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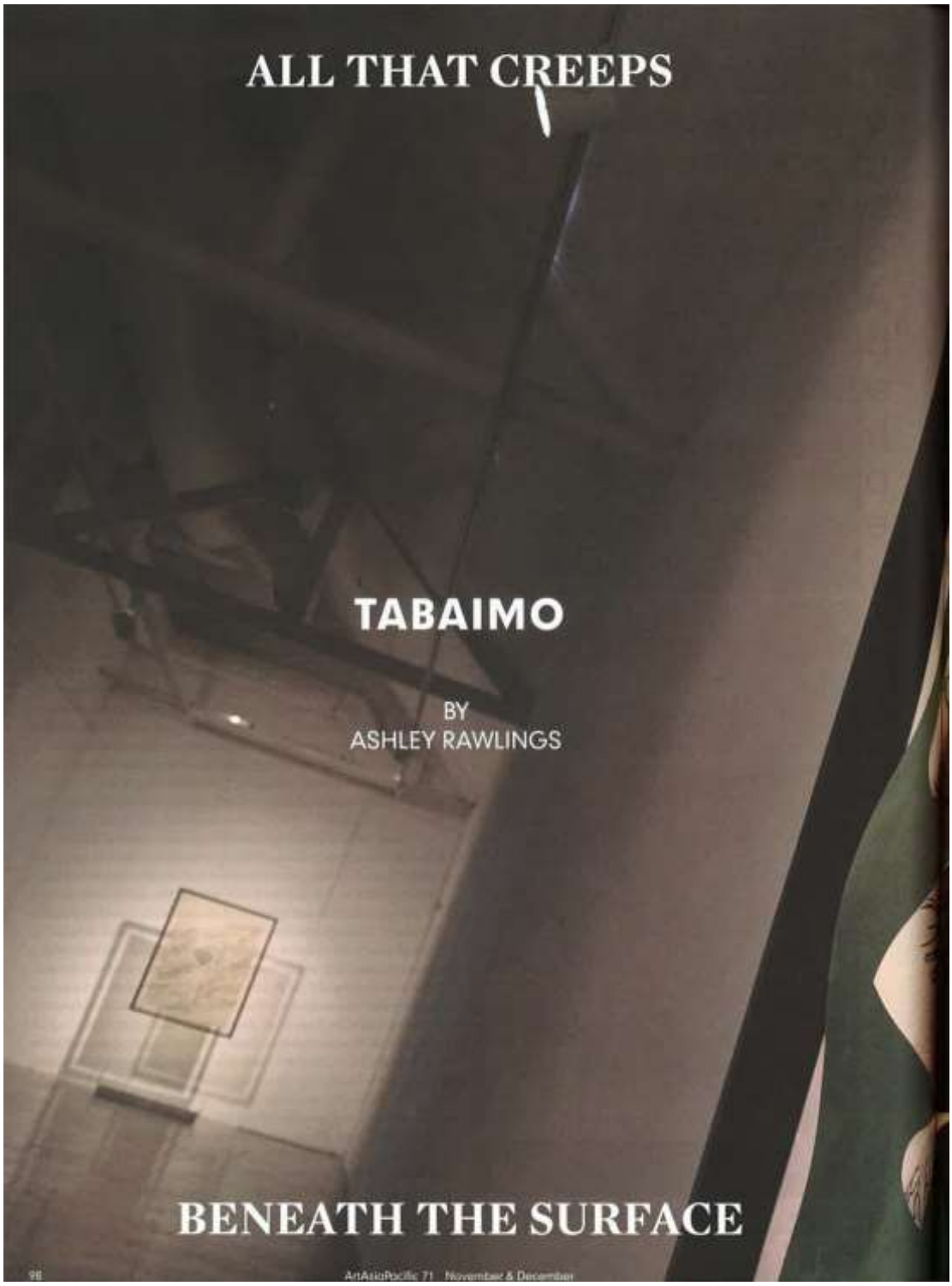
Rawlings, Ashley, "All That Creeps Below the Surface: Tabaimo," *Art Asia Pacific*, November/December 2010.



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**MIDNIGHT SEA**, 2006, video installation. Photo by Hirotaka Yonekura. Courtesy the artist; Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo; and James Cohan Gallery, New York.

(Previous Spread) **WALLPAPER 03**, 2009, mixed media, 167 x 131 x 15 cm. Installation view at Singapore Tyler Print Institute, 2010. Courtesy the artist and Singapore Tyler Print Institute.

