

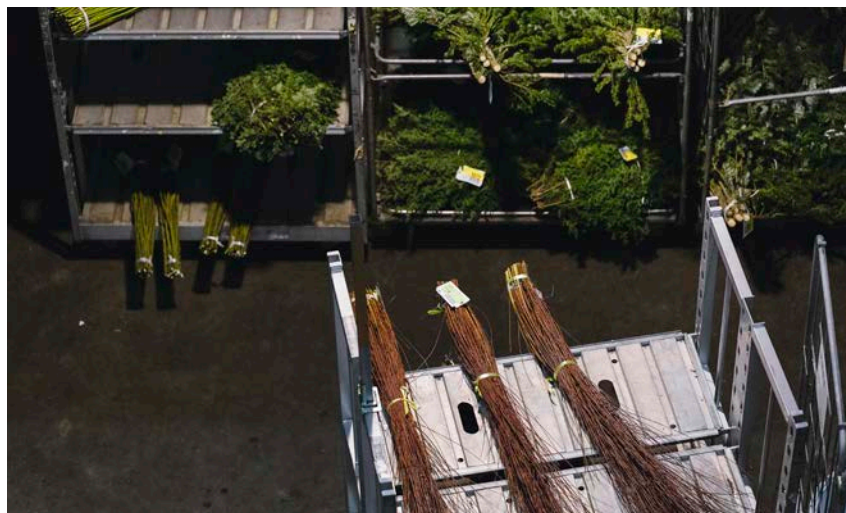


FLOWER POWER



Inside the dreamy, living laboratories of Japan's new wave of botanical artists, a group of punk musicians and modern architects are revisiting and expanding the ever-relevant philosophy behind ikebana

By Claire Knox
Photography Nandin Yuan



IN THE WEE HOURS OF THE MORNING, DEEP INSIDE THE SOUTHERN PORT SUBURBS OF TOKYO BAY,

neat streets are lined with shipping containers and factories. The only signs of life you may stumble across would be one of the dock's shift workers cruising by on a forklift, or a truck driving through. For a megacity of 40 million people that never seems to sleep – at pretty much any hour, one can find night owls slurping up bowls of ramen or izakaya still buzzing with ruddy-cheeked patrons swigging bottles of sake – it can be slightly disorienting. But step inside Ota Ichiba, the world's second-biggest flower market and Japan's largest wholesale bazaar, and the dark night erupts into an explosion of vivid colors and extraordinary shapes.

Before midnight, growers begin delivering the five million flowers and potted plants that will be traded inside a purpose-built hangar each day. At 7AM on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, the famed floriculture auctions begin,

highlighted by auctioneers shouting and waving bunches of dahlias and sprigs of delicate orchids. Florists liken the scene to a Wall Street trading floor, where they're transfixed by a high-tech system tracking sales and bids. Sales are over in minutes, with the winner's numbers flashing up on the screen. There's even an impressive distribution system that looks like a cross between Los Angeles' tangled highways and a rollercoaster.

But flowers are ephemeral and time is of the essence, so the city's most successful florists arrive much earlier than this. Eri Narita – a modish fine art flower sculptor from the avant-garde collective AMKK – is one such early bird. She and her colleagues beat the crowds and shuffle into Ota Ichiba by 4am, scouring their preferred suppliers and cherry-picking blooms that are so striking they won't even make it to the auction floor. They inspect dusty pink Japanese roses

grown in the summer fields of Shizuoka; lilac and myrtle-hued hydrangeas; wads of sweet peas and other pretty cottage garden flowers; wild and wispy banksia. They also find tropical gingers and celestial-scented jasmine.

NARITA MAJORED IN POLITICS AT university but 10 years ago decided to follow her artistic aspirations. She started training with AMKK's founder Makoto Azuma, who himself started out chasing a different dream: when he was 17, he moved to Tokyo from Fukuoka to become a punk rock singer. He took a part-time job at Ota Ichiba, but his passion for botany led him down a new path.

Flowers are big business in Japan. In 2012, the country's floriculture industry was worth an estimated \$8 billion, with 67,000 growers and 39,000 flower shops. Ota Ichiba last year traded about \$1.5 million worth of flora per day and around \$460 million a year. More than just being a cog in the economy, however, flora has a long artistic legacy in Japan.

