



SPECIAL EDITION

The Unspoken Gesture

—
FOCUS JAPAN

BYWATER CREATIVE STUDIO – SPECIAL ISSUE 1



Contents

I

Editor's Letter - Before You Arrive

Every journey begins long before the first step

II

Design Philosophy - Character & Feeling

Character is remembered long after style is forgotten

III

Feature - Before it Becomes Language

Feeling always arrives first

IV

Music - CHANMINA and The Art of Building a World

The worlds we create are often the ones we first needed ourselves

V

Food - The Restaurant is Not the Occasion

Comfort, restraint and the role of food in other people's lives

VI

Entrepreneurship - The Familiar Made Personal

People return for what makes them feel known

VII

Small Business Acumen - Second Fitzroy Coffee

Small decisions quietly become lasting reputation

VIII

Work Culture - The Shop That Teaches Children to Work

The lessons that shape us are rarely taught as lessons

Before You Arrive

AWAITING NO ONE, PREPARED FOR EVERYONE



*The most memorable experiences
are often those that make us feel
somebody thought about us before
we arrived.*

There is a tendency when discussing Japan to focus on outcomes.

The beautifully crafted object.

The respected brand.

The elegant building.

The memorable customer experience.

Yet the most interesting question is not the outcome.

It is what makes these outcomes possible.

There is a feeling that many people encounter when spending time in Japan.

It is difficult to describe at first because it often reveals itself through small moments.

The package opens where it should.

The sign appears exactly when you need it.

The train arrives when expected.

The room contains the item you forgot to bring.

The shopkeeper answers the question you were about to ask.

The interaction unfolds naturally.

Again and again, you encounter evidence that somebody has already thought about you.

Not in a dramatic way.

Not in a way that draws attention to itself.

But through a thousand small decisions that make an experience feel intuitive, considered and effortless.

Over time, I came to realise that this feeling extends far beyond customer service or good manners.

It appears in architecture, hospitality, retail, manufacturing, public spaces, design and business. It reflects a deeper habit of observation and consideration that continues to shape many aspects of Japanese culture.

My connection with Japan began more than twenty years ago while living in Kochi on the island of Shikoku. In the years since, I have returned regularly, spending extended periods in Kitakyushu and travelling throughout western Japan.

Over time, I became less interested in Japanese design as an outcome and more interested in the mindset that produces it. The habit of noticing. The discipline of refinement. The willingness to improve what already exists rather than constantly pursuing what is new.

Long before I lived in Japan, Japanese design had already found its way into my life through Melbourne's textile industry.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, my father introduced Shima Seiki knitting technology into Australia. These machines expanded what designers could create and transformed what manufacturers could produce.

Looking back, they represented something I would encounter repeatedly in Japan years later: technology in service of human creativity.

The Japanese concepts of Omoiyari (思いやり) and Ki Kubari (気配り) offer one way of understanding this phenomenon.

Neither translates neatly into English.

THOUGHTFUL IN ADVANCE

Kurashiki, Okayama Prefecture



Omoiyari speaks to the ability to imagine another person's experience before they express it. Ki Kubari describes an attentiveness to one's surroundings and a willingness to act before a need becomes a problem.

Together they describe a form of consideration that is both practical and deeply human.

Not grand gestures.

Not performance.

Simply the habit of paying attention.

Over the years, another pattern began to emerge.

Many of the people I encountered in Japan did not seem to view business solely as a commercial pursuit. Whether speaking with designers, shop owners, artisans, restaurateurs or makers, there was often a sense that the business existed to support the work rather than the work existing to support the business.

The motivation was not simply growth.

It was mastery.

The desire to improve a skill, refine a product and contribute something of value.

Profit remained essential, but it was rarely the entire story.

The business became an expression of the individual's commitment to their craft.

Perhaps this is why so many memorable Japanese businesses feel authentic. They are often shaped by people who care deeply about what they do. The customer experiences the result not only through the product or service, but through the accumulated attention, effort and pride invested in its creation.

気配り
思いやり

What makes these ideas particularly relevant today is that they challenge many assumptions about business and growth.

We often hear that success comes from disruption.

From moving faster.

From adding more features.

From demanding attention.

Yet some of the world's most trusted businesses have been built on a different principle.

Attention given rather than attention sought.

The ability to recognise friction before it becomes frustration.

To simplify complexity.

To remove uncertainty.

To improve an experience in ways that customers may never consciously notice, but always remember.

Many of the most admired Japanese products and services are not remarkable because they demand attention. They are remarkable because they have been carefully designed not to.

The experience feels natural.

The object feels appropriate.

The interaction feels effortless.

The design disappears, leaving only the experience itself.

PREPARED WITHOUT BEING SEEN



This edition of The Space Between Things brings together Japanese designers, artists and photographers, alongside creatives whose lives and practices move between Japan and Australia.

Their work spans different disciplines, perspectives and experiences, yet a common thread emerges throughout these pages.

A sensitivity to relationships.

A respect for process.

An appreciation for what is subtle rather than obvious.

An understanding that meaning is often found in the spaces between things.

As you move through this issue, I invite you to look beyond aesthetics alone.

Consider the decisions behind the work.

The details that have been refined.

The experiences being shaped.

The needs being anticipated.

The relationships being nurtured.

For founders, business owners and creative leaders, there may be no greater competitive advantage than developing an educated eye. The capacity to observe carefully, understand deeply and continually refine the experience you offer to others.

In the end, authenticity is not something a business claims.

It is something people feel.

The most memorable products, places and experiences share a common quality.

They leave us with the sense that somebody cared enough to think about us before we arrived.

Thank you for reading.

FUROSHIKI



*Again and again,
you encounter
evidence that
somebody has already
thought about you.*

Richard Bywater

Editor

Design - The Architecture of Feeling

Character and Feeling What Founders Can Learn from Typography and Shodō

WHERE CHARACTER BEGINS



Founders often believe they are building products, services and companies. In reality, they are also building perception.

Long before a customer understands what a company does, they experience what it feels like. That feeling emerges not only from the product itself, but from countless subtle decisions: colour, proportion, material, language, imagery and, perhaps most overlooked of all, typography.

A font may seem like a superficial choice. After all, words remain the same regardless of the typeface in which they are written. Yet experience tells us otherwise. The same sentence can feel authoritative, elegant, playful, innovative or trustworthy depending entirely upon how it is presented.

Typography does not change meaning. It changes our relationship to meaning.

The difference often appears subtle, yet it reveals something fundamental about the nature of design.

In Western design traditions, typography is often treated as a system. Letters are standardised, repeatable and optimised for communication. We speak of legibility, hierarchy, consistency and brand identity. These are important considerations, yet they only partially explain why certain forms resonate emotionally while others do not.

The more one examines typography, the less it appears to be merely a technical exercise and the more it begins to resemble an emotional one.

People do not merely read words.

They read intention.

The Presence Within the Mark

Japanese aesthetics offers a valuable perspective on this relationship.

In shodō (書道), the “way of writing,” the character is not simply a vehicle for language. It is an expression of presence. The pressure of the brush, the speed of the stroke, the balance of space and the confidence of movement all reveal something about the person who created it.

The viewer is not simply interpreting a symbol. They are witnessing an action.

A character written with discipline communicates something different from a character written with spontaneity. A bold stroke carries a different emotional energy from a restrained one. The literal meaning remains unchanged, yet the experience of that meaning transforms.

Shodō suggests that emotion is not attached to writing after the fact. It is present within the act of writing itself.

This idea finds a contemporary counterpart in the work of Nana, the Osaka- and Melbourne-based sign writer behind NanaSigns. For Nana, the value of hand-painted lettering lies partly in the fact that the viewer can sense the person behind it.

“The greatest value of hand-painted work,” she says, “is that you can feel that it was made by a person.”

That presence is carried through small variations: the slight movement of the hand, the irregular edge of a stroke, the places where the paint becomes dry or uneven. These qualities are not necessarily flaws. They are evidence that the lettering came into existence through contact between hand, brush, paint and surface.

