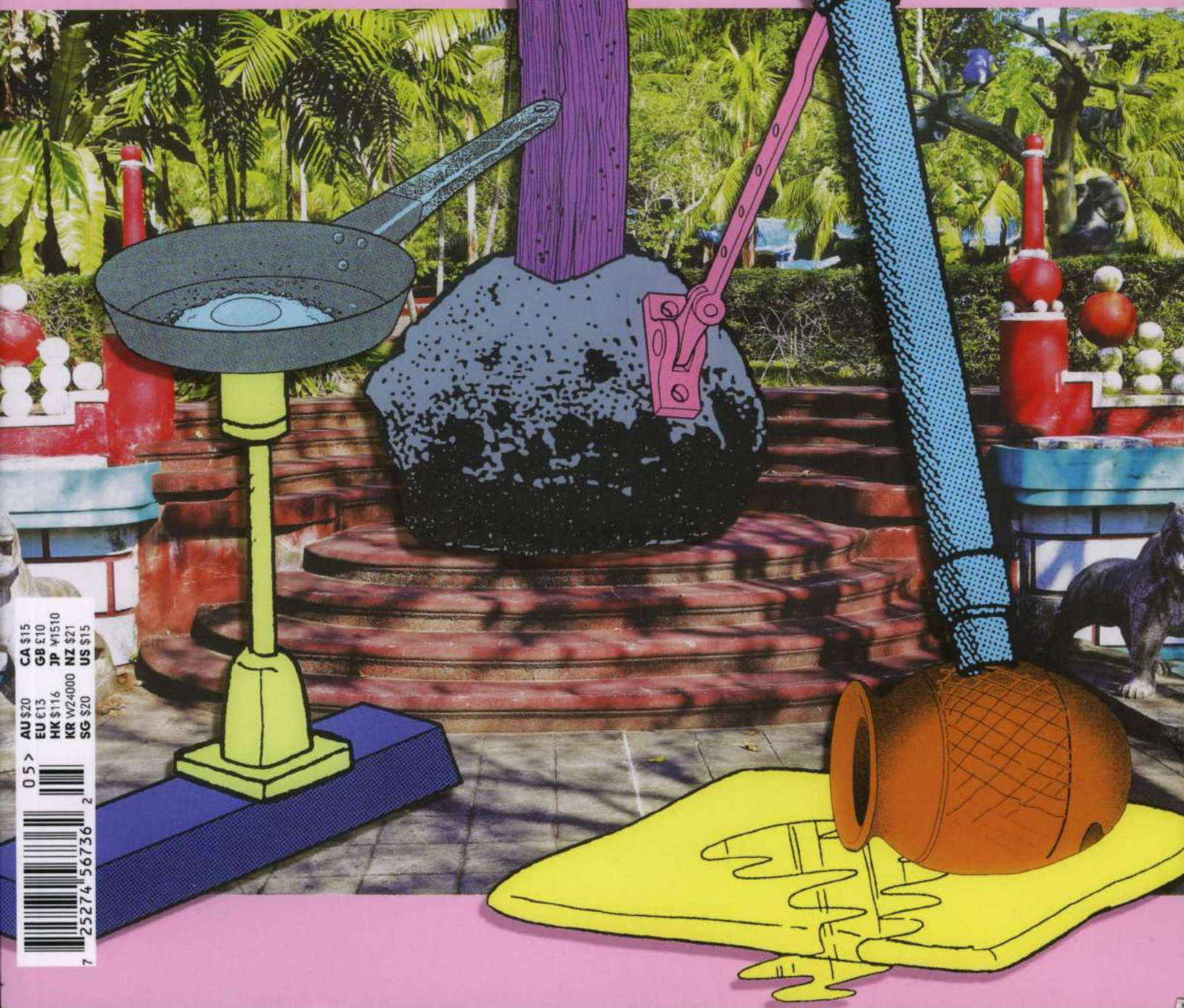


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TEPPEI KANEUJI

F r e e d o m

i n

F o r m s

BY HANA E KO





(Previous spread)

WHITE DISCHARGE (18 FIGURES), 2012, wood, plastic, steel and resin, 52 x 82 x 30 cm. Photo by Yusuke Nishimitsu. Courtesy the artist and ShugoArts, Tokyo.