The ancient imperial art of *ikebana* – a minimalist yet striking Japanese technique of flower arrangement – originated, like bonsai, in the sixth or seventh century as a form of altar worship, but gained in popularity once the Japanese tea ceremony took off in the 16th century. The practice is deeply rooted in spirituality and the Japanese philosophy of Zen. Aesthetically subtle, the flower arrangements emphasize unlikely elements of a plant, such as its stems or leaves, and reference heaven and earth, and the sun and moon, through the careful attention to shapes, lines and forms. Back in the day, ikebana masters worked in silent, minimalist surrounds in order to foster a deeper connection to nature. Tied intrinsically into the culture's immense emphasis on *omotenashi* (hospitality), ikebana was traditionally placed in the *tokonoma*, or built-in recessed space, of a home to welcome people in.

Azuma, who's now 40, and his edgy AMMK collective are part of a new breed of experimental Tokyo creatives breathing fresh life into this ancient art – one that both they and even the old guard of ikebana practitioners worry is in danger

THIS SPREAD
Morning scenes at Tokyo's Ota Ichiba, the world's second-biggest flower market



“
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THIS PAGE
Makoto Azuma, the founder of artistic collective AMKK, creates living works of art in his Tokyo studio

of fading into obscurity. While it has more recently gained popularity abroad, back in Japan, apprenticeships with the ageing ikebana masters are dwindling.

But through their innovative spins on ikebana – in one of Azuma's most brilliant experiments, he launched a psychedelic flower capsule and a 50-year-old white pine bonsai 30,000 meters into space from the Nevada desert – such artists are hoping to revive a fresh fascination among a younger Japanese audience. A few are also drawing attention to the big issues facing the world: conflict, war, climate change and geopolitics – subject matter some see as incongruous to the old tenets of ikebana, and yet perceived by others to tap into its purpose of uniting nature and humanity.

Azuma, for his part, already has the

international art world enraptured with his poetic, bold experiments that explore the cycle of life and death. Along with sending his one-meter-tall Shiki 1 bonsai and Exobotanica flower sculptures into the stratosphere with cameras and a GPS strapped on in order to “see the movement and beauty of plants and flowers suspended in space”, he's captured his work in all sorts of extreme climates, from glaciers to deserts.

For Azuma's *In Bloom* series, AMKK created a floating botanical garden in the middle of the Philippines' Hinoba-an Sea, near Negros Island – a four-meter tower of 10,000 glorious flame-red heliconias. Both images – taken by Azuma's terrifically talented business partner, Shunsuke Shiinoki – and the sculptures themselves have formed exhibitions at a number of cutting-edge galleries and museums, including Sotheby's in London. And earlier this year, the artist sculpted four giant, surreal, plastic fiber flowers for Singapore's Gardens by the Bay.

AFTER THE COLORFUL MORNING

markets, Narita invites me to the AMKK flower lab in the hip fashion district of Minami-Aoyama – a few hilly blocks from bustling Omotesando Station – to meet the artist himself. It's a secret garden of a studio, with refrigerated walls, industrial light bulbs that drip from the ceiling and stainless-steel work stations, each with their own iPad mood boards.

The space doubles as Jardins de Fleurs, an haute-couture flower atelier Azuma founded in 2002 with Shiinoki. It's here

that the duo, along with Narita and 14 other flower sculptors, work on commercial projects that fund AMKK's experimental art. Each morning, they work from 7am to 10am, creating various arrangements for clients and big couture houses such as Hermès and Fendi.

As it happened, it was high fashion that propelled Azuma into the art world: he says the turning point in his career came 11 years ago, when he was commissioned to create a whimsical window display for Colette in Paris. Now, collectors purchase his sculptures for up to \$400,000 a pop. Back in his Tokyo lab, the AMKK team is able to produce around 20 flower arrangements during each morning's session. With commissions going for around \$500, it's easier to fathom how Azuma can now fund space journeys and trips to the Arctic.

"Azuma doesn't tell us what to do, and there are no [written] rules. It's about feeling and following what the flowers tell you," Narita tells me. "We have such a diversity of flowers in Japan. But we try to explore new possibilities of what can be beautiful – our work is not just about *kawaii* (cute) or pretty bouquets."

Watching Azuma in practice is surprisingly meditative. Slender and grungy, with a freshly shaven head, he carefully – but quickly – picks up a single, creamy Calla lily, sculpting it into white waratah flowers and twigs that sprout out of an aqua-based sponge. "The Japanese way of thinking is to not waste, to respect that which has lived," he says. "Many florists use the head of the flower



and discard the stems and leaves, but I think it is important to use these, as you would do in [traditional] ikebana."