“Small variations and areas of unevenness give the work a character that belongs only to that particular sign.”

This contrasts digital production which has made visual perfection easier to achieve than ever before. Letters can be repeated without variation. Curves can be corrected indefinitely. Surfaces can be made frictionless.

Yet perfection can also remove evidence of life.

The issue is not that digital lettering is somehow less legitimate. It can be elegant, precise and entirely appropriate. The difference lies in what remains visible. Hand-painted lettering carries traces of the time, decisions and movements through which it was made. It retains the event of its creation.

THE MARK RETAINS THE HAND



*The greatest value of
hand-painted work is
that you can feel that
it was made by a person.*

Seen through this lens, typography ceases to be merely a branding asset and becomes an expression of organisational character.

The comparison becomes even more compelling when considered through three Japanese ideas:

Kanji (漢字) are characters.

Shodō (書道) is the act of giving those characters form.

Kimochi (気持ち) is the feeling that emerges through that expression.

Taken together, these ideas challenge the tendency to separate form from emotion. Character, gesture and feeling are not independent phenomena. They are different dimensions of the same experience.

Lettering and the Character of Place

Typography is never encountered in isolation.

It appears on a wall, above a doorway, across a window, on a package or within a screen. Its meaning is altered by material, scale, distance, light and the movement of people around it.

Nana's experience working between Osaka and Melbourne has made this relationship between lettering and place particularly visible.

“In Osaka, I have the impression that many signs place a strong emphasis on communicating information,” she explains. “In Melbourne, by contrast, I felt that signs often existed as part of the identity of the business and as part of the wider streetscape.”

Both cities contain many forms of visual expression. Yet the comparison reveals two different emphases.

In a dense urban environment such as Osaka, signage often carries a heavy informational burden. It must identify, direct, compete and clarify. The sign participates in a crowded field of words, colours, lights and visual signals.

Melbourne, in Nana's experience, often allows hand-painted signs to operate differently. Lettering may become part of the atmosphere of the shopfront and the street itself. Its ageing, fading and small imperfections can be accepted as part of the personality of the business.

LETTERS ENTER THE STREET



“In Melbourne, I often saw hand-painted lettering and even the way it changes with age, being valued as part of a business’s individuality.”

This introduces an important idea: that a sign does not only communicate at the moment of completion. It continues to change.

Paint fades. Surfaces weather. Lettering gathers history.

In many contemporary branding systems, consistency is treated as a virtue. The aim is to maintain the same image everywhere and at all times. Yet physical signs remind us that identity can also deepen through use, age and exposure.

A painted sign does not remain untouched by the place it inhabits. It becomes part of it.

For Nana, the goal is therefore not simply to reproduce either an Osaka or Melbourne approach, but to combine the strengths of both.

“I do not want the lettering merely to communicate information,” she says. “I want people to feel, ‘This belongs to this particular business,’ or, ‘This lettering suits this space because it could only exist here.’”

That final phrase lies at the heart of Nana’s perspective.

Because it could only exist here.

It suggests that the highest form of identity may not be something that can be transferred unchanged from one location to another. It may emerge instead from a careful relationship between the business, the lettering and the specific place in which they meet.

I asked Nana one question, “When you paint a sign, do you believe that the weight of your emotion and feeling somehow transfers into the sign providing energy and uniqueness that a computer generated image cannot?” The answer was without hesitation, “of course! Yes I do.”

From Information to Atmosphere

For founders, this observation reaches far beyond typography.

A brand is rarely defined by what it says. Competitors can imitate products, replicate services and borrow language. What proves more difficult to reproduce is atmosphere: the subtle emotional field that surrounds an organisation.

Trust, aspiration, sophistication, innovation, warmth, credibility and authenticity emerge through thousands of small decisions, many of which operate below the threshold of conscious awareness.

Typography contributes to this atmosphere in profound ways.

A typeface may communicate confidence without arrogance. Tradition without stagnation. Modernity without coldness. These qualities are rarely stated explicitly, yet they are continuously perceived.

The process begins, in Nana's work, not with the lettering itself but with an attempt to understand the business.

"I begin by trying to understand what the business or brand values."

She asks who the owners hope will enter, what kind of environment they want to create and what intention led them to begin the business in the first place. These ideas are then translated into shape, weight, spacing and colour.

Each decision carries emotional consequences.

A heavy letter can feel stable or forceful. A thin one can feel elegant or fragile. Tight spacing can create urgency. Open spacing may suggest calm, refinement or generosity. Colour can create warmth, restraint, confidence or distance.

None of these qualities exist independently. They operate together. The sign becomes a form of interpretation.

THE STUDIO BEFORE THE SIGN



“Rather than feeling that I am simply designing letters,” Nana says, “it feels closer to giving form to the particular character of the business—to what makes it itself.”

This is the point at which typography becomes more than selection.

The designer is not merely choosing a font. The designer is trying to discover which visual form is capable of carrying the character of the organisation.

That task is inherently interpretive. It requires attention not only to what the founder says, but to what the founder values, what the business hopes to become and how it wishes to be encountered.

The lettering becomes a translation of intention.

When the Sign Enters the Space

A design viewed on a screen remains incomplete.

It may be technically resolved, but it has not yet entered the conditions through which it will be experienced. Scale, architecture, material, light and movement can alter it entirely.

For Nana, the decisive moment occurs when the sign is placed in the actual environment.

“When you look at the lettering by itself, it is a design. But when it comes together with the walls, windows, movement of people and light within the business, it becomes something that helps create the atmosphere of that place.”

This is where the themes of typography and architecture converge.

Letters do not merely sit upon walls. They alter them.

A word painted across glass can change the threshold between inside and outside. A hand-lettered name above a door can soften an otherwise anonymous façade. A small sign near the entrance can affect whether the business feels formal, intimate, established or experimental.

The sign becomes part of the choreography of arrival.

It shapes the customer’s first reading of the space before any employee speaks, before the product is touched and before the service is understood.

WHEN THE SIGN ENTERS THE SPACE



*“When lettering comes
together with the walls,
windows,
movement of people and light,
it begins to create
the atmosphere of the place.”*

Nana describes a sign as both something to be read and something that creates the first impression of the business.

Reading is only one part of the encounter.

Before the customer interprets the words, they have already encountered scale, colour, balance, texture and gesture. They have already begun forming an impression of whether the place feels welcoming, confident, refined, playful or distant.

The sign communicates before it is consciously understood.

The same is true of design more broadly.

Words convey information.

Design conveys intention.

Typography, spacing, rhythm, proportion, contrast and visual balance create a silent dialogue between creator and observer. They shape expectation before conscious analysis begins.

In many respects, design functions much like music. We do not always understand why a particular composition moves us, but we recognise the emotional response immediately.



The Human Character of Brands

The most enduring founders understand this intuitively.

They recognise that brands are not remembered solely because of what they say. They are remembered because of what people feel in their presence.

Meaning is rarely contained in information alone. It emerges through the relationship between message and expression, between substance and form.

Hand-painted lettering makes this relationship unusually visible because the form retains evidence of the human act behind it.

Nana believes that this presence gives businesses and brands a greater sense of warmth and humanity.

“Because of this, the business or brand also begins to feel more human and warmer. I believe that this makes the sign more likely to remain in the memory of the person who sees it.”

The point is not simply that handmade work is nostalgic or charming. Its value lies in the fact that it reveals care.

Someone has stood in front of the surface.

Someone has mixed paint, measured space and guided the brush.

Someone has accepted responsibility for the mark.

That evidence of attention becomes part of the customer’s experience of the business itself. A carefully painted sign suggests that someone has considered how the business meets the world.

The sign therefore becomes more than an object. It becomes a small demonstration of organisational character.

For founders, the conclusion is difficult to avoid: design does not sit on top of meaning.

