



Erica Kaminishi: Presenting a Brazilian Nikkei Identity through Art

By [Patricia Wakida](#) / 19 Feb 2018

Artist Erica Kaminishi, born and raised in Mato Gross, Brazil, is one of the hundreds of thousands of Nikkei Brazilian *dekasegi* who have migrated to Japan to work or study, a hundred years after their ancestors immigrated. Over a span of ten years, she worked, studied pottery, and attended a PhD program in Japan. She now lives and works full-time as an artist in Paris, France, but her roots as a Nikkei Brazilian and her time in Japan have clearly had an impact on the way she sees and thinks.



Artist Erica Kaminishi and curator Michiko Okano at the opening of *Transpacific Borderlands* (Photo by Todd Wawrychuk)

Kaminishi is one of thirteen artists selected to participate in *Transpacific Borderlands: The Art of Japanese Diaspora in Lima, Los Angeles, Mexico City, and São Paulo*. The question of Nikkei-Latin American identity was a critical point in the selection of the artists. Michiko Okano, who curated the Brazilian Nikkei section of the exhibition, says, "It's important to understand the diversity of the artists and to verify that different sensibilities are developed depending on several factors—the singularities of each artist, their artistic experiences, and their life experiences."

Curator Okano included two pieces of Kaminishi's: one, a series of text-based topographies of sorts, soft curves that rise from the paper, embellished with the poetry of celebrated poet Fernando Pessoa, that is painstakingly rendered by hand in Kaminishi's tiny script in jewel tones, and two, an installation that immerses the visitor in a wash of emotions. Since the show opened in October, I have seen numerous photos of the spectacle she had created within the gallery—a room hung with 3,300 transparent petri dishes filled with 60,000 synthetic, pale pink blossoms, meant to emulate the effect of walking beneath a blossoming cherry tree. Kaminishi's large-scale installation, *Prunusplastus* (2017), is something of a visual wonderland, and yet the meditation on its message is really curious. "*Prunus serrulata*" is the Latin name for the Japanese cherry, while "*plastus*" is Latin for "something modeled." According to Kaminishi, the piece conceptualizes the nature of one's cultural DNA through this quasi-scientific lens. "In Japan, the celebration of flowers blooming in the springtime, such as the famous cherry blossoms (*sakura*), is a major tradition. I wanted to reproduce this atmosphere in a contemporary way, while examining the ways that we appreciate and nurture culture...The work touches on the Japanese concept of '*mono no aware*,' which holds that while beauty is very affecting, it is also, like all things, ephemeral. Nothing is eternal."

The following email interview with Kaminishi is just the beginning of an inquiry on the role of art interpreting Japanese migrant history and culture. It left me open to reimagining my own approach to words, symbols, and identity. Nikkei culture is embedded within us. Nikkei culture is artificial. Nikkei culture is an illusion, a memory—maybe even just an inherited memory that has been described in a household object, in language, or a distant song.

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Patricia Wakida: Tell me about your family's history, or what you know. Where are your ancestors from originally? Where did they settle? Do you think there were particular experiences that had a big impact on their personal history?

Erica Kaminishi: Both my maternal and paternal grandparents are from Miyagi province in northern Japan. My maternal grandparents migrated to Brazil with my aunts, who were still small children. They first settled in the countryside of São Paulo, like most of the Japanese immigrants in Brazil. Later, they moved to Assaí (which is derived from the Japanese city of "Asahi"), which is a village in the northern state of Paraná, where the majority of the population is of Japanese descent. There were several established Nikkei communities in this region and my grandparents ended up working on coffee and cotton farms. They had thirteen children.

My paternal grandparents met in Brazil. My grandmother came with her older brothers, although perhaps she was "forced" to emigrate since only families were allowed to travel. The siblings settled in the rural interior of São Paulo, where my grandmother was introduced to her husband through *miai*, or an arranged marriage, which was customary for most Japanese immigrants. After they were married, my grandparents moved to a rural community (Cabiuna) in Assaí, where they bought a small farm.

My father didn't share many stories about his family, perhaps because my grandfather died when my father was only 12 years old. But I do know that my grandfather immigrated with his brother (my great-uncle) and mother (my great-grandmother). The boys were the two youngest children, and had no right to inheritance, which is reserved for the eldest son (*chonon*). Their only possession was their grandfather's (my great-great-grandfather's) samurai armor, which they had to sell to pay for their trip. According to my father, his great-grandfather immigrated to the Miyagi region right after the end of the castes brought about by the Meiji revolution. He bought large portions of land and the family became quite wealthy. I also know that my grandfather was the most artistically talented member of the family; he painted, played the *shakuhachi* and practiced calligraphy (*shodo*). If I'm not mistaken, my great-uncle's family in Miyagi, Japan still owned some of my grandfather's paintings until recently, but the 2008 earthquake destroyed everything. One of my father's early childhood memories in Brazil are of my grandfather painting at home on rainy days, when he couldn't work outdoors. When my grandfather died, my grandmother, maybe because of a stressful momentary situation, burned all his paintings.

