A lurking, gnawing sense of dread, a fear that all is not well with the world persists throughout Tabaimo's work. Be it a cask using human ingredients, insects crawling out of human hands, a turtle being flushed down a toilet or nerves running between the floors of a dollhouse, the imagery that makes up the artist's animated videos is at once nightmarish and alluring. In the dozen or so major installations that the 35-year-old artist has made during the past decade, she has refined a surreal style that fuses personal anxieties with darkly humorous hints at the underlying ills of Japanese society.

In *danDan* (2009), the world itself falls apart. Composed of three screens that arch over each other in a C-shape, the installation presents a skewed look inside a Japanese apartment, filling one's field of vision with the paraphernalia of domestic life: cupboards, drawers, coffee tables, bookshelves and stacks of futons. A pigeon flies into the bedroom and pecks at the tatami floor matting, and suddenly the apartment's four rooms and their contents begin to move. The floors slide sideways and the tatami give way to the tiles of a bathroom floor; the closet doors fade out to reveal the clothes inside. As the doors slip around, we witness a man opening a fridge and disappearing inside; a woman washing her face in a toilet bowl; and the pigeon growing several times its size—it pecks at a futon and blood spurs out. As these intimate interiors shift into generic stairwells, it becomes evident that we are ghosts, passing through the walls of a *danchi*—a housing block. Eventually, the rooms disintegrate; the floor falls away, the walls collapse and these little units of troubled domesticity tumble into a void of darkness. Only the bird escapes.

This cryptic work premiered in December last year at Tabaimo's solo exhibition at the Yokohama Museum of Art, which subsequently traveled to the National Museum of Art in Osaka. The Yokohama show's title, "Damnen no Sedai" ("Cross-Section Generation"), is Tabaimo's play on *dankei no sedai* ("mass generation" or "solidarity generation"), the term for Japan's baby boomers who were born in the second half of the 1940s.

This demographic has been discussed a lot in the media in recent years. Its members, who are thought of in Japan as selfless and group-oriented in their work ethic, are credited with achieving Japan's remarkable economic and political recovery following World War II. However, this generation has just reached retirement age in a country where one-fifth of the population is over the age of 65—a reminder that in the coming decades, Japan may struggle to sustain itself. In addition to being mired in economic stagnation for the past 20 years, Japan is lumbered with the world's second-lowest birth rate: various estimates project that the current population of 127 million will have declined by approximately one fifth in 2050 and by one half in 2100. Meanwhile, the political establishment remains deeply reluctant to compensate by loosening its strict laws on immigration.

In contrast with the *dankei* housing complex in *danDan* is the artist's metaphor for her contemporaries: while the layout of all apartments may be the same in cross section, each unit is in fact made up of idiosyncratic, individual components. Tabaimo has always used invented words in her artwork and exhibition titles because she wants to enhance the sense that her works portray a world beyond the norm. Even "Tabaimo" in itself does not reveal whether the artist is male, female or even a collective. She was born Ayako Tabata: Tabaimo is her childhood nickname, a riff on her being the second daughter in the family. Though the characters for "Tabaimo" mean "sack of potatoes," they are a contraction, a homophonic play on *tabata no imoto*, meaning "Tabata's little sister." (Meanwhile, her younger sister, who works as her personal assistant,
In danDAN, the world itself falls apart. Eventually, the apartment’s rooms disintegrate: the floor falls away, the walls collapse and these little units of troubled domesticity tumble into a void of darkness.
Stockholm, London and New York. Having been included in the international group show at the Venice Biennale in 2007, this year she was chosen to represent Japan at Venice in 2011.

Like many artists preparing for a major exhibition, Tabaimo has retreated into a period of intense focus on production and is declining requests for interviews. In August, Imai exchanged emails with ArtAsiaPacific on her sister’s behalf. “The recurrent theme of ‘failing’ in Tabaimo’s work expresses our generation’s feelings of unease,” she said. “In damn you see a void opening up before your eyes. You’re looking down on a space that has been cut up into pieces, and you construct your own stories out of it. But the floor is unstable and you’re thrown over—the floor disappears and you fall.” However, Imai is keen to emphasize that the imagery should not be read exclusively in a pessimistic light. “While Tabaimo is aware of the negative connotations that falling may have, she’s also after the positive elements—the pleasure that one can find in falling, or a sense of yearning to fall into an unseen world in front of you.”

The relationship between seen and unseen worlds, the public and the private, is the subtext of public convience (2006), which Tabaimo exhibited for the first time in a solo exhibition at Tokyo’s Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in 2006. Projected onto three walls, the animation shows the dilapidated interior of a women’s public restroom. Viewers are confronted with a series of unusual and disquieting scenes: a woman walks across the room naked in her underwear and a kindergarten student’s satchel on her back; a turtle struggles to climb out of a squat-style toilet as a woman repeatedly tries to flush it away; a baby is born out of a woman’s nose; a baby’s back and disappears down the toilet; crude sexual images and scrawls such as “I let so-and-so do this to me” appear on the wall of their own accord; and a pack of moths with camera shutters for eyes fly in through the window and flutter aggressively around the room, photographing its occupants.