Design is one of the ways meaning comes into existence.

Whether expressed through a contemporary typeface, a handwritten signature or a brush-drawn kanji, writing carries evidence of the human mind behind it. We perceive personality in form. We sense character in structure. We recognise feeling in gesture.

Perhaps that is the deeper connection between typography, sign writing and shodō.

All three seek to make the invisible visible.

They transform language into experience.

They reveal that communication is not simply about transmitting information, but about conveying presence.

In Japanese, one might say that the journey from kanji to feeling occurs through shodō.

In design, the journey from information to emotion occurs through form.

And it is within that subtle transformation, from character to feeling, that enduring brands are born.

AUTHOR

Richard Bywater

Feature - Art

Before It Becomes Language

The brush records what the body already knows.

BEFORE LANGUAGE



*Through painting, calligraphy,
and design,
Junko Azukawa explores how
meaning emerges not only
through what is seen,
but through the intention,
presence, and emotion
embedded within every mark.*

There is a moment before the brush touches paper when nothing has yet happened, but everything is already present.

For Japanese artist Junko Azukawa, that moment is not simply preparation. It is a threshold. The body gathers itself. The mind quietens. The hand waits. Ink rests in the brush. White paper sits open, absorbent and unforgiving. Intention is there, but it cannot be too forceful. Expectation is there, but it must fall away.

“Sometimes I can’t start,” Junko says, “because there is still expectation. The thought that I should make something beautiful, or impress people, stops me.”

The first stroke does not arrive through control. It arrives through release.

“At that moment,” she says, “who cares what I paint? That is when I start.”

This moment contains a question that reaches far beyond art itself. It is a question artists, architects, designers, musicians and craftspeople have wrestled with for centuries.

Why do some forms move us before we understand why?

Why does one landscape feel peaceful while another feels unsettling? Why does a room feel welcoming before we consciously analyse it? Why can a single brushstroke seem calm, confident, restrained or energetic despite carrying no literal message at all?

Perhaps meaning does not begin with language.

Perhaps it begins with feeling.

EVERGLOW

Junko Azukawa



For Junko, this understanding lies at the heart of shodō, the Japanese way of writing. The brushstroke is not simply a mark. It is a record of presence. The movement of the hand, the pressure of the brush, the rhythm of the gesture and the state of mind of the artist all become visible within the finished work.

“The brushmark responds honestly,” she says.

A person changes from day to day. They may be tired, joyful, distracted, tense or relaxed. The brush does not conceal these states. It reveals them.

“Today, you may be grumpy,” she says. “Tomorrow, you may be relaxed or happy. So the brushmark is more a reflection of that moment.”

In shodō, the materials make this honesty unavoidable. Washi paper absorbs everything. A slow brush releases more ink. A fast brush dries out. Pressure creates weight. Lightness creates air. Hesitation shows. Confidence shows. Gentleness shows. Force shows.

The line is not merely an image.

It is evidence.

Evidence of breath, pressure, rhythm, mood and contact.

*The most powerful forms
do not describe feeling.
They allow feeling
to become visible.*

This idea helps explain why certain forms resonate emotionally before they are intellectually understood. We often imagine that emotion is added to a work after it is created, but Junko’s practice suggests something different. Emotion emerges through the act of creation itself. It becomes embedded within form.

The finished brushstroke carries traces of the artist’s attention in the same way that a voice carries traces of feeling. We recognise something within it before we have words for it.

This principle extends far beyond art.

The most memorable products are rarely distinguished by functionality alone. Buildings, objects, brands and environments all communicate emotional information long before they communicate practical information. The curve of a chair, the weight of a typeface, the texture of a material, the proportion of a bottle or the shape of a doorway can all influence perception before conscious interpretation begins.

Consumers may not consciously analyse why one object feels trustworthy while another feels cold, or why one space feels comforting while another feels sterile. Yet they respond instinctively to signals embedded within form.

A single brushstroke can convey confidence, restraint, calmness, energy or contemplation. The brush does

not describe these qualities. It embodies them.

At its deepest level, design may be doing exactly the same thing.

Over time, practice changes the relationship between artist and tool. At first, the beginner thinks too much. Mind, body and brush are separate. The hand attempts to obey an idea. The stroke becomes awkward because the person remains outside the act of making.

But gradually something begins to join.

“The more you become familiar with the brush,” Junko says, “the more your body and the brush begin to move as one.”

She sees this transformation repeatedly in her students. In the morning they are often self-conscious. They worry about technique. They try to make the brush behave. By afternoon, after hours of grinding ink, breathing, standing and moving, something shifts. The body enters the process. The brush becomes less like an object and more like an extension of perception itself.

Eventually, she says, “the brush, body, mind and soul become one.”

This idea belongs not only to shodō but to every discipline where mastery passes through the body. A musician does not merely move fingers across strings. A surfer does not merely stand on a board. A gardener does not merely arrange plants. A craftsperson does not merely assemble materials.

At the highest level, action becomes perception.

A surfer learns to read the wave through the body: where the power lies, where movement should soften, where acceleration should occur. The wave is never static. Like paper, it is a living surface. The surfer moves through it as the practitioner of shodō moves through ink.

The result is not thoughtless. It is a different kind of thinking, one that occurs before language.

Junko recognises this state. She speaks of being “in the zone”, but not as an escape from awareness. Rather, it is an intensification of awareness.

Grinding ink, she says, can heighten sensitivity to birds, music, movement and space. Everything becomes sharper. Then, at a deeper point, sound itself may seem to disappear.

This raises a question that sits quietly beneath many contemplative traditions: is the deepest creative state one of total awareness, or one in which awareness becomes so complete that it feels like emptiness?

The history of shodō sits near this question. Junko notes that related practices were cultivated by monks and samurai, people for whom centred attention was not decorative but essential. A samurai could not afford to become blank. He had to hear everything. Every movement, every sound, every subtle shift in his environment.

The zone, then, is not absence.

It is presence refined.

It is awareness so complete that the boundary between self and action begins to dissolve.

This dissolution shapes Junko’s own artistic process. When painting landscapes, mist, birds or trees, she does not begin with a rigid plan. A blank page does not arrive as a finished composition waiting to be executed.

Instead, she begins somewhere.

A mark appears.

The paper responds.

The ink absorbs.

A dark area may call for lightness elsewhere. A strong gesture may require delicacy beside it. Empty space may suggest that nothing more is needed.

LET GO

Junko Azukawa



“Ink decides,” she says.

This does not mean the artist disappears. Rather, the artist becomes one participant in a larger conversation.

The work develops through call and response: ink, paper, brush, hand, eye, memory, feeling, silence and space.

Junko compares this to music. Strength requires softness. Shadow is needed to express light. If every note is loud, no note is loud. If everything is full, nothing can breathe.

This is where negative space becomes more than an aesthetic device.

It becomes a philosophy.

The traditions that shaped shodō did not emerge in isolation. For centuries they developed alongside contemplative practices that sought harmony between seemingly opposing forces: dark and light, fullness and emptiness, movement and stillness. What appears on the paper is not simply a composition. It is the visible expression of a relationship.

A brushstroke exists because ink meets paper. Neither can create the image alone.

Too much ink overwhelms the page. Too much empty space leaves the composition unresolved. Strength requires softness beside it. Darkness requires light. Form requires space.

Perhaps this is why a balanced work feels intuitively satisfying. The viewer recognises, even if only unconsciously, that something has been reconciled within it.

The ink has found its proper relationship with the paper.

Seen this way, shodō becomes more than an artistic practice. It becomes a reflection on relationship itself.

In much Western design, space is often defined by function or filled by information. A room is identified by what occupies it. A product communicates through features. An image declares what it depicts.

Traditional Japanese aesthetics often approach space differently.

A room may become a living area by day and a bedroom by night. Sliding doors may divide a house into smaller spaces or open it into one larger whole. A brushstroke may suggest a bird to one viewer, a butterfly to another and something entirely different to someone else.