I believe that coming to Brazil and the premature death of my grandfather were the two experiences that impacted our family history. Neither my grandfather nor my father had the opportunity to develop their artistic skills. My father had to start working very early in life and he could not continue his studies, but he was always a fine craftsman. Even now, he creates objects and wooden toys using recycled materials. Maybe I inherited these artistic instincts from them.



Nikkei Association in Uberaba, Minas Gerais, 1989 (I am wearing white stockings and my dad the man wearing sunglasses)

I understand that your parents eat Japanese food at home, are Buddhist, and speak a mixture of Portuguese and Japanese to the children. Tell me more about the larger community where you grew up. Was your family part of a Nikkei Brazilian community? What was that like, from your perspective?



First day of school in Uberaba, Minas Gerais, 1986

As children and as young adults, we accept that the family culture that we are raised in as perfectly natural. It's like living in some sort of time capsule. The issues of being Nikkei in Brazil only became relevant to my immediate family when my parents went to Japan to work, and later when I also went to Japan and suddenly realized that the real Japan was not like the Japan of my childhood home.

My parents spent most of their lives in closed communities in the countryside of Paraná. In Assaí, the town where they grew up, there are several rural communities divided into distinct sections:

Cabiúna, Seção Palmital, etc. Even today, those communities are active and to visit them is like going back to the past. Every Nikkei house there keeps souvenirs from Japan in them such as pictures of a member of the royal family, and there's always the smell of incense in the air since the Buddhist altar still holds a privileged place in the house.

It is the contrast with the environment outside that takes you to the Japanese culture, a place made of memories and the tropical landscape of rural Brazil with its very red soil. My mother learned Portuguese only after she got married and moved to the city. She still uses words that only exist in the Nikkei culture, even though she lived in Japan for a long time during the 1990s. For example, she uses terms such as *yo-ra* (*yo* meaning "me", in one of the oldest and most formal forms of Japanese language) and *você-ra* (*você* is Portuguese for "you"). She uses the word *kimono* for clothes, and *ofuro* for the bath. My parents still observe traditions such as preparing certain dishes like *sekihan* on special occasions. To this day, my parents make their own tofu, *tsukemono*, and *dashi* at home and until recently, once a year a Buddhist monk would come to our house to pray at our family altar.



Childhood in Uberaba, Minas Gerais, 1987

It is interesting and funny in some ways, but it shows how the Nikkei of their generation has kept our ancestral culture alive, a rural Japanese culture that no longer exists in contemporary Japan. From my point of view, these are all inherited traditions that have been handed down. My parents didn't get to know Japan until they moved there, when they were almost 50 years old, and some of my uncles and aunts still have never visited the country. Their culture is a legacy, of an imaginary Japan.

You've had a variety of life experiences, including living in Japan as a *dekasegi*, working at a phone company. First, why did you decide to go to Japan?

I had just finished high school and was accepted to study history at the University of Londrina, Paraná. My parents had returned to Brazil after working as *dekasegi* in Japan for a few years and my older sister, who went with them, was also back in Brazil but wanted to go back and do her studies in Japan.

She wanted to try studying at a Japanese university. I decided to join her because she had lived and studied in Tokyo and she knew people there who might help us. I had another sister, our eldest sister, who was married and living and working in Japan too. So in a way, I was under the tutelage of my sisters, as it has always been since I was ten years old, when my parents first went to Japan and I stayed here (in Brazil) to continue my studies.

In the beginning, Japan was very difficult. I worked numerous jobs and worked in many different environments. During my last year in Japan, I stopped studying Japanese once I realized that the Brazilian curriculum could not be applied to a Japanese college. So I decided to study art on my own. I took a course in ceramics and then with my own savings, I went to London to study English and to get to know the local culture. I understand that I needed a basic arts education and skills, and the arts and culture are generally very Eurocentric, which is why I chose London.



First time in Japan. Mashiko Pottery Festival, with my friend Eugenia, 1999.

Was that your first time to Japan? What was the work like? Did you find community in Japan? Did you meet any family?

Yes, it was my first time. At that time, now 20 years ago, there were different job levels for *dekasegi*, ranging from assembly line factory work to office tasks—usually concentrated around Tokyo. My last jobs in that time period were for Brazilian telephone companies, with a very international staff of Chinese, Filipinos, and Brazilian people all working together. I worked at the Call Center, a Portuguese answering service. I would study in the morning and afternoon and then work at night, as clients came home from work and called the company. I made good friends this way, that I keep to this day. During my last year in Japan, my mother joined me. My family is constantly coming and going, and even today I feel we have a certain urge to move and change.

