



Thumb attachments: the miniature objects at the centre of Kirsten's *Line* series. Photo courtesy of the artist.



CONSUMPTION IN MINIATURE

Kirsten Farrell

I was thinking a lot about what it means to be an artist, how to establish myself as an artist and how to best embark on that journey.

My connection with Japan is represented in a series of artworks I created some time ago in Japan called *Line*. *Line* remains a work in progress. I began this work in the late 1990s in Mie prefecture, during my third residency in Japan.

While completing my Bachelor of Visual Arts at The Australia National University I had the opportunity to complete a semester at Seika University in Kyoto. After that I stayed on in Japan for two years, living and working in Mie prefecture. This was an exciting but also an anxious time for me. It was the first time I had had a full-time job outside of academic study and I was also very concerned with establishing myself as an artist. I was thinking a lot about what it means to be an artist, how

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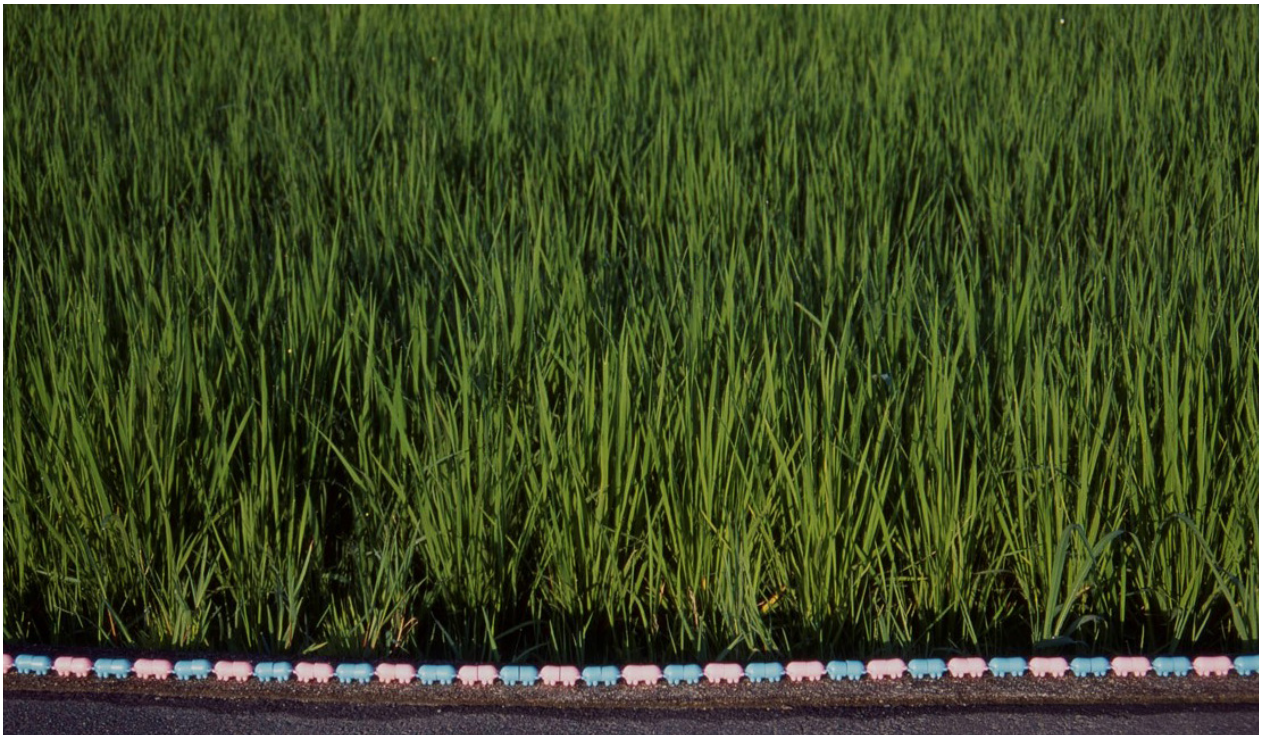
I had more money and less time than I had ever had before in my life. One of the jobs I had was as an assistant teacher where I helped middle-school students learn English. One of the common questions that we would ask students was ‘what is your hobby?’ I was surprised at how commonly students answered with ‘shopping’. This was in the top three answers, after ‘watching television’ and ‘playing video games’.