(This page)

WHITE DISCHARGE (CAT SHAPED ROBOT) #2, 2015, wood, plastic, steel and resin, 75 x 32 x 32 cm. Courtesy Satoko Oe Contemporary, Tokyo.

(Opposite page, left)

TWIST & SHOUT, 2012, sticker, steel and plastic, 60 x 35 x 35 cm. Photo by Yusuke Nishimitsu. Courtesy the artist and ShugoArts, Tokyo.

(Opposite page, center)

WHITE DISCHARGE (FIGURE/ARMY), 2006, plastic figures, pigment and resin, 24 x 10 x 4 cm. Courtesy Satoko Oe Contemporary, Tokyo.

(Opposite page, right)

WHITE DISCHARGE (FIGURE/BLUE), 2006, plastic figures, pigment, resin and wood, 18 x 15 x 11 cm. Courtesy Satoko Oe Contemporary, Tokyo.

Like a scene out of a child's nightmare, a vertical stack of four toy figurines forms a haunting installation on a bright-blue pedestal. Caked almost entirely in dripping white resin, the sculpture is dramatically frozen in a mid-action pose like the petrified bodies of Pompeii. Those familiar with Japanese pop culture will recognize the figurines as that of the popular manga and anime character Doraemon—a lovable robotic cat from the 22nd century armed with fantastical inventions, who travels back to our present to help a bumbling boy called Nobita Nobi navigate his life. The sculptural installation, *White Discharge (Cat Shaped Robot) #2* (2015), is part of a series by Tepei Kaneuji, best known for his wonderfully bizarre installations that collage together, and joyously transform, various everyday objects.

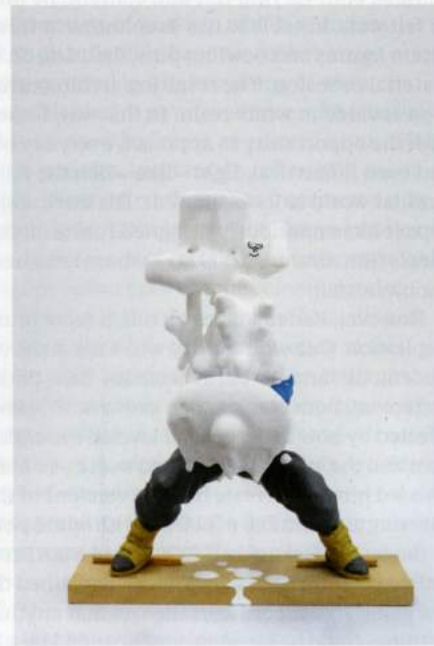
Standing at just 75-centimeters tall, the Doraemon totem pole is not physically imposing, but it is nonetheless jarring. Almost everyone in Japan knows that Doraemon is a solver of all problems and a trusty friend one can count on in any situation. Seeing him captured under resin, therefore, is unnerving—his helplessness made all the more eerie by the white globs taking over his relentlessly smiling expressions. It is of note that Kaneuji considers Doraemon one of his personal heroes, thus making the obfuscation of the figurines an even more intriguing artistic decision. It is, in fact, representative of one of the core concepts of his practice, which is to free objects of their original meaning, purpose and connotations, and to explore the possibilities of their reinvention. In a work such as *White Discharge*, even the most familiar Japanese manga character becomes estranged from viewers—something that sounds almost impossible until seen in person.