The artist does not need to decide everything.

This is not vagueness.

It is generosity.

It leaves room for participation.

In Junko's work, the viewer is not merely receiving an image. They are completing it. Mist, trees, shadows and movement are not used to explain nature but to evoke an experience of nature. The more suggestive the image becomes, the more space it creates for memory, imagination and feeling.

"I don't want to use words to explain," Junko says. "Just feel. That is the answer."

This may also explain why some places remain with us long after we leave them. Certain landscapes, buildings and artworks linger not because they delivered information but because they created space for personal meaning to emerge.

Australia has changed Junko's relationship with that process.

Since living here, she has painted more Australian subjects: cockatoos, gum trees and local landscapes. She has also embraced colour in ways she once hesitated to do in Japan.

"In Japan, I worried my teacher might get angry if I used even a little colour," she says.

Australia gave her permission to loosen that anxiety. Tradition remains present, but it no longer feels restrictive. It becomes a foundation rather than a boundary.

As a result, her Australian works carry a distinctive double vision. They are grounded in Japanese discipline while responding to Australian light, trees, birds and atmosphere. They do not merely depict place. They translate place through a brush trained in another world.

A black cockatoo, a stand of gum trees or a memory from lockdown may appear newly vivid after passing through Junko's ink. The work returns viewers to moments they did not realise they had kept.

WHERE THE BRUSH BEGINS



The same relational quality appears in Junko's live performances with musicians. Performing alongside taiko drummers and flautists, she does not plan the outcome. The brushstroke influences the music. The music influences the next brushstroke. At times she is responding. At times she is leading. The work emerges between them.

This is art as reciprocal attention.

And perhaps this brings us back to the larger question.

Why do some forms move us before we understand them?

Junko's work suggests that the answer lies in the quality of presence embedded within creation itself.

Before language, there is gesture.

Before explanation, there is feeling.

Before meaning is analysed, it is sensed.

The emotional power of a brushstroke, a building, a landscape, a piece of music or a carefully designed object may arise from the same source. Each carries traces of attention. Each communicates something beyond utility. Each transforms feeling into form.

This is the space where Junko's practice lives: between ink and paper, sound and silence, intention and surrender, artist and viewer, tradition and freedom.

It is also the space between perception and language.

The place where meaning first begins.

Perhaps a life unfolds in much the same way.

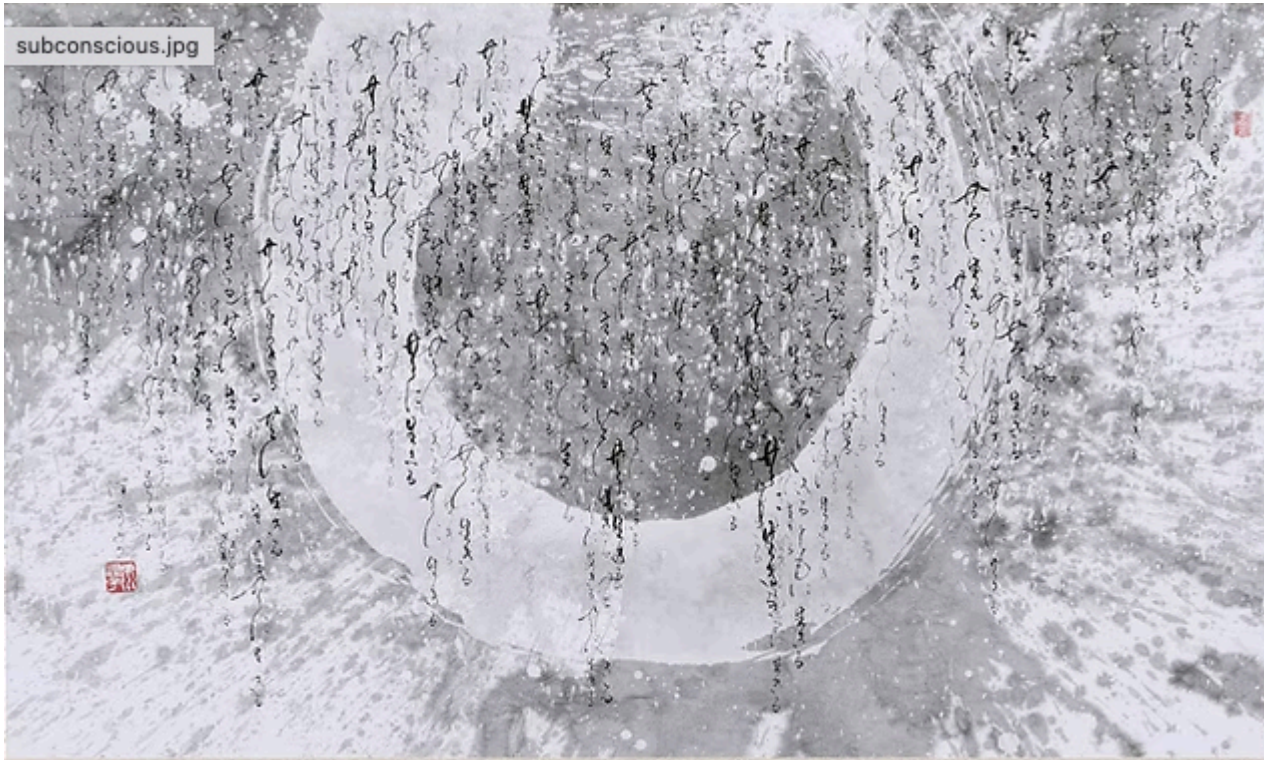
We inherit a page already marked by others. We add our own gestures, sometimes carefully, sometimes carelessly. We take from the world and we leave traces upon it. We absorb experience and we contribute to it. Every encounter leaves its mark. Every decision alters the composition.

The challenge is not to fill every space, nor to leave the page untouched, but to find a balance between what we receive and what we return.

In the end, the question may be the same for both the artist and the individual: not how much ink was used, but whether the composition was brought into harmony.

SUBCONSCIOUS

Junko Azukawa



*In the end, the question may be
the same for both the artist
and the individual:
not how much ink was used,
but whether the composition
was brought into harmony.*

AUTHOR

Richard Bywater

CHANMINA and the Art of Building a World

*Great artists don't simply write
songs.
They build worlds that people choose to
inhabit*

THE WORLD OPENS



If you live in Australia, there is a reasonable chance you have never heard of CHANMINA.

That is understandable. What is harder to understand is how someone can become one of Japan's most creative figures while remaining largely invisible to much of the English-speaking world. The discrepancy itself is fascinating.

It suggests that influence and visibility are not always the same thing. The first time I encountered her work, I assumed I was looking at a musician.

Then I assumed I was looking at a fashion figure.

Then a visual artist.

Then a cultural commentator.

Eventually, I realised the problem was not with her.

It was with the categories.

None of them seemed large enough.

THE WORLD MADE VISIBLE



CHANMINA belongs to a generation of creators who move effortlessly between disciplines. Music, visual design, fashion, performance, identity and storytelling are not separate activities. They are simply different expressions of the same creative instinct.

Born to a Korean mother and Japanese father, and raised between cultures, languages and identities, she has spent much of her career operating in the spaces between worlds.

From the beginning, her perspective was shaped not by a single cultural lens, but by the experience of navigating several at once.

Her music blends Japanese, Korean and English.

Her visual identity constantly evolves without losing coherence.

Her work moves between vulnerability and confidence, rebellion and elegance, intimacy and spectacle. The result is something unusual.

People do not engage with her work in the way audiences traditionally engage with music. They do not merely listen.

They participate.

They adopt the aesthetics.

The language.

The attitudes.

The emotional vocabulary.

What begins as fandom gradually becomes something closer to inhabitation.

*Some creators leave
behind work.
Others leave behind worlds.*

This raises an interesting question.

What exactly are people attaching themselves to?

Because it cannot simply be the songs.