At the time 100-yen shops were very popular. I would often visit 100-yen shops and I found them to be amazing places full of incredibly colourful, small, plastic objects. I became very interested in multiples.





An untitled artwork from the *Line* series. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Living in Japan, even in a place like Mie which is a bit off the beaten track, there were wonderful art galleries. The Mie Prefectural Gallery had a large collection of Antoni Tapies' work. Tapies was quite influential on postwar Japanese art, particularly *Mono-ha* (The School of Things) and the Gutai movement, and I became more aware of these artistic movements. I also had the chance while in Japan to see an extensive Donald Judd retrospective at the Shiga Museum of Modern Art.

Donald Judd is often named as a key proponent of minimalism in an art context. Unlike Gutai (with which it shares some similarities) minimalism was not an organised movement as such but coalesced, at least in

part, in reaction to the extremely personal and emotional approach favoured in abstract expressionism.

The big shift that minimalist art enabled was that it detached meaning from the artist and the object. Meaning instead was produced when the viewer encountered the object. It's easy to scoff at minimalist art objects—they appear to lack any expression at all or any inflection of the artist's hand. In fact Judd made a point of outsourcing the manufacture of his work to this end. The reason I like them so much is for their insistence on the role of the viewer in creating meaning. It was the simplicity of manufactured objects and the idea that the meaning of things could reside outside the things themselves that fascinated me.

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Encountering these things in Japan allowed me to conceive a way to investigate these ideas that, now that I look back, informed the development of my practice away from producing objects to producing ideas and situations in ways that continue to inform my work.

At the time, I was living in a little apartment in Mie prefecture. I would go out with my camera and my small, plastic objects and take photos. These works were made before digital photography, so I took all the photos on slide film.

The artworks began while I was shopping in 100-yen shops, where I decided that if I was attracted to a specific small object I would buy every single one in the shop.

The objects that appear in these photos are thumb attachments for giving massages. When I first saw these objects I did not know what they were, yet I decided to encumber myself with them.

I had become very interested in objects in the landscape especially after seeing the Donald Judd exhibition and, inspired by the Gutai movement in postwar Japan, the idea of questioning what art could be. The art associated with the Gutai movement, in all its diverse forms, often involved the artist in some kind of interaction with others or the landscape. I was fascinated by this idea.

So, not having much time or space to create major artworks I decided that I would make these small photographic interventions in



An untitled artwork from the *Line* series. Photo courtesy of the artist.



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the space around my home. I would usually go out on a Saturday afternoon and install these thumb attachments in a particular place and photograph them. Inevitably, someone would come up and ask me what I was doing. This led to many fascinating—and often deep and existential—conversations with ordinary people in prefectural Japan. I also installed objects in the schools where I was working, sparking more conversations with students. Through this I discovered that art could be all kinds of things; it was performative and interactive.

The memories and conversations I had while creating these artworks have stayed with me. One time I installed some objects

in the pedestrian underpass at Matsusaka train station and had a fascinating conversation with the local police, who came to see what I was doing, about what the installations evoked in them. These were formative experiences for me as a speaker of Japanese and a lover of Japanese culture, and as a person.

I found in Japan a love of the abstract, the strange and a willingness to engage with things that one does not understand at first. For me, these small objects, while they may be somewhat cute and silly, also personify the possibilities of art as an interaction, the importance of lived experiences and that everyone has a story.



Kirsten Farrell is a multidisciplinary artist who has a long association with Japan. In high school she spent a year in Fukuchiyama, Kyoto Prefecture, then completed Japanese Studies and Visual Arts at The Australian National University, including time at Kansai University in Osaka and Kyoto Seika University. She also lived and worked in Mie Prefecture. Farrell taught at the Centre for Art History and Theory at The Australian National University during her PhD in the Print Media and Drawing workshop. She is currently the Deputy Manager of Research for the College of Asia & the Pacific.