Kaneuji was born in Kyoto, Japan, in 1978, a year before the rebooted *Doraemon* animated series debuted on Japanese television (the show's 26-year span far surpassed the original edition's 6-month run in 1973). From an early age, he was a collector and assembler of objects that fascinated him. Beginning first with toys and stickers, his collection evolved to include tools and other items, and his fascination with such things has continued to the present. "My house, personal studio and workspace at the university I work at in Kyoto are constantly stocked with objects that I've collected," Kaneuji wrote in an email to *ArtAsiaPacific*. "There are those that I've collected with a specific project in mind, but there are equally as many that I've assembled not having decided what I would do with them beforehand." Most of these items are purchased by Kaneuji—in his daily life, during his travels or online—with his

preferred source being home-improvement supplies stores. His current collection, from which a potential future project could arise, includes "industrial products that have a bone-like structure, transparent objects, images of makeup products, knockoff *Doraemon* paraphernalia, wood-carved crafts, lenticular posters and postcards, and stickers."

The transition from collecting things to making them into artworks began when Kaneuji was an art student at the Kyoto City University of Arts (KCUA), where he went on to receive both a bachelor's and a master's degree in sculpture, in 2001 and 2003 respectively. There, he studied the traditional techniques of modeling, woodcarving and stone carving, as well as working with resin. But all the while, he tinkered with the objects he amassed and made small collage works at home. Then in 2001, as part of an exchange program at KCUA, he traveled to London to study at the Royal College of Art, which became a significant turning point for the artist. "Studying abroad in London opened the door for me to experience a variety of different exhibitions and artworks," he told *AAP*. "This, in turn, led me to be more conscious of diversity—specifically of cultural contexts and histories, and how they are connected or intertwined with one another." That shift in style and mindset became a catalyst for his idiosyncratic, two- and three-dimensional collages and installations that have come to define his practice today.

Throughout his career, Kaneuji has attempted to break away from conventional forms in his art and also his personal life. While the artist has consistently shown at various galleries and museums since his first solo exhibition in 2002 at Kodama Gallery in Osaka, Japan, it was the major success of his 2009 Yokohama Museum show, "Tepei Kaneuji: Melting City/Empty Forest," that gained him international acclaim and recognition—a status that, incidentally, came at somewhat of a cost. In a 2008 interview with the Japanese blog *Pass the Baton*, Kaneuji said that he decided to become an artist because he initially thought the art world seemed the most "free" and flexible out of all industries; but now, as a relatively successful artist, he has come to learn that things are not as he had assumed, noting that there are many "unspoken rules" that artists must adhere to—such as exhibiting and producing work regularly according to art-world movements. As Kaneuji noted in the interview, in an ideal world, artists should instead be able to make their own rules—which he believes would then lead to creations that are more liberated and interesting.



(This page)
SPLASH AND FLAKE (PIPELINE) #1, 2009,
wood, plastic and steel found objects, 88 x 80 x
58 cm. Courtesy Satoko Oe Contemporary, Tokyo.

(Opposite page, top)
Installation view of **HAKUCHIZU** (2001–),
from the exhibition “Metamorphosis: Object
Today” at Gallery aM, Tokyo, 2009. Courtesy
Satoko Oe Contemporary, Tokyo.

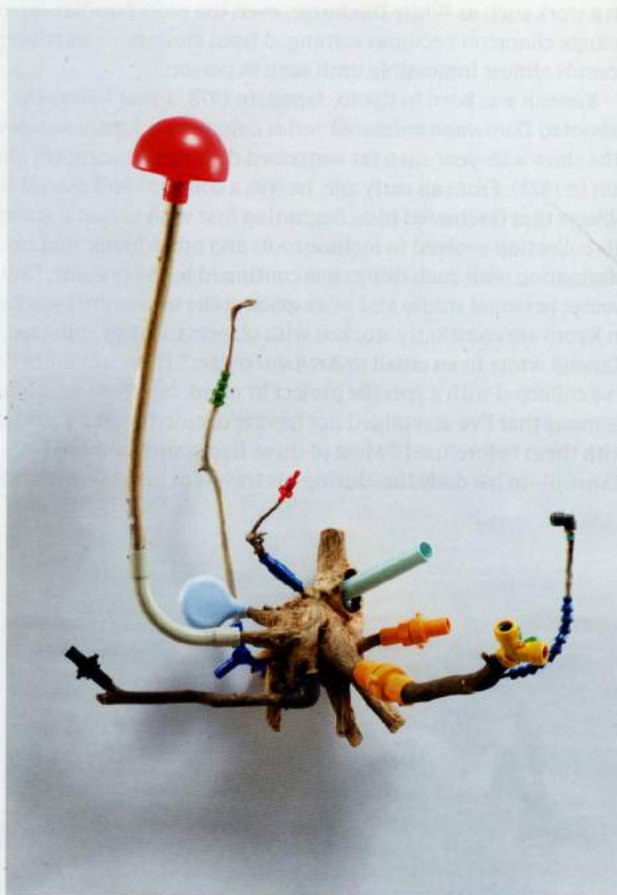
(Opposite page, bottom)
**WHITE DISCHARGE (BUILT-UP
OBJECTS) #34**, 2013, wood, plastic, steel,
resin and ping-pong table, 350 x 480 x 240 cm.
Courtesy Satoko Oe Contemporary, Tokyo.

