didn't work out so well. I was somehow luckily picked up" by the art world.

A demure woman dressed in a denim workman's jumpsuit, she was initially hard to tell apart from the rest of the team installing her show. Her unassuming demeanor contrasted sharply with the work itself, which has transformed the gallery from the prototypical Chelsea white cube into three flamboyant environments, each of which seems to address some disparity between outer appearances and inner life.

In "guignorama" (2006), blue-veined hands emerge from the darkness of a black-curtained room, scratching and rubbing against each other as they sprout toes and metamorphose into feet. ("I had eczema when I was younger," Tabaimo explained, "so I spent a long time looking at my hands.") Then there is "Blow" (2009), staged in a space whose curved walls appear to be submerged in some sort of primordial soup. Limbs, organs and blood vessels stretch upward from the bubbling water, blossoming into plants and flowers when they find air.

"Every day you think about things that happen and you try to verbalize them," she said. "But what one feels inside and what comes out when one expresses oneself, they don't match up."

For the third piece, "danDAN" (2009), a three-channel video depicting apartments in a Japanese housing estate is projected into a three-sided box, creating the sense of looking down from surveillance cameras positioned on the ceiling. As footage of the identically shaped rooms scrolls

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by, viewers catch glimpses of the lives they contain — from the mundane (a messy closet, a tidily organized living room) to the disturbing (a blood-spattered bed, a woman washing her face in the toilet and a man climbing into his refrigerator). Tabaimo said the piece was inspired by the six years she spent living in Tokyo.

“You get a glimpse of your neighbors and you begin to characterize them,” she said. “Your imagination takes flight.”

For many viewers, Tabaimo’s appeal starts with her unusual aesthetic, a mélange of surreal happenings, mangalike line drawings and the softly modulated coloration of Ukiyo-e woodblock prints. Although her animations are digitized — usually by her younger sister and primary assistant, Imoimo — they begin with hundreds of drawings, made by Tabaimo with pens or an automatic calligraphy brush.

The combination fascinated Shelley Langdale, the associate curator of prints and drawings at the Philadelphia Museum of Art who put Tabaimo’s 2007 “dolefullhouse” video in the first Philagrafika triennial last year. (The piece, which had its debut at the 2007 Venice Biennale, depicts giant human hands playing with a westernized dollhouse; an octopus keeps creeping into the rooms and the walls soon crack open to reveal a pulsating vascular system.) “There is an anime look to her work,” Ms. Langdale said, “but she is also calling on traditional Japanese visual culture to allude to this constant tension in Japanese society between old customs and increasing globalism.”

From a Japanese viewpoint, Tabaimo’s biting social critique packs the hardest punch.

“When I first saw her work, I really couldn’t believe that a university student made it,” said Yuka Uematsu, a curator at the National Museum of Art in Osaka and the commissioner of the Japanese pavilion at the Venice Biennale who organized Tabaimo’s show there this year. “Not only because it was a video installation, but because of the theme itself. She was focusing on typical Japanese society” — a realism Ms. Uematsu had not seen in Japanese art before — “but critically, in her own way.”

The piece Ms. Uematsu encountered was “Japanese Kitchen,” Tabaimo’s first student work, whose mundane setting suddenly erupts into matter-of-fact savagery: after the housewife decapitates her laid-off husband, his headless body rises and shoots her dead. As if to hammer home the point that such intense feelings were simmering behind the shoji screens of recession-era Japan, Tabaimo displayed it inside a four-walled enclosure reminiscent of a typical Japanese room, its walls emblazoned with the Japanese flag.

Tabaimo soon found herself included in a number of international shows, including the 2001 Yokohama Triennale and the 2002 São Paulo Biennale. She also won the prestigious Kirin Contemporary Award competition, which led to her first solo show in 2000 at the Kirin headquarters in Osaka. Yet because Tabaimo, whose real name is Ayako Tabata, assumed that competition would be a one-time event, she showed under her nickname, a contraction of her surname and imouto, or “little sister” in Japanese.

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“It was playful,” she said. “I thought that would be it for shows, because I would get a real job.”

Fixated on that idea, it took Tabaimo several years to accept her success. After spending 2003 working for a graphic designer in London, she finally realized that art was the better path. That year “I decided on what direction my life should take,” she said. But it was the experience of living in a more multicultural society that changed her work. Meeting Japanese people who had been raised elsewhere overturned her notions about what being Japanese meant.

“Things that I thought were for certain suddenly became uncertain,” she said. “I needed to reconfirm that by looking more closely at myself.”

Recently she has gained inspiration from another unusual source: her parents. Four years ago, she and her younger sister moved home to live with them in Karazuiwa, an Aspenlike mountain resort town outside Tokyo. Her mother, a ceramicist, makes dinnerware for elaborate multicourse kaiseki meals, and her father, formerly a salaryman, helps her mother in the studio. As Tabaimo put it, laughing, “We have two creative teams going” at home.

Having a closer connection with her father, especially, she said, has enriched her insight into her own culture. “I’m beginning to understand his generation better,” she said. “I’m interested in trying to bridge the generations in my work.”

As her knowledge has deepened, her animations have grown increasingly metaphorical and abstract, with hair, hands, flowers and the sea replacing cultural specifics. And her installations have become more elaborate: her most ambitious work to date, “teleco-soup,” now representing Japan at the 2011 Venice Biennale (through Nov. 27), uses mirrors, curved walls and multiple-channel projections to give visitors the illusion that they are walking through a city subsumed by floodwaters, blossoming roses and fire. (Although the drawings for the piece were conceived and executed well before the earthquake and tsunami devastated the Tohoku region of northern Japan last March, some saw in it an allusion to these events.)

When making a work today, Tabaimo starts by focusing on the exhibition space. “I go there and I see what the air feels like,” she said. “Then I go home. That’s when words, images, motifs and movements come to me a little at a time. It’s a matter of combining them for the work to emerge.”