Photographer Shiinoki, with his eye-catching afro and stylish specs, is quieter; the yin to Azuma's excitable yang. While neither have ever studied ikebana with a *sensei* (master), they trust that the ancient art's ideology is in their blood – "not just in terms of flowers but in our sense of balance and the order of life," Shiinoki says.

After the last arrangement is completed, Azuma takes us upstairs to his "research lab", a spacious room with Apple computers, sketches strung up on the walls and a small, dead bonsai tree that the artist had grafted individual green needles onto. As we chat over hot

THIS PAGE
At Hoshinoya Tokyo, an ikebana display greets guests at the entrance



Hamarikyu Onshi-teien
This tranquil garden was once the hunting grounds of the Tokugawa Clan. Situated on an island, it's surrounded by an ancient walled moat. The teahouse, bridges and groves are all charming.
1-1 Hama-rikyu-teien

Mejiro Teien
Flower viewing is something of a national sport in Japan, no more so than during the sakura season. Head to this small but beautiful park for a cherry blossom experience that includes drinks and snacks. **3-20-18 Mejiro**

Nezu Museum Gardens
This Omotesando museum houses antiques from the Shang and Zhou dynasties. It also contains one of the city's most striking urban gardens with stone lanterns and a beautiful teahouse.
nezu-muse.or.jp/en

SECRET GARDENS

Three of the most beautiful, lesser-known oases in Tokyo

sencha tea, Azuma screens footage of his latest and "most difficult" project. Last week he and the team sent a flower sculpture and cameras encased in a steel structure 1,000 feet under water into Japan's Suruga Bay, a project dubbed *Sephiothic Flower: Diving into the Unknown*. The collective spent three years researching the science of sending a living plant that far beneath the surface.

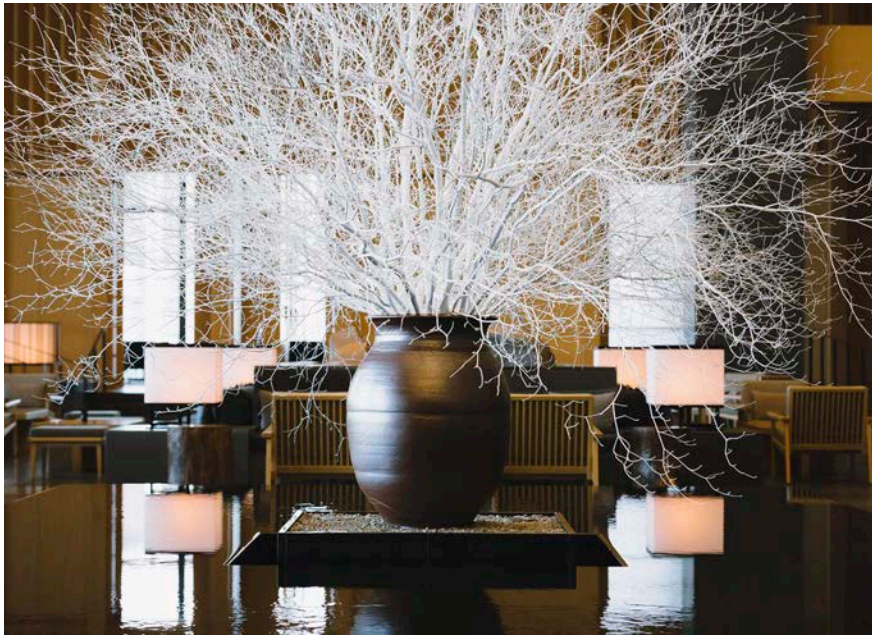
"I expected the intense water pressure to kill these seemingly delicate plants very quickly, but I learned a new characteristic of the flowers – that they could withstand both this and the rough waves. I was impressed," Azuma reveals. "To me it was symbolic of the world right now. We are in such a fragile, scary place. I want to show the power of nature and why we need to protect her."

THE INFLUENCE OF IKEBANA'S principles can be seen almost everywhere in Japan – from the precision of Tokyo's urban planning through to the simple yet sublime presentation of food. At Hoshinoya, a luxurious new 84-room ryokan-style hotel in the Otemachi financial district, huge cypress doors open to reveal a double-height genkan entrance. It's all designed to guide your eyes straight to a tokonoma housing an ikebana display of a sacred, pink lotus.