A lurking, gnawing sense of dread, a fear that all is not well with the world persists throughout Tabaimo's work. Be it a cook 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 rooms 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 spurts 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, "Danmen no Sedai" ("Cross-Section Generation"), is Tabaimo's play on *dankai 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 *dankai no sedai*, Tabaimo sees members of the *danmen no sedai*—her moniker for the generation born in the late 1970s—as being more individualist than their parents. The cross section of the *danchi* 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,

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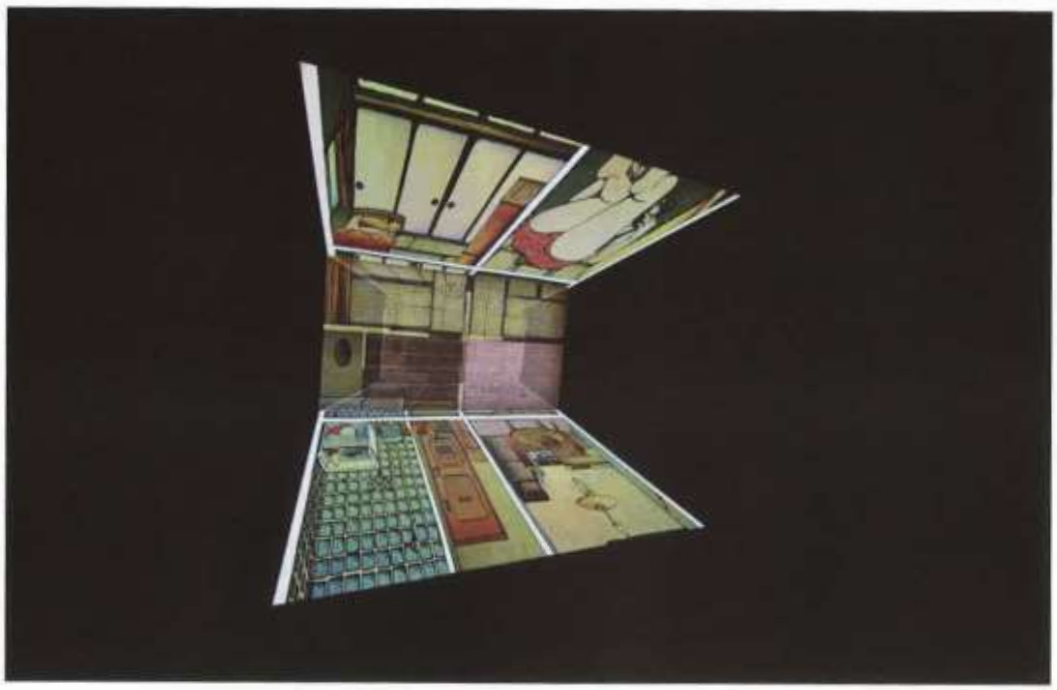

**DANDAN**, 2009, video installation. Courtesy the artist; Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo; and James Cohan Gallery, New York.

goes by the name Imoimo, which literally reads as "many potatoes" and is derived from *imoto no imoto*, meaning "the younger sister of the younger sister.")

Among her early interests, Tabaimo cites the artist Keiichi Tanaami, the authors of the horror manga genre such as Junji Ito and Kazuo Umeda and a chance discovery of a book of Hokusai's 18th-century *ukiyo-e* prints, which influenced her use of color. But she was quick to synthesize these elements into her own vision. When she completed her studies in information design at the Kyoto University of Art and Design in 1999, her graduation piece, the three-channel video installation *Japanese Kitchen* (1999) won the Kirin Contemporary Art Award's Grand Prize, gaining her wide recognition for her distinctive style from the very beginning of her career.

Mounted inside a small room-like structure made of paper screens and a sloping floor of four tatami, *Japanese Kitchen* portrays a housewife cooking with a disturbing array of ingredients. A human brain simmers in a cooking pot; a politician campaigns inside a microwave; and an old woman chants in a jar. The housewife opens her refrigerator; inside, a miniature man dressed in a suit is working at a desk. She picks him up, places him on the chopping board and cuts off his head—a visual pun on the expression *kubi o kiru* (literally, "to cut a neck"), meaning "to fire someone." It hints at the sharp rise in Japan[illegible]conomic bubble burst in the early 1990s, a source of shame and disappointment for a country that had maintained extremely low levels of unemployment during previous decades. The radio announces that it will be "raining high school students today," and three figures fall past the window—an oblique reference to Japan's high rate of teenage suicides. *Japanese Kitchen* was the centerpiece of a solo exhibition at Tokyo's Gallery Koyanagi in 2003, and since then Tabaimo has held solo shows at major museums and galleries in Tokyo, Yokohama, Osaka, Paris,