Perhaps because we had foreigners amongst our family and friends, or maybe because most Japanese at this age are in college, I did not have many Japanese friends. It's also quite interesting that I had more contact with young Japanese people when I lived in London.



First time in Japan. Party with colleagues I worked with at Brastel, 1998

Do you have a specific story to share that describes that experience?

Being born and educated in Brazil, I've always found Japanese social codes hard to "decipher"...I've learned how to observe and make mistakes until I understood how to socially behave properly, although I suppose that I will never be able to fully understand the nuances of a pause, a silence, the body language. I don't remember any one specific story about my experience of being Nikkei in Japan, but will always remember the "scoldings" of my teachers or of a Japanese elder telling me that I should not say this or that, or telling me that I had behaved inappropriately...

Later, you returned to Japan as a graduate student and stayed for many years, working, exhibiting, and studying both traditional forms (pottery) and contemporary forms (film and visual arts). What were some of the big lessons you took away from studying in Japan, both artistically and personally?

Going back to Japan as a graduate student made me see the country and its culture with different eyes. I experienced two situations in "two" different countries: first as an immigrant worker and then as a foreign student. The way that you're treated in these situations changes according to your social position...well, this happens everywhere! However those two experiences gave me a more realistic perspective about the local culture and my origins too. Through my formal studies, I was able to understand certain practices and rituals cherished by my ancestors and the behavior and thinking of my parents and grandparents—to understand them and not to judge them, the way that the younger generation usually points a finger at what's old and passé. Most of all, I believe I've learned to demystify and de-construct the ideology that surrounds Japanese culture. Nowadays I can observe things from both sides and this is only possible when you live and face reality and study it.

Is your family still in Brazil? Do you think they identify as Nikkei Brazilian? Do you?

Yes, they live in Brazil and today, my parents consider themselves Nikkei. Until they went to Japan, they considered themselves Japanese. My father has dual nationality. But I believe that their stay in Japan was much more difficult than mine, and the culture shock was much more complicated. They were raised and were educated as Japanese and they feel more at ease speaking in Japanese, but when they actually went to Japan they were perceived as just Brazilian immigrants, on the same level as a *gaijin*, a derogatory word that I heard throughout my childhood, to designate all outsiders. It's all about experience, feeling at home in one's own skin. Today, if they refer to a Nikkei as *nihonjin*, they usually quickly realize it and correct themselves on the spot.

As for me, yes I do identify (as Nikkei) and it's visible! My looks and my name won't let me escape the definition. However, in my opinion, this question of identifying as Nikkei or not is something that is very pertinent in Brazil and is a matter of personal experience. The definition of identity only becomes relevant or problematic in a person's life when there is a real confrontation in a different environment or in a new situation.

Do you have a story you can share about how art became a part of your identity (either as a child or an adult)?



Master's Degree Graduation Ceremony at Nihon University, Japan, 2009

While I was studying for my Master's degree, I took classes in traditional Japanese folklore, and every class was like returning to childhood, a déjà-vu through the Japanese children's stories and songs that my mother used to tell us. This sensation of imaginary memories was very present when I went to Japan the second time. Maybe because I was more aware of the culture then. For instance, I was traveling once with my husband in the Shizuoka area, near Mount Fuji. It was my first time in that region. We decided to visit a local waterfall, which is very famous, called the Shiraito Waterfalls. When we got there, I recognized it right away!

It was such a strange feeling, like knowing it without really knowing where I knew it from. It was only later, on our way back, that I remembered "my" childhood waterfalls, which was actually a very large poster of the Shiraito, in shades of green, that decorated the living room of our house. On the poster, there was an image of a man and I remembered that I used to create stories and imagine narratives of him in this place. After that "re-encounter," I developed a series of drawings entitled "Views of Fuji" where I make direct reference to the Mount Fuji as interpreted by artists Hiroshige and Hokusai. I reconstructed my Fuji using collages of cartographic maps of the region and poems by Fernando Pessoa:

*"Cantava em uma voz muito suave, uma canção de país longínquo
A música tornava familiares as palavras incógnitas
Parecia fado para a alma, mas não tinha com ele semelhança alguma..."*

(She sang in a very soft voice, a song of distant land
The music made unknown words sound familiar
Sounding like a Fado to the soul, yet there was no resemblance at all)

So in a way my work is directly connected to my personal experiences. I'm not sure if I could produce anything that didn't have this physical and emotional connection. Reclaiming those references to Japanese culture and bringing them into my work is like investigating and (re)discovering the true meaning of things that were lost so long ago. That, to me, is like being the archeologist of my own history and memory.