This idea of artistic anarchy is explored in Kaneuji’s works, but they are less about open defiance and more about embracing the irregularities and confusions that exist in everyday life. The artist centers his practice—and indeed his life—on quotidian items and scenes that catch his eye on a day-to-day basis. He lives with these acquired objects, leaving them around his house and studios in Kyoto to “mature” until a collective image, or configuration, comes to mind. In this process, it is most gratifying for Kaneuji when he discovers two seemingly unrelated objects to be compatible, such as when he found that a wooden branch fit perfectly into a PVC pipe, which then became part of a series of wall-fixture-like installations titled “Splash and Flake (Pipe Line)” (2009). For Kaneuji, acknowledging that things don’t always align with preconceived standards—as was the case with the branch’s compatibility with the piping—is liberating. As he told Cinra.net in 2009, through everyday observations he finds ways of breaking away from socially imposed logic, an act that he believes is more mentally freeing than if he were to “embark on a spiritual journey to India or go off the grid to live in the mountains.”

Kaneuji often assembles materials for his installations based on a particular functional or aesthetic criterion rather than whether they exist within a narrative. When asked if this practical style of production was influenced by his father, the designer Shusuke Kaneuji, the artist told AAP: “My father designed furniture, light fixtures and self-help devices [for the physically impaired]. So the connection that I see between the creative process, the body and everyday life may have an element of design to it. That there is at times a fine line between whether my work can be seen as ‘design’ or ‘fine art’ may be because of his influence.” In the case of the “White Discharge” series (2002–), which he has been making countless editions of in varying size and content, he initially collected objects he felt were suitable to use as columns or framework, such as large action figures and bowling pins, focusing on structural design over material cohesion. The resulting architectural formations were then covered in white resin. In this way, Kaneuji presents viewers with the opportunity to approach everyday objects in a different, and even fantastical, light—like when the falling of snow causes the familiar world to look different. His intricately arranged formations appear like ambitiously designed future cityscapes—think Fritz Lang’s film *Metropolis* (1927)—where time has been stopped by a snowstorm.

However, Kaneuji relies on much more mundane moments for inspiration. One winter’s day when the artist was still a university student, he came across a Mercedes-Benz parked by a pile of dog excrement, both blanketed in snow. At the time, he was greatly affected by how the snow had leveled the entities—one a luxury item and the other an unwanted waste—to a single, equal landscape. This led him to re-create his own versions of the existential scene, by covering an assembly of objects with white powder, which resulted in the series “Hakuchizu” (2001–). In a 2011 conversation with fellow artist Megumi Matsubara, Kaneuji explained that in creating his works, he always considers the fact that anything, be it a person, place or thing, could be swept up and upended by a bigger force—much

**“I always want
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like how the snow had wiped out the connotative values of the car and the dog waste. "For me, the everyday [includes] the possibility that the meaning of things may suddenly be upset," he noted.

