



# ART TOKYO

From small independent galleries in narrow backstreets to gleaming modern institutions, themed cafes and high-end hotels, Tokyo's art scene is omnipresent – and far from conventional

**Words:** Danielle Demetriou



**S**kyscrapers, sumo, salarymen, sushi — Tokyo has long been a city that attracts a steady stream of admirers due to its architecture, culture, social quirks and food. But one of the Japanese capital's best-kept secrets is perhaps frequently overlooked: namely, Tokyo's status as a leading player in the global art world.

The city excels at all things art-related, from small independent galleries hidden on back streets, to stararchitect-designed contemporary museums, plus a string of art-themed cafés, stores and hotels. While much of the world's gaze has focused on nearby China in recent years, Tokyo is increasingly building up a vibrant and energetic art scene that is intent on emerging from the shadow of its neighbour.

Testimony to the city's status as an art mecca is the steady stream of artist exports enjoying acclaim outside Japan, from the minimalist creations of Rei Naito to the rainbow-bright world of Takashi Murakami.

#### NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

For many visitors, the biggest initial challenge is overcoming the fact that there is no centralised area for exploring galleries, unlike the hubs that can be found in London's Mayfair or Chelsea in New York City. Instead, an art exploration of Tokyo often involves travelling widely across the capital and being prepared to head off the beaten track—a bonus for any open-minded traveller keen on probing life beyond the city's stereotypes.

A good starting point is Roppongi. Once famed for its nightlife, the neighbourhood is increasingly renowned as home to an eclectic array of art spaces. A trio of high-profile contemporary establishments take centre stage. First is Mori Art Museum, which stages world-class exhibitions on the 53rd floor of Mori Tower in the heart of the Roppongi Hills shopping complex (currently undergoing renovations until the spring). Then there is the National Art Center, home to 14,000 square metres of exhibition space and worth a visit to admire its distinct wavy glass façade, designed by architect Kisho Kurokawa

(plus the imaginatively-curated design store, Souvenir From Tokyo).

Finally, there is 21\_21 Design Sight, a minimalist concrete and glass haven designed by Tadao Ando, complete with a creative roll call of directors, including fashion designer Issey Miyake. For a taste of Tokyo's independent art scene, it's also worth popping into Take Ninagawa, a diminutive space in the shadow of the Mori Tower, representing artists ranging from the established Shinro Ohtake to emerging ceramist Ryota Aoki.

Next stop: Harajuku. The name may well bring to mind rainbow-bright pop images of Tokyo's edgy street fashion scene, with crowds of trendsetting teen tribes populating the thronging streets. But art should also be on a visitor's checklist of local attractions.

Blum & Poe, a major Los Angeles gallery renowned for championing contemporary Japanese artists such as Yoshitomo Nara, recently opened its first Tokyo outpost in the area. The angular fifth-floor space hovers serenely above the colourful shopping crowds, with a wall of glass framing unexpectedly calming views of the dense green forests surrounding nearby Meiji Shrine.

The gallery, which opened in September last year with an inaugural exhibition by Dave Muller, is a timely addition to Tokyo's energetic art scene, according to its expert British director, Ashley Rawlings. "Typically, people tend to focus on New York and London, plus places such as Paris, LA and Berlin," he explains. "But within Asia, Tokyo is definitely the region's biggest and best-kept secret. And when you go beyond visual art and put it in a bigger context — looking at food, film, fashion, architecture, music, design — Tokyo is a cultural superpower. It's just enormous."

#### Eye-catchers

(above) Inside Roppongi's National Arts Center; artist Kiyoko Abe's work in the Artist Dragon Room at Park Hotel Tokyo (right)

(previous page) A photographer gets up-close to *Dots Obsession* by artist Yayoi Kusama at Mori Art Gallery





Wall art (above) The geometric Prada store façade in Aoyama

### BEYOND THE GALLERIES

Sampling the delights of Tokyo's art scene, however, need not be confined to the four white walls of a minimalist art gallery: a brisk stroll away to Aoyama, via nearby tree-lined Omotesando boulevard, will take visitors to A to Z Cafe. Tucked away on the top floor of an unassuming building on a side street, the café space houses a string of artworks and installations by Yoshitomo Nara and Osaka-based design collective, graf. Seated among the mismatched furniture and a small wooden house in the centre of the café filled with artworks, visitors can tuck into dishes such as shrimp toast, soft shell crab and salads, with teas and wines also available.

