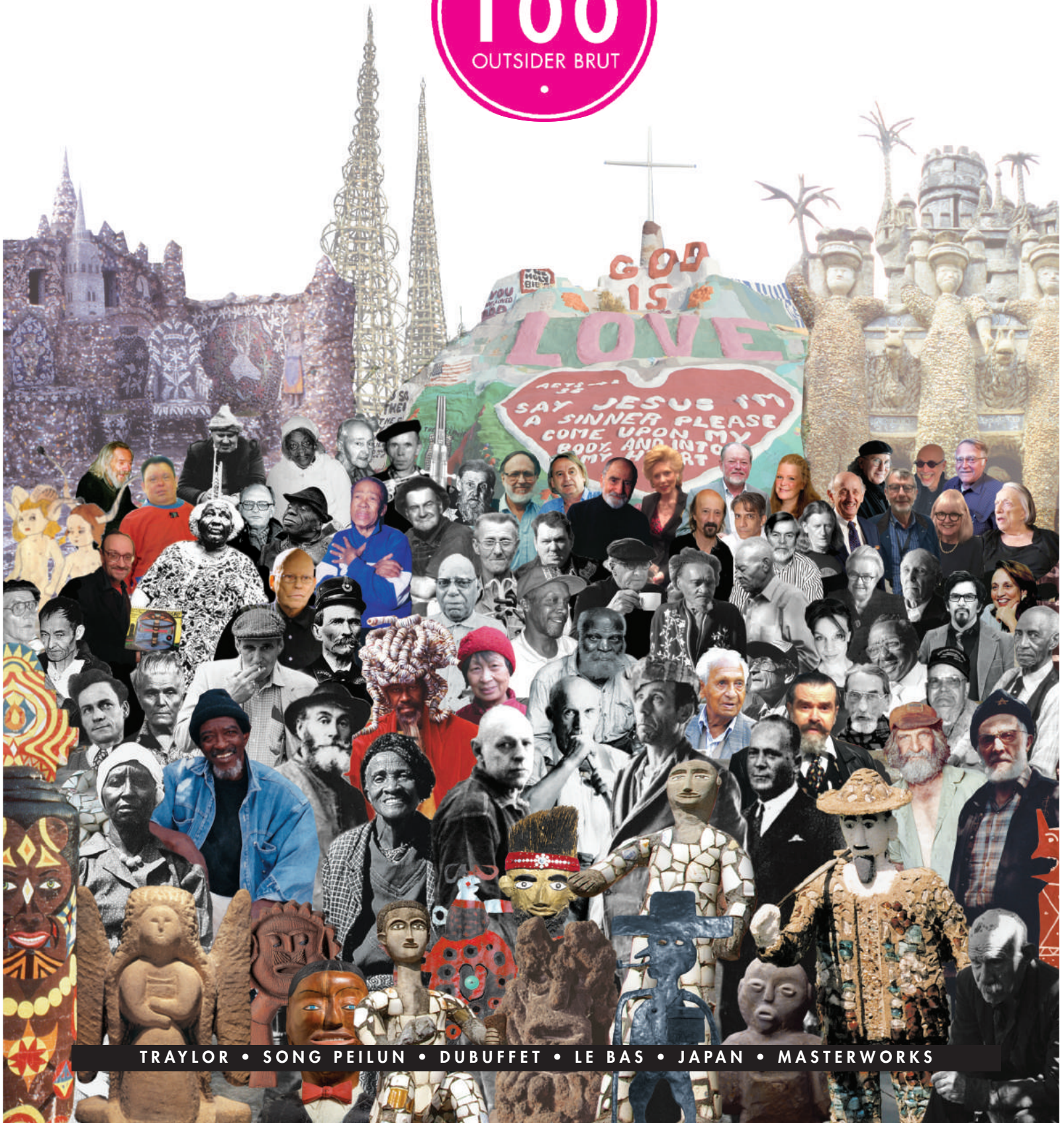


RAWVISION

O U T S I D E R A R T B R U T



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JAPAN IN FOCUS

A decade after presenting a groundbreaking show of innovative Japanese works, Switzerland's Collection de l'Art Brut revisits a country whose self-taught "auteurs" have earned international renown

EDWARD M. GÓMEZ



above: Itsuo Kobayashi, *Untitled*, 1982/89, ink on paper, 11 x 17.32 in., / 28 x 44 cm, Galerie du Marché, Lausanne

opposite: Toshio Okamoto, *Untitled (Man)*, 2015, ink on paper, 21.42 x 30.2 in., / 54.4 x 76.7 cm, Yamanami Kōbō, Kōka, Shiga Prefecture

In 2008, the Collection de l'Art Brut presented *Japon*, an exhibition of drawings, ceramics, performance-art costumes, and objects made by such Japanese autodidacts as Takashi Shuji, Shinichi Sawada, Eijiro Miyama and Takanori Herai. (In fact, the Swiss museum's involvement with art made by Japanese "auteurs" — literally, "authors", using a French term it employs to refer to art-makers — began with an earlier exhibition, *Art Incognito*, in 1997. At that time, in Japan, the French term "art brut", later adapted phonetically into Japanese as "aato buryutto" アール・ブリュット, had not yet become common, hence the title of that earlier show.)