"Hakuchizu," along with several other works, featured prominently at Kaneuji's 2013 solo exhibition at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing, entitled "Towering Something," which followed his six-month residency at the institution. Translating to "white map" in Japanese, "Hakuchizu" consists of works in which a random collection of stuff—such as an inflatable banana, rubber hose, duffle bags and books—are covered in a light coating of white powder. As is intended, the blanket of powder silences the otherwise overwhelming assemblage of everyday items, to portray a beautiful yet chilling sense of muted serenity. Incidentally, after 2011, many viewers seeing "Hakuchizu" for the first time have interpreted it as a commentary on the catastrophic Tōhoku earthquake and nuclear disaster that struck Japan that year. It is certainly an understandable misconception, as the juxtaposition between the solemn dusting of white and the neon-colored miscellanea heighten the feeling of a happy life suddenly ended. Kaneuji, for his part, is open to this interpretation. Speaking with the online magazine *The Artling* in 2014, he said: "Even though we are looking at the same piece of art or object, how we interpret it differs according to one's experience or cultural background. The things you know and the things you don't also differ and that is beyond our control."

The element of unmanageability is, in fact, a key factor in Kaneuji's oeuvre. "I always want to incorporate elements of the unknown, or things that are beyond my complete control, into my work," Kaneuji told *AAP*. This is seen in the untamed icicle-like drips of melted resin in "White Discharge," but also in other works such as





“Muddy Stream from a Mug” (2004–). The latter is a series inspired by inadvertent coffee cup stains on paper, which Kaneuji cut out and collaged into wall pieces and installations—which at once appear scatological, but also curiously decorative, like a patchwork pelt rug. The capricious fluidity of liquids and the like also characterizes the series “Ghost in the Liquid Room” (2012–), which features image clippings of assorted gooey cosmetic products—nail polish, body cream and foundation of diverse colors—adhered to wooden panels that form elegant, Dalí-esque sculptural configurations. Elaborating on his incorporation of unpredictability, Kaneuji commented: “This is partly so that I can keep expanding my horizon on what I can use as a medium, but also because I feel that doing so gives my work the opportunity to connect with something”—be it an idea, symbol or person—“that I had never considered before.”

Kaneuji’s unexpected juxtapositions and embracement of their misconceptions leads one to see parallels in his philosophy with that of the Surrealists of the early 20th century. Like Yves Tanguy and Max Ernst before him, Kaneuji creates peculiar creatures and figures through his recasting of the ordinary. One of his most popular series, “Teenage Fan Club” (2007–), for example, features whimsical mutant figurines, each composed of numerous technicolor clumps. Upon closer examination, one soon discovers that these amorphous clusters are, in fact, plastic hairpieces taken from various action figures, including anime and cartoon characters such as *Dragon Ball*, *Evangelion* and *Sailor Moon*, among many others. Although separated from their original context, each hairpiece is eerily sentient and parasitic, as if fighting the others in a race to become the dominant crown of the host body. The contrasting bubblegum color palette and the manic obsessiveness (the hairpieces vastly range in size and style), makes the work all the more unsettling—yet it is also alluring and, consequently, impossible to ignore.

“Teenage Fan Club” is a work that often leads to comparison with Takashi Murakami, the reigning king of pop art in Japan and a known proponent of the country’s *otaku* culture. In addition to paintings and sculptures that are dominated by Japanese-style *kawaii* (“cute”) characters, some of Murakami’s most subversive works incorporate and deconstruct anime-inspired figures, such as *My Lonesome Cowboy* (1998), a statue of a naked adolescent boy using his ejaculate as a lasso. Kaneuji, however, sees his use of pop-culture objects as having a different focus from that of Murakami. Whereas Murakami uses these symbols as part of his discourse on Japan’s postwar culture and its notably juvenile trends and fascinations, Kaneuji treats them the same as every other material in his works: as merely a group of mundane items that he encounters on any typical day.