The songs hold importance, naturally.

But they do not fully explain the phenomenon.

And once you begin looking for an explanation, you start noticing the same pattern elsewhere in Japan.

You find it in the films of Hayao Miyazaki.

You find it in the designs of Rei Kawakubo.

You find it in Nintendo's worlds.

You find it in architecture, hospitality, retail and even neighbourhood cafés.

Again and again, the same feeling emerges.

The sense that you are not encountering a product.

You are entering a place.

Only later do you discover that Japan has a word for this.

Sekai-kan.

Literally translated, the word means something like "worldview" or "sense of a world."

But neither translation quite captures it.

A sekai-kan is not simply a brand.

It is not a visual identity. It is not a story. It is not even a philosophy.

It is an entire atmosphere.

A complete emotional ecosystem.

A universe with its own rules, aesthetics, tensions and logic.

Once you understand the concept, it becomes impossible not to see it.

A Studio Ghibli film is not simply a movie.

It is a world.

A Comme des Garçons collection is not simply fashion.

It is a world.

The best Japanese restaurants are not merely serving food.

They are creating worlds.

Even a traditional tea ceremony is less an activity than an environment carefully constructed to shape how people feel, move and experience time.

Japan has long produced creators who seem less interested in making things than in constructing realities around those things.

Perhaps this is why so many Japanese cultural exports feel strangely immersive.

They invite participation.

Not only observation.

The audience is not standing outside the work.

The audience is stepping inside it.

Seen through this lens, CHANMINA begins to look less like an exception and more like a contemporary expression of a much older creative tradition.

THE INVITATION



What makes her remarkable is not simply her talent.

Japan has no shortage of talented musicians.

What makes her remarkable is her ability to create coherence across multiple forms of expression.

Her music sounds like her visual identity.

Her visual identity feels connected to her performances.

Her performances reinforce a larger narrative about confidence, identity, vulnerability, ambition and self-definition.

Everything belongs to the same universe.

Nothing feels accidental.

Nothing feels detached from the whole.

The songs are not the destination.

They are the entry point.

*The music is the doorway.
The world is what people stay for.*

This distinction reveals something interesting about creativity itself.

In the West, we often think about creation through the lens of products.

What are we making?

What are we selling?

What problem are we solving?

These are useful questions.

But they are increasingly insufficient.

Technology has made products easier to create than at any other point in history.

Artificial intelligence can generate images, music, writing and software in seconds.

Features can be copied.

Prices can be matched.

Design trends can be replicated.

Yet one thing remains stubbornly difficult to imitate.

A world.

Atmosphere is difficult to copy.

Meaning is difficult to copy.

Belonging is difficult to copy.

This may explain why some brands inspire loyalty while others compete endlessly on features.

People rarely devote themselves to products.

They devote themselves to identities.

Communities.

Cultures.

Worlds.

When people line up overnight for a product launch, they are not queuing for an object. They are participating in a story.

When people travel across countries to attend a concert, they are not purchasing sound. They are entering a world. When people become passionate advocates for a brand, they are not defending a product. They are protecting a place that has become meaningful to them. The deeper lesson hidden within CHANMINA's success is therefore not a lesson about music. It is a lesson about gravity.

GRAVITY



How do certain creators attract people into orbit around an idea? How do they create something that feels larger than the work itself? The answer may be that they stop thinking like producers and start thinking like world-builders. This is not only true for artists.

It may be increasingly true for founders, designers, architects, restaurateurs and entrepreneurs.

The most enduring organisations of the future may not be those with the best products. They

may be those that create the most compelling worlds.

Worlds people want to enter. Worlds people want to belong to. Worlds people want to return to.

Perhaps that is why CHANMINA matters, even to readers who have never heard her music. Her story is not fundamentally about celebrity. It is not even fundamentally about music.

It is about what happens when someone refuses to remain inside a category and instead constructs an entire universe around an idea.

And perhaps that is the deeper lesson hidden within Japan's creative culture.

The most enduring creators are not simply making things.

They are creating places.

Places people return to. Places people recognise. Places people feel part of.

Perhaps the most important question for creators, founders and designers is no longer what they are making. Perhaps it is what kind of world people enter when they encounter it.

And whether that world is compelling enough to make them stay.

DOORWAY TO ANOTHER WORLD



*The songs were never
the destination.
They were the doorway.*

Author

Richard Bywater

The Restaurant Is Not the Occasion

What Chef Ryo Kitahara understands about comfort, restraint and the role of food in other people's lives

THE WORK BEHIND WARMTH



I had intended to ask Ryo Kitahara about plates.

Before a chef begins arranging food, how does he decide where it belongs? Is the choice led by colour, proportion or texture? Does the plate begin with the appearance of the dish, or with the feeling the chef wants the guest to have when it is placed in front of them?

It seemed like a straightforward question about presentation.

Ryo's answer opened into something much larger.

When he was younger, he said, he concentrated on technique, knowledge and proving what he was capable of doing. This is familiar territory in the life of almost any creative person. At the beginning, ability must be acquired, tested and demonstrated. The young chef wants to make difficult food. The designer wants to be recognised as a designer. Ambition often begins with the self.

Ryo speaks differently now.

The technique has not disappeared. Without the knowledge and skill developed over years, he could not produce the food he makes today. What has changed is the purpose of that knowledge.

He is less interested in technique that calls attention to itself. He wants the food to taste good. He wants it to be understood. Most of all, he wants people to feel comfortable.

*Restraint is not
the absence of skill.
It is skill that
no longer needs
to prove itself.*

Comfort is not a word commonly placed at the centre of serious conversations about food.

We are more accustomed to hearing about innovation, experimentation, purity, provenance and disruption. Restaurants are praised for surprising us, challenging us or introducing us to something unfamiliar. The chef is presented as an author, and the diner becomes the recipient of an idea.

Ryo does not reject this outright. There are restaurants whose role includes educating diners and expanding what they understand food to be. But he no longer sees that as his own primary position.

Sometimes, he said, a chef can have too much ego. The result may be food that the customer does not really understand.

The problem is not that the food is unfamiliar. It occurs when the chef becomes so concerned with demonstrating an idea that the diner is required to admire the demonstration.

The meal becomes an argument for the chef's importance.

Ryo's food can still contain personality, training and cultural memory. It can still carry a distinctively Japanese taste. But it does not have to confuse people in order to prove that it is original.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF COMFORT



His forthcoming Japanese burger restaurant makes this position particularly clear.

A burger is already understood. The customer recognises its form, its structure and the satisfaction it promises. Ryo does not need to invent an entirely unfamiliar category. He can begin with something accessible, then introduce Japanese flavour, judgment and atmosphere into it.

The familiarity is not a limitation.

It is the ground on which difference becomes legible.

During our conversation, I mentioned Bikkuri Donkey, the Japanese hamburger-steak restaurant whose name translates, more or less, as “Surprised Donkey.” My memory of it has remained vivid for years: hamburger steak arriving on a sizzling hot plate, spring onions continuing to cook against the metal, grated daikon, rice, miso soup and a demi-glace sauce drawing everything together.

It was recognisably descended from a Western hamburger meal, yet unmistakably Japanese. An imported form had adapted to local tastes and habits until it no longer felt imported. It simply belonged.

Ryo’s burger will work in that same territory: familiar in form, but shaped by his own flavour, atmosphere and cultural memory.

*Familiarity is not the enemy
of originality.
It is often what allows
originality to be understood.*

The new restaurant will be shaped by the Tokyo of the 1990s. The logo, furniture, neon colour and music will draw from the visual and aural character of the period: animation, funk, urban energy and a particular Japanese understanding of modernity.

The intention is not merely to decorate a burger shop with retro references.

It is to create access to a time.

For those who knew Japan during that period, the room may produce direct recognition. For others, it may evoke a Tokyo encountered through music, television, fashion, graphic design or film.