Japon turned out to be an influential exhibition, prompting other European institutions to also present what came to be known both within Japan and overseas as "Japanese art brut". Halle Saint Pierre in Paris; the Museum im Lagerhaus in St. Gallen, Switzerland; the Outsider Art Museum in Amsterdam; the Wellcome Collection in London; and the 2013 Venice Biennale all went on to show such art. It also turned up at art fairs and in galleries in Europe and the United States.

In all of those instances, given certain language and cultural barriers, presenters outside Japan of "Japanese art brut" had to work with Japan-based





Takuya Tamura, *Untitled*, 2016, felt-pen on paper, 30.2 x 21.4 in. / 76.7 x 54.44 cm, Yamanami Kōbō, Kōka, Shiga Prefecture



Kazumi Kazuo, *Masato and I, Going to Yokohama Together*, n.d., ceramic, 14.76 x 10.6 x 9.44 in. / 37.5 x 27 x 24 cm, David and Sabrina Alaimo

intermediaries in order to learn about who was producing this kind of art and seek opportunities to show it. Often, they collaborated with what are known as “social-welfare organisations” in Japan, which house art-therapy workshops in which disabled persons take part. Some such institutions have embraced the *art brut* label to identify and promote some of their participants’ creations. For better or worse, especially within Japan, *art brut* has come to be associated almost exclusively with artworks produced by disabled persons. Meanwhile, outside the country, “Japanese *art brut*” has tended to group — and obscure — the individual creative voices of its makers under a broad art-brand label.

Given my Japan-related background, Sarah Lombardi, the director of the Collection de l’Art Brut, invited me to undertake fresh research about Japan’s art brut creators and to assemble a new exhibition of their works for the Swiss museum. Its goals: to showcase more vividly the individual artistic visions of such “auteurs” and to call attention to genuine *art brut* makers in Japan, whether they are associated with facilities for the disabled or completely independent of them. This time, too, the CAB sought to develop all-new, direct relationships with self-taught artists, institutions, galleries, and collectors. Lombardi notes, “This project expands our research

about Japan at a time when its discovery of *art brut* is in full swing and even as, in Japan, the concept of this kind of art is still relatively new.”

During several research trips to Japan, I met and studied the creations of a wide variety of self-taught artists around the country. I shared my findings and critical analyses with Lombardi and my curatorial colleagues at the CAB. We decided to call the museum’s new exhibition *Art brut du Japon, un autre regard* (Art Brut from Japan, Another Look), a title suggesting that we would look not only at more recent artistic productions from Japan but also propose to examine them in a new way.

In fact, this “new” way of looking at and thinking about them employs some well-established, critical-analytical criteria, which the French modern artist Jean Dubuffet, *art brut*’s pioneering theorist in the 1940s and the CAB’s founder in the 1970s, had articulated. Thus, in considering how technically or thematically inventive the Japanese works we were examining might be, we also looked for what made them original and unique. To what extent each art-maker’s works express a distinctive creative, philosophical, spiritual, or even enigmatic vision — this criterion was important as we selected the paintings, drawings, sculptures, and other productions of twenty-four “auteurs”.



Momoka Imura, *Untitled*, after 2013, fabric and plastic buttons, variable dimensions; David and Sabrina Alaimo

Earlier this year, I travelled to Japan to round up many of the more than 170 artworks (some are very small) that were being loaned to the exhibition by various individuals or institutions and take them to Tokyo, where a specialised art-handling company prepared them for shipping to Switzerland. Weeks later, I was present in Lausanne, along with Pascale Jeanneret, a CAB staff curator, who also plays vital registrar and exhibition-management roles, and Morgane Bonvallat, an intern who had earned a master's degree in museum studies at the University of Neuchâtel, when three big crates containing the artworks arrived from Japan.

Out of these treasure chests sprung large abstract compositions in ink and washi (traditional Japanese paper) by Hiroyuki Doi; multicoloured-grid drawings of people and animals by Takuya Tamura; Nana Yamazaki's strange garments made of embroidered, puckered fabric; mixed-media masks by the reclusive artist known as "Strange Knight" (who died this year and always wore a mask); and much more.

Bonvallat recalls, "The moment when the crates were opened was exciting. At last, we could discover the pieces we had been working on for months, but we also were quite taken by the way the Japanese shippers had packed each object with precision." Custom-made containers for each artwork, she notes,

had been fitted together in each crate like three-dimensional puzzle pieces "to within one millimeter" of snugness between them.