Critics have noted Kaneuji’s objective approach to (and combining of) materials as falling into the tradition of Gutai and Mono-ha, two preeminent avant-garde art groups that were active in postwar Japan. The Gutai movement produced works that emphasize freedom of expression and the use of unconventional materials and techniques, focusing on exploring the relationship between body, matter, time and space. Mono-ha (literally “School of Things”), meanwhile, experimented with natural and industrial materials—such as stones, steel and cotton—by arranging them together to explore their relational dynamics. “Gutai and Mono-ha represent seminal periods within Japanese art history, and are of the generation to which my father belongs, so, naturally, I have been influenced by them and feel a kinship to their work,” Kaneuji shared with AAP. “From what I understand, these artists [literally and conceptually] collided their bodies and various objects with physical space and environment—or it could be said that by doing so they harmonized these differing entities.”

This act of collision, specifically between objects, is also featured in Kaneuji’s extensive multimedia series “Games, Dance and the Constructions” (2011–). The ever-evolving project is consistent in each edition’s inclusion of randomly assembled quotidian objects cut out from Japanese manga books. These images are blown up

(Opposite page, top)
GHOST IN THE LIQUID ROOM (METAL)
 #1, 2014, inkjet print, paper, wood, urethane coating and clamp, 127 x 81 x 77 cm. Courtesy Jane Lombard Gallery, New York.

(Opposite page, bottom)
TEENAGE FAN CLUB #66 - #72, 2015, plastic figures and hot glue, dimensions variable. Courtesy Jane Lombard Gallery, New York.

(This page)
MUDDY STREAM FROM A MUG, 2004, collage of cutout of coffee stain on paper, 152 x 142.5 x 9.3 cm. Courtesy Jane Lombard Gallery, New York.



Kaneuji shares
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and screen-printed onto plywood and plastic panels, made into soft sculptures or collaged together with real-life photography. Kaneuji mentions that he extracts various images at random from many different types of Japanese manga books. He concedes, however, that more often than not he finds himself selecting images from such publications from the 1960s and '70s, including those by the pioneering artist Fujio Akatsuka, best known for his comedic manga *Tensai Bakabon* (1967–76). Kaneuji, an avid fan of manga, added that this is perhaps due to the fact that, to him, objects from these earlier periods were drawn more clearly, with individual presence, whereas those in modern publications are depicted more loosely and as part of the background. For Kaneuji, the boldly drawn objects of classic manga are more easily “stackable” when constructing a mental image of what he wants to create with them.

“Games, Dance and the Constructions” was further expanded in 2014, when Kaneuji embarked on a six-week residency at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI). The residency culminated in 80 new print works that were fresh takes on this series as well as several other ongoing works. Some of the prints were inspired by Singapore itself, which the artist saw intriguingly as being one big collage. “Multi-cultures are blended together like chaos and order in one place. I was very much drawn to that,” Kaneuji told STPI in a 2014 interview. However, the series of works created out of Kaneuji’s time there, “Games, Dance and the Constructions (Singapore)” (2014), are not easily recognizable as being Singapore-specific (at least to those who are not local), showing that Kaneuji had focused on his personal impressions of the city over the popular view. In the screen-print *Games, Dance and the Constructions (Singapore) #10-A* (2014), for example, a solid, hot-pink color serves as the background to a picture of a stack of durians (whose location and context is unclear), which is then partially covered by a curious shrine-like formation of manga cutouts printed in a deep, luscious green. The juxtaposition not only reinvents the image of the fruit, but also enigmatizes the stereotypical, manicured image of Singapore.

In 2015, another subseries of “Games, Dance and the Constructions” was featured in Kaneuji’s American solo debut at New York’s Jane Lombard Gallery, “Deep Fried Ghost.” The display of “Games, Dance and the Constructions (Soft Toys)” series (2014-15) included plush sculpture versions of black-and-white manga drawings of wood, bones, toys and food, packed flat into transparent, acrylic frames as “two-dimensional” wall-pieces. In *Games, Dance and the Constructions (Soft Toys) #19* (2015), a square clock is pressed against the top-right corner of the frame by an amorphous blob on its left, as well as an urn-like vessel and drum that sits below it. These plushy items, in turn, are similarly crammed in place by shapes resembling a bullhorn, wristwatch and wooden logs, among many other objects. Together, they form a methodical chaos that suggests the labyrinthine abode of a pathological hoarder.