The past will not be reconstructed literally. A neon sign, song, chair or logo cannot produce the 1990s by itself. The feeling exists in the relationship between them: the music against the lighting, the typography against the colour, the food against the ceramic.

Atmosphere is not found in one thing.

It occurs between things.

Ryo’s interest in Japanese ceramics belongs to the same philosophy.

A beautiful plate can make a small number of simple ingredients appear complete. Its glaze changes the way colour is read. Its texture can make a dish feel rustic, restrained or intimate. The empty surface around the food affects scale, proportion and pace.

Before the diner has tasted anything, the plate has already begun to shape the encounter.

The plate does not merely hold the food.

It tells the guest how to approach it.

This is not presentation added after cooking. The vessel is part of the meal.

*The plate does not
merely carry the food.
It tells the diner
how to approach it.*

THE UNSPOKEN GESTURE



The most important part of our conversation came when we moved beyond food and presentation altogether.

I asked what he hoped people would feel when they sat down, before the meal arrived.

His answer was not built around a single desired emotion. He did not say that every guest should feel excited, transported or impressed.

People come to a restaurant for different reasons, he explained: a family catch-up, a business discussion, dinner with friends or simply a meal after work. His role is to support them.

He does not want to distract them from why they came.

The restaurant is not the occasion.

It holds the occasion.

A restaurant can easily begin to imagine itself as the central event. The chef wants the food to command attention. The designer wants the room to be photographed. Service becomes performance. Every element asks to be noticed.

Ryo's mature position is almost the reverse.

The food, lighting, music, service and room should work together to make people comfortable while they are doing whatever brought them there. The restaurant should not compete with the family conversation or the meeting between friends. It should help those things take place.

Hospitality becomes a supporting role.

This does not make it passive. Support requires judgment. Music must be present without overwhelming the table. Service must be attentive without becoming intrusive. The food must be memorable without insisting that it become the only thing remembered.

The decisions remain exacting. They have simply been redirected away from the ego of the maker and toward the life of the guest.

“The restaurant is not the occasion.

It is there to hold the occasion.”

WHERE EVENINGS UNFOLD



This is where Ryo's use of the word comfort becomes especially powerful.

In some contemporary Australian dining contexts, comfort can be treated with suspicion. It may suggest predictability, conservatism or a lack of ambition. The chef is expected to push, challenge and distinguish.

The restaurant must have a concept strong enough to attract attention.

Ryo offers another way of understanding excellence.

Comfort does not mean the absence of ideas.

It may mean that many ideas have been resolved.

The guest does not need to notice that the light is at the correct level, that the music leaves room for speech, that the ceramic gives the food warmth, or that the flavours stop just before becoming excessive.

Comfort may be what happens when nothing unnecessary asks for attention.

There is something recognisably Japanese in this orientation, although it would be too simple to claim that Japanese chefs value comfort while Australian chefs value display. Both cultures contain every kind of chef.

Yet Ryo's philosophy reflects a Japanese hospitality sensibility in which care is expressed through anticipation, appropriateness and the removal of friction.

The host does not always need to announce what has been considered.

The evidence is in how naturally the experience proceeds.

That sensibility has travelled with Ryo, but it has not remained fixed. His career has taken place across cultures. He is not reproducing Japan in Melbourne without alteration. He is working between places, finding a form that remains true to his own palate while being immediately understandable to the people who enter the room.

His Japanese burger is therefore not a compromise between authenticity and accessibility.

It is a demonstration that authenticity can be accessible.

The food does not become less Japanese because it is immediately pleasurable to an Australian diner. Nor does it become less individual because the burger is familiar. Ryo's authorship appears in calibration: the flavour he introduces, the balance he chooses, the plate he selects and the atmosphere he builds around the meal.

The authorship is present.

It simply no longer needs to dominate.

Creative maturity is often described as finding one's voice. But there may be a later stage in which the maker learns that the voice does not need to fill the entire room.

A younger chef may ask whether the diner understands his food.

An older chef may begin to ask whether the food understands the diner.

What are they here for?

What do they need from this place?

What would allow their evening to unfold without interference?

These are not smaller questions than how to make the most technically impressive dish. They may be more difficult because they require the chef to give up the certainty of being at the centre.

Ryo is still ambitious.

His ambition has changed direction.

He is no longer trying only to make the best food in the room.

He is trying to make the room better for the people inside it.

The food remains essential. So do the ceramics, music, lighting, service and memory of 1990s Tokyo. But all of them are there to support something that does not belong entirely to the chef: a conversation, a reunion, a meeting, an ordinary meal that mattered to the people who shared it.

Perhaps that is the deepest purpose of hospitality.

Not to become the experience, but to create the conditions in which an experience may belong to someone else.

Author

Richard Bywater

People - Art and Entrepreneurship

The Familiar Made Personal

Kenny C.W.Y didn't invent
a new visual language.
He transformed one already
shared into something
unmistakably his.

MAKING BEFORE EXPLAINING



For years, radio accompanied Kenny C.W.Y while he drew.

It was there while he travelled, ate, lay awake at night or felt alone. Through FM Cocolo and FM802, music, information and distant voices entered the room.

The broadcaster remained unseen. The listener remained alone. Yet something crossed the distance between them.

Years later, FM802 invited Kenny to create its main visual. A medium that had quietly accompanied him had become the place where his private creative practice met public recognition.

The listener had become the artist on the other side of the transmission. That movement, from solitude to connection runs through Kenny's work. It appears in the yellow figures that invite people into his visual world, in the community that supported his Melbourne exhibition, and in the collaborative spaces where, as he puts it, "no one feels alone."

His work is easy to recognise. The yellow characters, direct black lines and exaggerated expressions arrive before explanation.

But recognisability is not simplicity.

Kenny's illustrations belong to a familiar visual world shaped by manga, cartooning, street art and contemporary pop culture. The influences are visible. They are not disguised, nor do they need to be.

Every artist begins inside a language that existed before them.

The more difficult task is discovering what can become personal.

温故知新 Finding the New Within the Familiar

The Japanese expression onko chishin 温故知新 describes the discovery of new understanding by returning to what is already known.

It is often translated as learning from the past, but its meaning is more active than nostalgia. What has been inherited does not have to remain fixed. It can become the material from which something new is formed.

Kenny's characters emerge from established traditions, yet their identity has developed through repetition, humour, observation and colour.

Yellow is central to that identity. It carries warmth and energy while allowing the figures to remain slightly outside ordinary reality. They are specific in mood but open in identity. The viewer can recognise the emotion without needing to recognise the person.

Over time, yellow has become more than colour. It has become authorship.



Rather than painting Melbourne as a skyline, Kenny paints it as a personality.

Flinders Street Station sits comfortably beside Victoria Bitter, graffiti, coffee, trains and street culture, while three unmistakably Australian characters wear expressions that are equal parts cynical, amused and affectionate.

It is the humour of Melbourne itself, never polished, rarely serious, but always alive.

The city becomes less about its buildings than the culture they contain: conversations over coffee, afternoons in laneways, public art, shared rituals and a willingness to laugh at almost everything, including ourselves.

The result is not an illustration of Melbourne's landmarks, but of Melbourne's character.

“When the goal shifts from being able to draw to wanting to draw, the way we see the world begins to change.”

Attention and Instinct

Kenny describes his creative development through a simple distinction.

At first, drawing is often about ability: achieving the right line, expression or proportion. Later, the aim moves from being able to draw to wanting to draw.

For Kenny, that shift changes observation itself.

“Observation is extremely important to me,” he says. “I naturally find myself observing people and everyday life without even realising it.”

Yet when drawing for himself, he tries not to think.

“If I overthink it, I can’t draw.”

The apparent contradiction reveals his process. Observation is constant, but the act of drawing cannot be over-managed. The material has already entered him.

He watches closely.

Then he lets go.

Osaka, Melbourne, Nara

Kenny’s creative life has been shaped by three places.