Art conservator Mijanou Gold, CAB's collections technician, and Marie Ducimetière, an intern working with her in the museum's conservation department, recognised the fragility of many of the works from Japan. Gold observes, for example, that "the contrast between the weight" of Kazumi Kamae's ceramic sculptures of fluid, multi-limbed figures, with numerous faces, "and the fineness of the little scales, like grains of rice" that cover their surfaces, "is substantial", while Ducimetière, a recent graduate of the Haute École Arc in Neuchâtel, where her conservation studies focused on scientific, technical, and horological objects, notes that "the greatest challenge" in handling such works lies in putting them in their assigned places. "One wrong move could leave a mark" or otherwise harm them, she says.

As my colleagues and I became familiar with the appearances and physical characteristics of the works to be exhibited, some of which were borrowed from sources in Europe, Lombardi asked me to tap into my background in graphic design to develop the design of the exhibition (known as its "scénographie" in French). Since we had to place many objects in a loft-like chamber in the attic of the Château Beaulieu,



Akina Miura, from the Art Center Ainosato workshop in Sapporo working on her ten-metre-long drawing, *People of the Past*, 2017, photo: Edward M. Gómez



Collection de l'Art Brut head technician Alain Corbaz and museum staffers installing Miura's work, photo: Edward M. Gómez

which houses the museum (a space tucked under a Mansard roof, with inclined outer walls) and in an adjoining, smaller gallery, I created a design with free-standing walls and pedestals to display Kamae's ceramics and other works in the normally overlooked spaces located beneath the inclined walls on the perimeter of the room.

The museum's experienced head technician, Alain Corbaz, who knows every square centimeter of its 18th-century building, translated my sketches into expertly crafted, custom-made display platforms and found special, luminous coloured paper to line long vitrines. That's because a key component of the exhibition's design is the way it picks up colours from the palette of its accompanying catalogue. It was conceived by Miki Kadokura and Tilmann Steffen Wendelstein, a Japanese-German graphic-design team whose company, The Simple Society, is based in Berlin and Tokyo. In choosing them to design both the

exhibition's bilingual, French-English catalogue (published by the CAB and 5 Continents, a Milan-based producer of art books) and its Japanese-language edition (issued by Kokusho Kankokai, a leading publisher of art books based in Tokyo), we wanted to document the show in a way that would reflect the lively, contemporary visual culture of Japan.

Visitors to the exhibition will see how the works on view have been arranged to highlight relationships between their themes or materials, or the techniques by which they were created. They will see how psychologically intense, expressionist ink sketches by Issei Nishimura enter into a dialogue with small, coloured-pencil drawings of nymph-like women and strange animals by Toshiro Kuwabara, which are shot through with a psycho-sexual charge, or how Ryuji Nomoto's abstract sculptures made with drippy, coloured glue echo in three dimensions wiry, knotty ballpoint-pen-on-paper compositions (all



Undated, mixed-media mask by Strange Knight, photo: Edward M. Gómez



The old house in Osaka, Japan, that is the home of Atelier Corners, an art-making workshop for persons with disabilities, photo: Edward M. Gómez



Ceramic works by Kazumi Kamae in the conservation studio of the museum, photo: Edward M. Gómez



Conservators unpacking large ink drawings by Hiroyuki Doi, photo: Edward M. Gómez

titled "Soap") by Eiichi Shibata. They will find Momoka Imura's plastic-button-covered fabric balls of varying sizes, which recall Moeko Inada's minimalist ovals in coloured pencil and ballpoint pen on paper, rotund forms that glow and hum in the show's first room.

Staff curator Jeanneret says, "I was seduced by the drawings on canvas of Katsuyoshi Takenaka [of fantasy castles and landscapes]. I like the expressive power of Strange Knight's masks made from found materials, and the illustrated notebooks of Itsuo Kobayashi are surprising in their obsessive approach to their subject and their point of view." Kobayashi, a former restaurant employee, meticulously documents every meal he eats.

For me, curating *Art Brut from Japan, Another Look* was a dream project that brought together three of my abiding interests: Japanese culture, art brut, and Switzerland, the country in which I grew up. Museum director Lombardi and I wondered: What would

Dubuffet have thought of such an exhibition? She observed, "He was always curious about new discoveries of *art brut*. I think that he would have been interested in those from a country in which a sense of conformity is always very present, works that are born on the margins of such a society." Visitors to the exhibition can savour for themselves what we have found — compelling, often mysterious artworks from one of the most effervescent cultures in the world today.

all images courtesy of the Collection of Art Brut, Lausanne

Art Brut du Japon, un autre regard (Art Brut from Japan, Another Look) is on view at the Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne, Switzerland, through April 28, 2019.

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Koji Nishioka, participant in the Atelier Corners workshop, working on one of his drawings of musical scores. photo: Edward M. Gómez



Miruka, who goes by one name and works at the Yellow facility in Osaka, photo: by Edward M. Gómez