Even Aoyama's boutiques are works of art. A five-minute stroll from the café will take you to the Prada boutique, encased in a glass building that looks like a crystal bursting from the concrete. Designed by Herzog & de Meuron, its geometric façade of concave and convex glass panels play tricks on the eyes of passersby.

Hotels are also jumping on the art bandwagon. One pioneer of the art world is the Park Hotel Tokyo, a chic, modern design hotel in Shiodome, which is in the throes of creating an entire Artist Floor. Inspired by the concept of an artist-in-residence, the hotel has

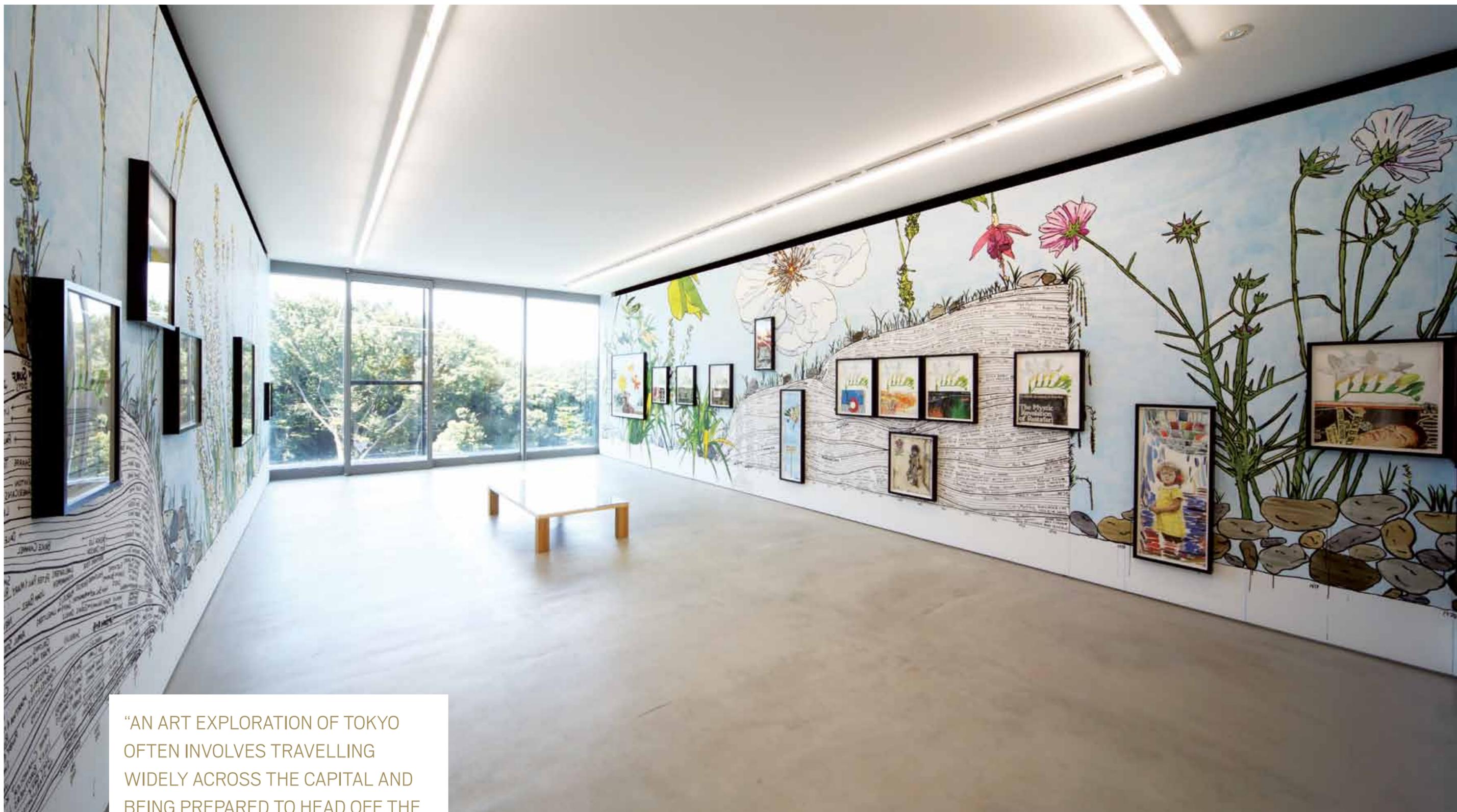
commissioned a range of Japanese artists to transform 31 guest rooms by 2016.