For the exhibition’s opening night, Kaneuji set up a makeshift studio in the back of the gallery, where he screen-printed color manga images onto canvas tote bags and customized items of clothing. There, gallery-goers had the delightful opportunity to purchase these one-of-a-kind artworks for a surprisingly affordable price of five to ten US dollars (for perspective, his prints from STPI were sold for approximately USD 3,000 to USD 24,000). Going against the hierarchical exclusivity that so often characterizes the art world, the event seemed a genuine effort on the part of Kaneuji to bend the scene’s “unspoken rules,” but also to share with visitors the infinite possibilities that are inherent in found objects and the importance of encountering, and finding enjoyment in, situations that we don’t quite understand.

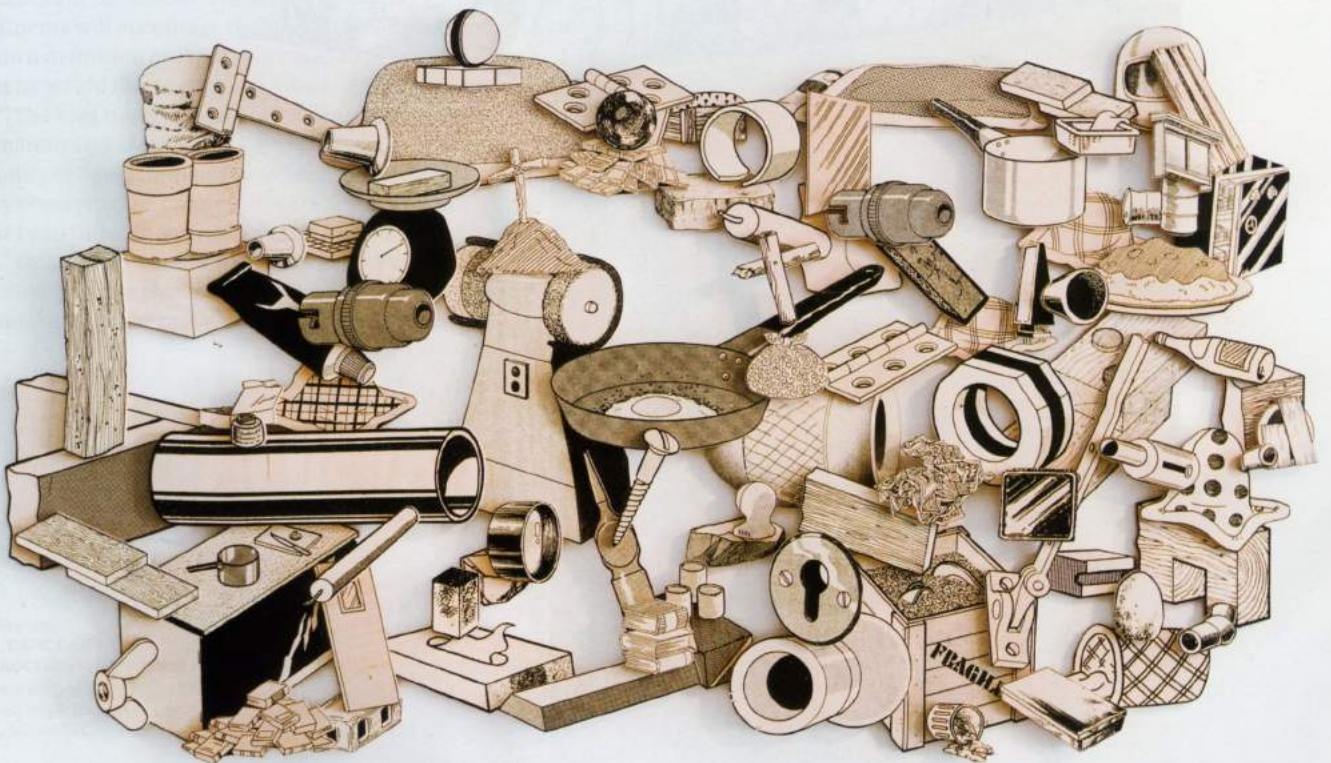
Most recently, his work was featured in a show at Marugame Genichiro-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art in Kagawa, entitled “Zones” (2016), which was Kaneuji’s first major solo museum exhibition in Japan in seven years. It included many of his signature pieces as well as special collaborative projects, where he incorporated original works, offsite events and performances by