Osaka is his hometown: vibrant, convenient and filled with movement. Its energy can be stimulating, but Kenny found that it also brought constant distractions.

Melbourne revealed another way of living.

During his year in Australia, he had more time to focus on art. He also encountered an everyday openness that stayed with him—strangers greeting one another, people smiling, communities gathering to help.

When he held his solo exhibition in Melbourne, that warmth became practical. Friends and members of the community helped make it possible.

“It really made me realise how much I’m supported by others,” he says.

Returning to Japan, Kenny wanted to preserve both the time and mental space he had discovered abroad. Rather than return to Osaka, he chose Nara.

Nara offered another rhythm: nature, calm and proximity to the city without its constant pressure. The people felt kind and easygoing. Kenny found that he could create from a more settled state of mind.

His move was not a rejection of Osaka or a withdrawal from the world. It was a creative decision about attention.

Osaka gave him energy.

Melbourne gave him time and connection.

Nara gave him balance.

A place close enough to remain connected, but quiet enough to hear the work.

INSIDE THE PRACTICE



The Signal Between Solitude and Recognition

Radio formed another bridge between those places.

FM Cocolo and FM802 had been familiar to Kenny since he was young. Through them, he encountered music and information beyond his immediate world. The stations remained close during ordinary and difficult hours.

At one point, he seriously considered leaving art.

That gives the FM802 commission a significance beyond professional success. The station that had sustained him privately was now asking him to contribute to its public visual identity.

He was nervous about the responsibility of creating a main visual. Once he began, however, anxiety gave way to enjoyment.

His response was gratitude—to the station, the event staff and the people who came to see the work. The image carried his name, but the moment belonged to many people.

*The listener became
the artist on the
other side of the transmission.*

SKETCHING THE NARRATIVE



From Solitude to Gathering

Kenny's community practice began not with an artistic manifesto, but with a home party in Australia.

Because home parties were less familiar to him in Japan, he saw the gathering as a way to help people connect—particularly Japanese residents who might otherwise feel isolated.

The idea was social before it was artistic.

But the experience changed how he thought about artists, who often spend long periods creating alone. Kenny began to recognise the importance of giving them places to meet and make work together.

“Hosting that home party was a wonderful turning point for me,” he says.

Create the space first.

Allow connection to happen inside it.

Kenny describes communal drawing just as directly:

“When everyone is drawing together, no one feels alone.”

The value lies not only in the finished image. It lies in the temporary change within the room. People leave their separate worlds, share attention and respond to one another.

The artist may create the setting, but the people entering it also change what the artist sees.

Kenny chose Nara because it gave him enough quiet to hear himself.

He creates communal spaces so that quiet does not become isolation.

His practice depends on both.

Looking Up

Kenny believes murals can make people look up.

“So many people spend their time staring at their phones while walking through the city,” he says. “I believe murals have the power to make people look up from their screens, even for a moment.”

The effect may last only seconds.

That is enough.

The image interrupts habit. Attention returns to the wall, the street and the place immediately around the viewer.

Kenny’s visual language is recognisable, but recognition is only the doorway. What matters is what happens after someone enters.

A person stops.

Another person joins.

A wall becomes a meeting point.

A drawing becomes a conversation.

FROM SOLITUDE TO GATHERING



Creativity as Connection

“For me, creativity exists because of the connections I’ve made with other people,” Kenny says.

A stranger offers a greeting.

Friends help build an exhibition.

A distant radio voice enters the room.

Melbourne teaches an artist to protect his time.

Nara gives him the conditions to continue.

People gather after working alone.

A passer-by looks up.

Together, these encounters become the conditions of the work.

Kenny’s visual language became personal through repetition, observation and instinct. It became sustainable through the life he built around it. It became meaningful through the people who entered it.

The movement in his work is not simply from influence to originality.

It is from solitude to connection.

The listener becomes the artist. The private drawing becomes a public image. The home party becomes a creative community. The mural returns a passing stranger to the world.

And the artist once sustained by distant voices begins creating spaces in which other people no longer feel alone.

The familiar became personal.

Then it became shared.

Author

Richard Bywater

What Travelled

Home

How Melbourne's café culture crossed
the Pacific, encountered Kokura, and
became something
entirely its own

THE CITY BEFORE THE CAFÉ



Before the first sip of coffee, there is music.

Not enough to dominate the room. Just enough to soften it.

A customer pushes open the door. Someone looks up from behind the machine. Light settles across the timber, the plants, the photographs and the small objects placed around the room. Nothing appears arranged for effect, yet little has been left to chance.

By the time the coffee reaches the table, the experience has already begun.

Second Fitzroy Coffee sits in Kokura, on the northern edge of Kyushu. Its founders Mio and Mau Murakami grew up here, but the idea for the café began much farther away.

Before returning to Japan, they worked as baristas in Canada and Australia. In Melbourne, they encountered a café culture in which coffee was not treated simply as a drink, nor the café as somewhere to complete a transaction and leave.

Customers and baristas spoke to one another. Regulars became known. People arrived alone and stayed without appearing alone. The café became part of the structure of daily life.

What stayed with the founders was not only the coffee.

It was the closeness.

“We were inspired by the relationship between café staff and customers,” they explain. “Cafés overseas felt like places where people naturally gathered, shared conversations and became part of each other’s daily lives.”

When they returned to Kokura, they wanted to bring some of that feeling home.

Not Melbourne itself.

Something learned there.

Something translated.

A City That Reveals Itself Slowly

Kokura is a compact city, but it never feels closed.

At its centre stands Kokura Castle, beside the river and gardens that draw people through the city rather than away from it. Bridges connect shopping streets, restaurants, civic spaces and quieter paths beneath the trees. In the evening, the castle can appear almost theatrical against the dark. By morning, it has returned to ordinary life: commuters crossing the grounds, families near the water, shopfronts opening one by one.

History has not been removed from the city and placed behind glass.

It remains inside the rhythm of the day.

Kokura does not announce itself with the force of Tokyo, Kyoto or Osaka. It reveals its character slowly—through covered arcades, neighbourhood restaurants, the turn of a bridge and small independent businesses discovered while walking.

Second Fitzroy Coffee belongs to that kind of city.

Its name carries two meanings.

The first refers to Fitzroy, Melbourne's inner-city neighbourhood of old buildings, independent businesses, cafés, music, street art and creative life.

What appealed to the founders was not a single style. It was the way different periods of the city remained visible at once. Historic buildings held contemporary businesses. Older streets supported new ideas. Nothing needed to be made entirely new before it could become relevant again.

The founders did not see Fitzroy and Kokura as identical places. What they recognised was a shared possibility: the past did not need to be erased for contemporary culture to grow.

“Second Fitzroy” therefore does not mean another Fitzroy recreated in Japan.

It suggests that something first encountered there might take on another life elsewhere.

The second meaning is more personal.

“Second” also refers to a second home, or a second place.

Somewhere outside the obligations of home and work. Somewhere a person can enter without explanation, sit alone or meet others, and feel that returning is natural.

It is easy to call a café welcoming.

It is much harder to design one that actually feels that way.

*The founders did not bring Melbourne
home intact.*

*They brought home
what they had learned to
value there.*

Before the Coffee

A room begins influencing us long before we understand why.
The volume of the music affects how loudly we speak.

The distance between chairs determines whether we feel exposed or protected.

The light alters the colour of the coffee, the table and the person sitting opposite.

Furniture decides where the body settles. Objects suggest whether a room belongs to someone or has merely been styled to resemble a place with a past.

At Second Fitzroy Coffee, the founders consider the lighting, music, furniture placement, flowers, photographs, plants and small decorative objects as parts of the same experience.

They may not be noticed separately.

That is not their purpose.

“We believe small details create the overall experience,” they say. “From the taste of coffee, the way we serve drinks, the music, the furniture and even the atmosphere, everything contributes to how customers feel.”

The details are not performing for attention.

They are establishing the conditions of the room.