Some rooms are already open. Among them are the green walls of Artist Room Bamboo by Yoshitaka Nishikawa and the monochrome fantastical designs of sumi ink artist Kiyoko Abe's Artist Dragon Room. The Artist Floor is also due to launch an art concierge service, to advise guests about exhibitions, galleries and events.

Palace Hotel, an elegantly designed landmark hotel near the Imperial Palace moat in Marunouchi, boasts an impressive art collection of 1,000-plus pieces, many of which have been exclusively commissioned from leading Japanese artists. The hotel also recently launched a bespoke art tour service. The service, dubbed Transcendent Tokyo, offers visitors the opportunity to take part in tours of the city's art hotspots, led by editors from global art and culture curator, Blouin ARTINFO.

"Although Tokyo is widely accessible and endlessly fascinating, especially for the bold and ever-curious, Japan's art scene is so rich and diverse that the question of where to begin in one's exploration can prove daunting to even the most independent traveller," explains Masaru Watanabe, the hotel's executive director and general manager.

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“AN ART EXPLORATION OF TOKYO OFTEN INVOLVES TRAVELLING WIDELY ACROSS THE CAPITAL AND BEING PREPARED TO HEAD OFF THE BEATEN TRACK – A BONUS FOR ANY OPEN-MINDED TRAVELLER”

For those happy to venture off the beaten track, one neighbourhood that is worth checking out is Yanaka, in eastern Tokyo. With its low-rise wooden houses, decades-old stores and tree-lined streets, the area is one of the few spots in Tokyo to have escaped the architectural ravages of wartime bombings and natural disasters.

In recent years, a new generation of creatives have also set up small independent workshops and boutiques in the area, tapping into the neighbourhood's heritage as a hub for quality leather craftsmanship. Hidden on a quiet lane is Scai the Bathhouse, one of Tokyo's most original independent galleries, with exhibitions ranging from the bauble-encrusted deer of Kyoto-based Kohei Nawa to the minimal bold sculptures of Anish Kapoor. As reflected in its name, the atmospheric gallery is set in a renovated public bathhouse, complete with a curved tiled roof, towering chimney and serene light-filled high ceilings. Just around the corner is Kabaya, an old-school 1930s *kissaten* (tea room) coffee shop housed in a tiny old wooden building, which has been renovated by the owners of the gallery, complete with retro furnishings and a mirrored ceiling.

To scratch further beneath the surface of Yanaka, visitors would do well to head to the cult store, Tokyobike, and rent one of their urban bicycles for a two-wheeled exploration of the neighbourhood. It's while exploring local spots such as Yanaka that it's easiest to tap into the creative energy that is currently fuelling Tokyo's art scene — and understand why its neighbourhoods are some of Asia's best-kept art secrets. ■

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## THEGOLDENBOOK

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**Art unexpected** Artist Kohei Nawa's bauble-encrusted deer, on display at Scai the Bathhouse (below); inside the newly-opened Blum & Poe gallery, which specialises in contemporary art (previous page)



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