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And later that week, visiting the cool, hushed halls of Aman Tokyo, the latest in the swish brand's resort empire, I find tiny vases of ikebana in alcoves in front of each room. Occupying the top six floors of the soaring 38-floor Otemachi Tower, one of the reasons Aman chose the location was because of the wooded forest planted at its base featuring more than 56,000 plants. The towering lobby – designed to look like a shoji lantern and located beneath a 30m ceiling made of washi rice paper – features meditation gardens and sweeping views of the metropolis that extend out to Mount Fuji. What caught my eye, though, was the ethereal ikebana sculpture in the center of the room. In the middle of an inky pool of water stands a flourishing magnolia

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An ikebana installation at Aman Tokyo; Masahito Kitano, Aman Tokyo's onsite ikebana master





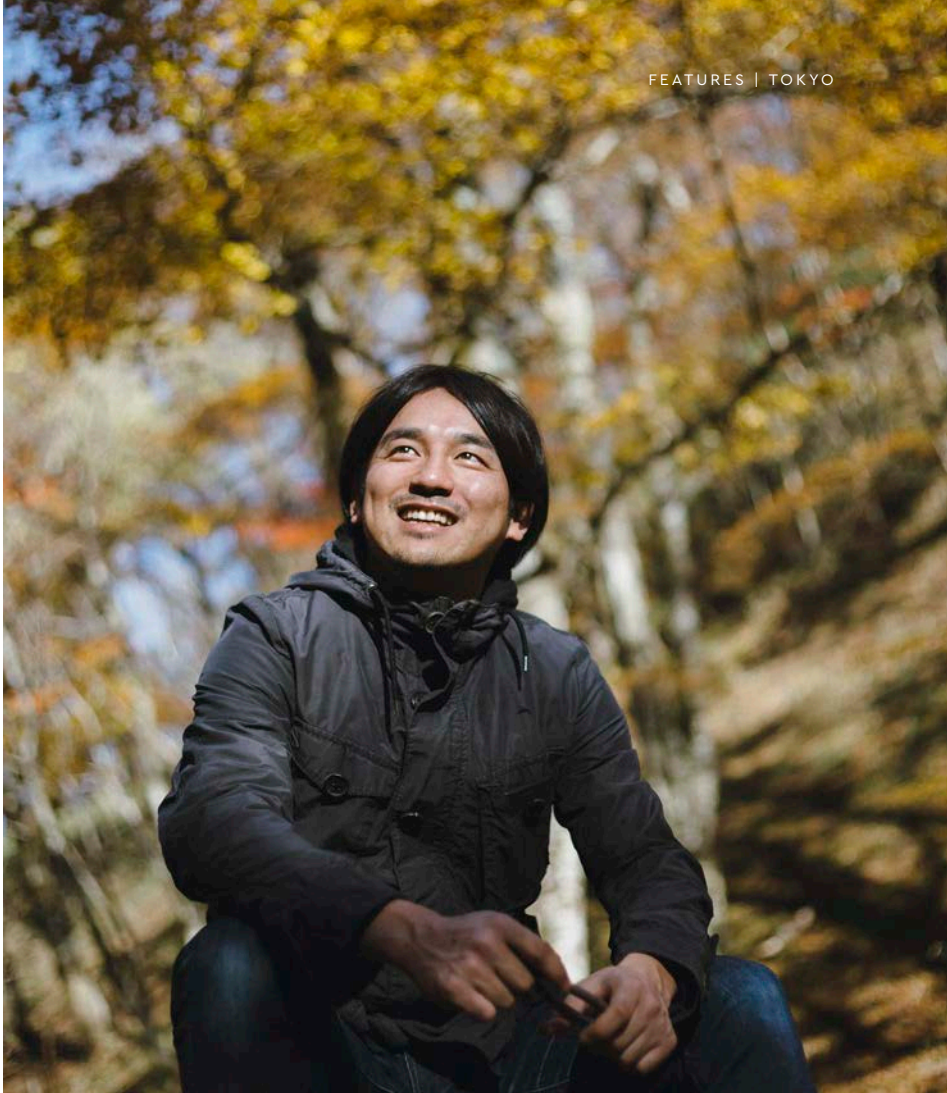
grandiflora tree, its branches unfurling out like the limbs of a creature from a Guillermo del Toro fantasy film.

Aman's onsite ikebana master Masahito Kitano tells me he imagines the history of each branch before creating a piece. "We are trying to cut out the original Japanese landscape in each season. The changing pageant of the seasons strongly affects the feelings of the Japanese people, and those feelings eventually find expression in ikebana," he says.