Tabaimo uses these incongruous actions to articulate the murky, uneasy relationship between the individual, society and the mass media. She deliberately chooses images that can be interpreted in both culturally specific and universal terms. To a Japanese audience, the turtle with the baby on its back is a clear reference to the bittersweet 18th-century legend of Urashina Taro, in which a turtle takes a fisherman to a feast at an undersea palace, only for the fisherman to return to the surface and discover that 300 years have passed and he has lost everybody he knew and everything he owned. At the same time, the image of the baby disappearing down the toilet also evidently points to the chronic, universal issue of parents abandoning newborn children; in several interviews, Tabaimo has stated that this imagery reflects the uncertainty of whether a child is better off for being abandoned by a parent who does not want it.

Meanwhile, the camera-moth flying into the toilet stall and snapping its occupant as she changes her sanitary towel recalls the problem of men taking illicit cell-phone photographs up women’s skirts, a social ill that may not be unique to Japan but is particularly acute on crowded subway trains. Likewise, while the sinister graffiti appearing on the toilet wall could be a metaphor for the anonymity of internet usage all over the world, the connotations of this image had particular resonance for Japanese viewers during the 2000s, when the media reported heavily on the surging popularity of nichanneru ([www.2c] most websites that require some form of registration, offers total anonymity. The Japanese public has been at once appalled and fascinated by the uncensored hate speech posted on the site, which ranges from racist diatribes against Chinese and Korean people to speculation about murder suspects using real names. In stark contrast with the nonconfrontational character of Japanese public life, the virutal online reveals the underbelly of the human psyche.

The undercurrents of anxiety in Tabaimo’s work are not solely...
related to social issues. Since public venience, she has increasingly
explored the theme of physical discomfort and distortion, even in
situations where you least expect it. Projected onto the floor, midnight
set (2006) shows white waves rolling and crashing through pitch-
blackness. Patches of light periodically swell in the darkness, revealing
tangled fragments of the human body—trains, kidneys, stomachs,
mundibles, ligaments and nerves—and a strange bug-like organism
swimming around like a fish. The creature recalls yokai ("demon")
images in akkyo-e prints, a resemblance that is not entirely coincidental:
Tabaimo conceived this image while thinking about the words kami no
ke, which, depending on the characters, can mean both "hair" and
"curse." She visualized the movement of a woman's head of hair as seen
from above, and when she removed the rest of the body, the tapered
form took on an independent, ominous character of its own.

Several videos depict hands scratching or scratching each other,
a clear reference to the acute dermatitis that Tabaimo has had on her
hands since childhood. When they itch, she feels as though there
are insects crawling underneath her skin, and when the condition is
at its worst, her hands feel completely disembodied. In guignavara
(2006), a protective conglomeration of discolored hands and feet
writhes, twist and mutate out of each other to an evocative soundtrack
of sticky, slimy noises.

At the Venice Biennale in 2007, she presented dolphinehouse (2007),
which shows two giant hands opening up the floor of a Western-style
dolphinehouse, which releases a flood of water. One hand scratches the
other, then slowly they place model furniture in the building's hardly
colored rooms. At one point the hands place a small sculpture in one
of the rooms and it disappears into a wall. As the hands scratch each
other more furiously, nerves appear throughout the house, throbbing.
The hands then break in through windows on the side of the building
and tear at the floor and the walls, ripping off wallpaper and knocking
over furniture. Water pours in from a hole in the wall and the scene
fluctuates more; as the water rises human organs appear in each of the
rooms. In Tabaimo's video, what is normally a toy—an introduced
world within a world wherein a child can construct his or her own
visions of domesticity unaware of the difficulties that lie ahead in life—is
pulled apart by tormented giant hands in an act of bitter and vengeful
desecration, perhaps committed by an adult disappointed by and still
fearful of the reality of society's flaws.

Tabaimo revisited some of the motifs she used in dolphinehouse in
February 2009, when she was artist-in-residency at the Singapore Tyler
Print Institute (STPI). Learning a variety of advanced printmaking
techniques for the first time, she created several bodies of work. Among
them, the "wallpaper" series (2009) consists of expanses of wallpaper
torn away, bunting open or peeling back to expose dark, stained meshes
of veins, sinews, nerves and organs underneath. Furthermore, while
Tabaimo has pushed the video medium to the limit of its ability to
evoke fishy skin through screen movement and sound alone, the
techniques she learned at STPI allowed her to achieve a more direct,
tactile and ultimately more compelling expression of the pain of
dermatitis. The "li-inner" series (2009) resembles bruised, bleeding
skin. Where the upper layers appear to have been scratched away,
each can see a layer of scattered insect bodies followed by another layer
of nerves, muscules and ligaments. Three prints from the different
series made at STPI are now in the permanent collection of New York's
Museum of Modern Art.

At the moment, Tabaimo is very much a master of her craft. With
the STPI prints, her work reached a sublime level of technical
and conceptual refinement. She is already highly exacting about
her standards of quality, and her residency at the STPI proved that
she strives to produce outstanding art even when pushed outside of
her comfort zone of the video medium. Likewise, the new
video installation that she premiered at the "Danmen no Seizai"
show in Yokohama are her most technically accomplished yet. Below,