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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, Imoimo exchanged emails with *ArtAsiaPacific* on her sister's behalf. "The recurrent theme of 'falling' in Tabaimo's work expresses our generation's feelings of unease," she said. "In *danDAN* 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, Imoimo 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 conVENience* (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, climbs onto the turtle'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 15th-century legend of Urashima 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 its 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 vitriol online reveals the underbelly of the human psyche.

The undercurrents of anxiety in Tabaimo's work are not solely

**PUBLIC CONVENIENCE**, 2006, still from video installation. Courtesy the artist; Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo; and James Cohan Gallery, New York.

**WALLPAPER 04**, 2009, mixed media, 167 x 143 x 19 cm. Courtesy the artist and Singapore Tyler Print Institute.

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related to social issues. Since *public conVENience*, she has increasingly explored a theme of physical discomfort and distortion, even in situations where you least expect it. Projected onto the floor, *midnight sea* (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—brains, kidneys, stomachs, mandibles, ligaments and nerves—and a strange wig-like organism swimming around like a fish. The creature recalls *yokai* ("demon") images in *ukiyo-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 mutating 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 *guignorama* (2006), a grotesque conglomeration of discolored hands and feet writhe, twist and mutate out of each other to an evocative soundtrack of sticky, slimy noises.

At the Venice Biennale in 2007, she presented *dolefullhouse* (2007), which shows two giant hands opening up the front of a Western-style dollhouse, which releases a flood of water. One hand scratches the other, then slowly they place model furniture in the building's luridly colored rooms. At one point the hands place a small octopus 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 floods once more; as the water rises human organs appear in each of the rooms. In Tabaimo's video, what is normally a toy—an introverted world-within-a-world where a child can construct his or her own vision 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 *dolefullhouse* 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, bursting open or peeling back to expose dark, singed meshes of veins, sinews, nerves and organs underneath. Furthermore, while Tabaimo has pushed the video medium to the limit of its ability to evoke itchy skin through on-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 "in-inner" series (2009) resembles bruised, bleeding skin. Where the upper layers appear to have been scratched away, one can see a layer of scattered insect bodies followed by another layer of nerves, muscles 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 installations that she premiered at the "Danmen no Sedai" show in Yokohama are her most technically accomplished yet. *Blow, Fragment* and *yudangami* (all 2009) are large, immersive installations focusing on dismembered bodies, their colors and their evocations of alien worlds richer than ever. However, the tropes that define her practice—the introspection, the unease, the anxieties about the body, all rendered in Hokusai's colors—risk becoming formulaic. The challenge she faces as she prepares for the Venice Biennale is to find fresh perspectives on the subject matter that intrigues her.

**IN-INNER 03**, 2009,
mixed media, 170 x 129 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Singapore Tyler Print Institute.

Eight months before the opening of the Biennale, Tabaimo has yet to give specific details of her plans. But she has stated that she will address the idea of Japan's "Galápagos Syndrome." It is unclear who originally coined the term, but it refers to the Galápagos Islands west of Ecuador, an archipelago renowned for its unique wildlife. When it entered into popular usage a couple of years ago, Galápagos Syndrome described the way Japan's cell phones have become so advanced that they only function in Japan, while the majority of non-Japanese phones are unable to connect to Japanese networks. Now, however, the term encompasses the notion that, for such a technologically advanced nation, Japan is unusually disconnected from global affairs and its society may be evolving in isolation from globalization.

Such a vast generalization is full of flaws, but the analogy nevertheless corresponds with Japan's post-1990 identity crisis. Two decades of economic stagnation, aggravated by the current global recession, have greatly diminished Japan's self-confidence. In August, China overtook Japan as the world's second-largest economy and India is in fourth place—a hugely symbolic shift in the global balance of power. In this context the Galápagos Syndrome of the *danmen no sedai* is a profoundly charged subject for Tabaimo to work with; the "cross-cut" generation can choose to become more introverted and isolated, burying its collective head in the sand, or it can reinvent itself. As a member of this generation, Tabaimo is in an ideal position to convey the mood of a country that may have no choice but to take pleasure in falling into the unseen world in front of it.