MUCH OF IKEBANA'S HISTORY IS

rooted in Japan's culture hub of Kyoto, yet if there's a nucleus for the art form in Tokyo it's the Sogetsu School, founded in 1927. Students from all around the world travel to Tokyo to take classes taught by accomplished sensei here – its founding *lemoto* (master) was Sofu Teshigahara, who was hailed the "Picasso of flowers" by *TIME* magazine and counted Dalí and Gaudí as close confidants.

Located just 15 minutes from the AMKK studio, in Aoyama, its current campus was built in 1977 by Japanese modernist architect Kenzō Tange. The facility's centerpiece is an ethereal and serene stone garden that serves as the canvas for stunning floral sculptures. In June, design firm Nendo installed 40,000 shards of polished steel as part of an exhibition to celebrate the school's 90th birthday. The mirrored landscape gave the effect of the ikebana flowers gently bleeding into the walls and ceiling.



I chat with 80-year-old sensei Reiko Takenaka, a member of the old guard of ikebana artists whose work is now on show in the city's leafy New Otani Hotel. Initially, she started practicing ikebana to "gain more wisdom", but continued with the activity to "find her soul".

One of Takenaka's most successful local students is 34-year-old Yuki Tsuji, who I later meet for coffee in a hip café at the arty Spiral Building. Tsuji is a trained architect, and it was while studying the concepts of old Japanese tearooms that he discovered the deeper meaning of ikebana and "really got into it". Fast forward 10 years, and he's creating pieces for brands such as Porsche and Bang & Olufsen, and performing at New York's esteemed Carnegie Hall.

Tsuji's contemporary work is incredibly affecting. Mostly created as part of live performances or captured on video, it's as much about the process as the finished piece, and is more subdued and subtle than Azuma's work. His "studio" is a two-hour drive away on the slopes of Mount Fuji, and it's here that he collects

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Yuki Tsuji, a trained architect and ikebana practitioner who's performed at New York's Carnegie Hall

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Yuki Tsuji at work; one
of Yuki Tsuji's stunning
ikebana creations

all of his materials: huge, twisting branches; softly cascading cherry blossoms; curved poles of bamboo.

"One of the big reasons I chose ikebana instead of architecture was that there seems to be a sense of urgency around these old arts – maybe there's just not so much time left to learn them. People around the world know that Japan has such a strong history of crafts, yet the old masters are ageing and dying. I hope that people like me can soak up and preserve the knowledge of greats such as Sensei Takenaka," he says.

His Carnegie Hall performance last December, in front of 500 patrons, was one example of this. Tsuji had originally planned to bring his Japanese materials with him, but customs and quarantine thwarted that plan. Instead, he reversed his concept and used indigenous

American plants and even dead animal bones and antlers sourced from the wintery woods of upstate New York. "Many of my tools would not work with these stiffer, drier trees. But in the end, when I performed wearing my kimono and employing a Japanese technique with foreign ingredients, it created something very new," Tsuji recalls.

IN APRIL THIS YEAR, TSUJI WAS INVITED by the Emperor and Empress of Japan to perform for the Spanish King and Queen at Tokyo's Imperial Palace. "This made me conscious of presenting a more global form of ikebana," he says, gazing pensively across the sea of café diners. "You know, look at what has just happened this morning," he muses, in reference to the ballistic missile North Korea had just fired over Japan's northern island of Hokkaido earlier that day.

"Look at the world now – not just North Korea but the United States [and other countries]. We have these leaders not showing any form of compassion. To me plants and flowers are a metaphor for compassion and delicacy," Tsuji says. "Ikebana is about cherishing diversity, and treating all materials with respect."

In response to these ideas of world peace, Tsuji is planning to tour his work internationally next spring, including a stop in the Philippines. "There has never been a more important time for this," he stresses. "It's about celebrating the beauty of the moment. There is always a really strong reaction when people witness something so fleeting."

PAL flies daily between Manila and Haneda, Manila and Narita, and Cebu and Narita.

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TOKYO



Flower brigade

AMKK are far from the only artistic collective using flowers as a medium for expression. London-based artist Rebecca Louise Law has worked on stunning creations for Hermès, Jimmy Choo and Jo Malone. Meanwhile, in New York, designer Lewis Miller and his team took to the streets earlier this year and dressed up trash cans in roses, azaleas and sunflowers, turning these everyday objects into works of art. And over in Melbourne, botanical design studio Loose Leaf strings up dazzling flower wreaths in laneways and alleys all across the city.