(Opposite page, top)

GAMES, DANCE AND THE CONSTRUCTIONS (SINGAPORE) #7-C, 2014, screen print, archival inkjet print, plexiglass and cotton rag paper, 64.5 x 94.5 x 4.5 cm. Courtesy Satoko Oe Contemporary, Tokyo.

(Opposite page, bottom)

GAMES, DANCE AND THE CONSTRUCTIONS (UNFINISHED PLYWOOD) #7, 2015, screen print, unfinished plywood and aluminum structure, 119.4 x 211 x 5 cm. Courtesy Jane Lombard Gallery, New York.



Kanouji shares
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other artists (including his father) and creative professionals. The exhibition was also given a Japanese title that translates to “Tepei Kaneuji’s Mercator Membrane”—an intentionally ambiguous phrase meant to suggest the fluid and experimental nature of the show—which was the brainchild of novelist Yu Nagashima and commissioned by Kaneuji. The “collaging” of artists, so to speak, was also an interpretation of human relationships in the real world. Kaneuji wanted to reflect the idea that when interacting with people in real life, it is inevitable and natural to not see things eye to eye, or to be influenced by others—and that we are shaped by these experiences, whether for good or bad. The result was a multifaceted viewing experience—which included a display of Kaneuji’s art at an udon noodle shop, a projection-mapping installation featuring theater actor Izumi Aoyanagi, and a live event by Japanese improvisational performance group Contact Gonzo, among others—that challenged visitors on their ideas of a traditional “art exhibition.”

Moving forward, the year 2017 will be a busy one for Kaneuji. Following his Marugame show, the artist will keep his focus on Japan, where he will present a large-scale video installation at the Yebisu International Festival for Art and Alternate Visions in February. In another upcoming project, he will design and stage a theater version of his series entitled “Tower” (2009–). Originally a set of drawings depicting a rectangular tower, where various solid, liquid and gaseous elements are shown seeping into and out of the structure, it was adapted into an animated video for Kaneuji’s Yokohama Museum show and a manga book for his Marugame Genichiro-Inokuma Museum exhibit. “Tower” in its theater form will make its debut at Yokohama’s BankART 1929, as part of TPAM (Tokyo Performance Arts Meeting), in February.

As he prepares for the upcoming year, Kaneuji expressed his desire to try new genres, including ceramics, bronze and perhaps even a feature film. He has always actively welcomed challenges—as a sculptor, collage artist and stage designer, and also as an instructor at his alma mater, where he has taught since 2010. In addition to teaching foundational skills in sculpture, Kaneuji has a studio at the school. The artist hopes the exposure to his experiments will encourage the students to pursue and discover their own definition of art. When asked to describe one crucial notion he would like to pass on to the artists of tomorrow, Kaneuji said: “[The idea that,] depending on your power of observation, imagination and ideation, any moment, place or fragment has the possibility of being uniquely beautiful. I, too, want to always be closely observing the unique moments and places that I encounter, so that I can think about and find the individual beauty within them.” One can expect that Tepei Kaneuji’s close observations of the ordinary things that we tend to overlook will birth many more enchanting, thought-provoking and uncanny works. 🍷

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GAMES, DANCE AND THE CONSTRUCTIONS (SOFT TOYS) #16, 2015, screen print, cotton fabric, polyester stuffing and acrylic box, 160 x 63 x 30 cm. Courtesy Satoko Oe Contemporary, Tokyo.

(This page)

GHOST IN THE LIQUID ROOM (FOUNDATION) #2, 2015, inkjet print, paper, wood, urethane coating and clamp, 78.7 x 42.5 x 7.8 cm. Courtesy Jane Lombard Gallery, New York.