You discussed in your questionnaire that so many Nikkei Brazilian *dekasegi* bring cultural baggage with them (as I think all Nikkei do when they come to Japan and live there for awhile). Did you live in a large *dekasegi* community in Japan?

No, but I have visited numerous cities with large Japanese-Brazilian populations such as participate in exhibitions. It is interesting to visit these cities and the neighborhoods where there are stores that cater to the community, with Brazilian names and the green and yellow Brazilian flag on display.



First time in Japan. Oizumi Brazilian Festival, 1999.

Can you talk about this more or give me an example of watching Nikkei working through the complex layers of nostalgia and building their own cultural experiences?

I can't say how or whether other Nikkei Brazilians assimilate their experience of being Nikkei into their cultural experiences while living in Japan, like I did. What I perceive is that when facing and experiencing Japanese culture there are two extremes: many identify fully as Brazilians and emphasize its national symbols: the flag, food, language, Brazilian music, etc. ...or they adapt themselves fully to the local culture and become "Japanese" as a way of being accepted into society. This is my impression, but the Brazilian community in Japan is big and I believe that there is a cultural diversity, just like in Brazil.

I'm fascinated by how much you incorporate text into your work (and with pens, handwritten!). I've also read some of Pessoa's poetry, translated into English. I'm curious if you have any thoughts you want to share about language? You are clearly multilingual and I'm wondering how that might affect your process at times.

I always joke that the only language that I'm fluent in is Pidgin, because I always end up mixing everything together. To be honest, I don't know this is a good thing. I've always been better at writing than I am at speaking (literally), and Portuguese, my mother tongue, has always been an

important part of my identity. I believe that this is true for many people, but Portuguese is the only language in which I can express myself as being “truly me.” The sensation we have when speaking other language is that of being another person...

So, since I have this difficulty with communicating verbally, writing has always been the best form to express myself. When I returned to Brazil after living in Japan for four years, writing diaries and drawing was the way that I found that helped me challenge all of my experiences and make re-adaption to Brazilian culture easier. Writing is a form of therapy, and writing repeatedly for hours is like a meditation, like in Shakyō.



One of my first awards in Visual Arts Competitions, Curitiba Paraná, 2003

What is your work and life environment like in Paris? Are you teaching in addition to creating and exhibiting work? How is your work and concepts received with this audience?

Living in France was never part of my plans. There are some things—maybe it's fate, I don't know—but I believe we are destined for. The way that we embrace these experiences depends on each person. My husband is French, and we met in Japan. We moved to France in late 2010, and settled in Seine Saint Denis, where French is almost like a second language, but it is convenient, because it is very close to his work. Living in the *banlieue* (suburbs), far from downtown Paris, has made me even more aware of my origins. I am more conscious of current political debates about immigration, ghettos, and racial borders because this is my reality today. I believe the French are more politically conscious, open to debate and are outspoken. Of course, you have all sorts of opinions here, but being in this environment has expanded my critical sense and opened me up to different interpretations of my work. I have never exhibited in France, and have always felt a bit removed from the contemporary French art scene, which tends to be more conceptual... Since I live in the suburbs, I am a bit isolated from everything. Socially it's bad, but artistically I can concentrate, assimilate, and focus on my production. I could not produce and focus on my work if I had too many distractions.

Did you work with curator Michiko Okano to choose the piece in the exhibition? Did you have a conversation about what pieces might be the best to use in this particular exhibition?

Yes, we exchanged many emails and talked online. At first, we thought about exhibiting my *Jardim* work, an installation that reproduced a Japanese stone garden, and which won the National Foundation of Arts in Brazil Contemporary Art Prize. But after we studied JANM's

exhibition spaces, I proposed that we show a previously unexhibited project that I've kept for years and never had the opportunity to show, largely because large installations like *Prunusplastus* require a lot of technical planning and financial support as well. I believe the two works selected by Michiko, *Clouds* and *Prunusplastus*, were perfect for this exhibition.

What does it mean to you to be included in an exhibition of Nikkei artists?

Until arriving in LA and going to JANM in person, I had no idea of the scale of the project, or of the curatorial framework. Although I was aware of some of the historical facts of what happened during World War II, it was so intense and shocking to see the museum's collection up close, and to meet volunteers and their descendants who were sent to American concentration camps. As I became more involved in the daily activities of the entire museum team and got to know other Nikkei artists from other countries, I began to understand the importance of a project like this! Not only for its anthropological aspects, but for its poetic sense and what it means to Nikkei as well. Being part of this exhibit will probably have a great influence on my future work.



Exhibition *New Art Brazil - Japan 2008* at Yokohama Civic Art Gallery, Japan, 2008