Downstairs, customers remain close to the movement of the café. Drinks are prepared within view. Conversations can pass naturally across the counter. The work of the barista is visible and immediate.

Upstairs, the pace changes. There is more distance from the machine and the activity below. The room can hold solitude, private conversation or a slower kind of attention.

The two spaces do not perform the same task.

Together, they allow different people to belong to the same café in different ways.

A ROOM THAT LETS YOU STAY



Upstairs, the room is modest. Timber tables follow the length of the space. Light

from the window moves across the wall and the worn surfaces of the chairs.

Small candles rest on the tables. Plants occupy the edges rather than demanding

the centre.

Nothing insists that a customer admire the room.

The room simply allows them to remain.

This is not decoration added after the business has been created.

It is the business being created through space.

Music Beneath Conversation

Music matters here because the founders understand that sound can change the emotional temperature of a room.

Like coffee, music becomes attached to memory.

A song heard while waiting for someone may later recall the table, the weather outside and the particular mood of that afternoon. Its effect often survives the moment in which it was heard.

Near the window, a record is lifted carefully from its sleeve.

It would be easy to mistake the turntable for decoration.

It is not.

Music is part of the room's rhythm.



In a café, music must find its place.

Too loud, and it competes with the people in the room.

Too quiet, and the space can feel exposed.

The right music supports conversation without occupying it. It fills the intervals without eliminating them.

This is one of the places where the ease the founders experienced in Australia meets the precision they brought to the café in Japan.

Melbourne's café culture gave them an appreciation for social informality. Staff and customers could speak naturally. A café could feel like an extension of public life rather than a room divided neatly between those serving and those being served.

Japan sharpened the question.

How loud should the music be for that ease to occur?

Where should the furniture sit?

What kind of light allows someone to stay without feeling watched?

How can a customer be acknowledged without being crowded?

*Australia offered
the invitation.
Japan refined the
conditions.*

What Melbourne Taught Them

Australia has developed a café culture in which specialty coffee belongs to everyday life.

The coffee is taken seriously, but it is not always treated solemnly. Baristas are recognised for their skill. Customers become interested in origin, roast, technique and the decisions behind the cup.

The founders absorbed that respect for the work.

More importantly, they saw that cafés could create community through repetition.

The same customer at the same time.

A familiar order.

A short conversation that grows over months.

Recognition built gradually enough that it never needs to be announced.

When they returned to Japan, they wanted to help specialty coffee grow in Kokura. But they also wanted to bring home the relationship surrounding it.

That is where imitation would have failed.

The outward appearance of Melbourne café culture is easy enough to reproduce. Exposed brick. Industrial furniture. Handwritten menus. Particular cups, colours and graphic references.

But resemblance does not create meaning.

A visual copy may be recognisable while remaining emotionally empty.
The founders of Second Fitzroy Coffee understood the principle beneath what they admired.
They brought home the permission to stay.

The closeness between staff and customers.

The idea that coffee could create an occasion for belonging.

Once in Kokura, those ideas encountered Japanese habits of restraint, attention and care.

The result does not feel like Melbourne transplanted into Japan.

It feels like what happened after Melbourne was remembered here.

Hospitality After Service

Since opening the café, the founders say they have learned that hospitality is not merely good service.

Service can be trained and repeated.

Hospitality begins with attention.

It requires an understanding that comfort is not the same for every person. One customer may want conversation. Another may want silence. Someone may arrive with friends, while another may need an hour in which nothing is asked of them.

The task is not to perform friendliness.

It is to notice.

This distinction sits close to the Japanese understanding of hospitality, although that idea is often reduced from outside Japan to formality, precision or immaculate presentation.

Its deeper expression lies in anticipation.

It is the attempt to recognise what might make another person more comfortable before that person needs to ask.

At Second Fitzroy Coffee, this sensitivity sits alongside the more open social quality the founders experienced overseas.

The café does not feel purely Australian or conventionally Japanese.

It has been made through both.

There is conversation across the counter, but also an awareness of when not to interrupt.

There is the freedom to stay, but also the discipline required to make staying comfortable.

Warmth has not been left to chance.

Coffee as an Occasion

Many people can make coffee.

The founders are clear that a memorable café requires something beyond technical ability.

The taste matters. Without quality, the rest of the experience eventually becomes fragile.

But quality alone does not explain why one café enters a person's routine while another remains interchangeable.

People carry away more than flavour.

They remember the tone of the interaction.

The music.

The chair.

The light moving through the room.

The feeling of being recognised.

The ease of spending an hour somewhere without needing to justify it.

Outside the café, coffee remains in someone's hand while conversation continues.



One person stands. Another sits in the doorway. The cup is present, but it is not the centre of the scene.

What matters is the small exchange between them.

This is what the founders noticed overseas.

Coffee creates the occasion.

The relationship gives it meaning.

A successful café eventually becomes part of the emotional geography of a city.

People stop referring to it only by category.

They do not say, “Let’s get coffee.”

They say, “Let’s go there.”

That small change reveals that the place has acquired meaning beyond its product.

The founders hope customers leave Second Fitzroy Coffee feeling a little happier than when they arrived.

Not transformed.

Not overwhelmed by an elaborate performance of hospitality.

Simply better.

There is modesty in that ambition, but no lack of seriousness.

Improving a small part of someone’s day requires decisions that may never be consciously acknowledged.

Coffee prepared properly.

Music held beneath conversation.

Light adjusted.

Flowers chosen.

Furniture placed with care.

A returning customer remembered.

A person arriving alone allowed to feel that they belong.

None of these decisions is remarkable by itself.

Together, they become the place.

At the Castle

Second Fitzroy Coffee also appears through regular pop-up events at Kokura Castle.

It is not a permanent second location, but the setting carries particular meaning.

The castle represents the history and identity of the city. Serving coffee there places the café within a larger public story and introduces it to people who may not otherwise encounter it.

The pop-ups also reveal something about the nature of place.

A café is usually imagined as a fixed interior: walls, tables, a counter and a machine. Yet when

Second Fitzroy Coffee moves into the castle grounds, much of its identity travels with it. The architecture changes.

The furniture changes.

The sounds, movements and surrounding landscape are different.

What remains is the coffee, the people, the conversations and the manner in which others are received.

The café is carried through behaviour.

An idea first encountered in Australia returned to Japan, found a home in a small independent business, then appeared beside a castle that has watched Kokura change for centuries.

The old and new meet once more.

The Journey Back

The relationship between Australia and Japan is often described through tourism, trade, diplomacy and education.

It is also built through individuals who move between the two countries and return with altered ways of seeing.

A Japanese barista works in Melbourne and begins to understand the café as a social institution.

An Australian designer visits Japan and learns to notice the weight of small decisions. A chef carries an ingredient in one direction and a method of restraint in the other. A sign painter

discovers that lettering occupies space differently across two cities. The exchange does not erase difference. Its value lies in what each culture changes in the other.

Second Fitzroy Coffee belongs to this larger conversation.

Australia influenced the founders through its openness, its respect for baristas and the place cafés occupy within community life.

Japan transformed those lessons through a more finely calibrated attention to setting, behaviour and the needs of the individual customer.

Kokura gave the idea somewhere to belong.

What emerged now has something to offer back.

Australians may recognise parts of their own café culture in Second Fitzroy Coffee. They may also see those qualities returned with renewed clarity: music that does not overwhelm, objects that give a room personality, hospitality that adapts to the individual and a space designed around how people will feel rather than how it will photograph.

The influence has completed a circle.

Melbourne gave the founders something.

Kokura changed it.

The result can now be understood from both shores.

The founders did not bring Melbourne home intact.

They brought home what they had learned to value there: skilled work, human closeness, everyday community and the possibility that a café could become a second place in someone's life.

Then they allowed those ideas to become part of Kokura.

The coffee begins the exchange.

The place is what remains.

Author

Richard Bywater

Work - Culture

The Shop That Teaches Children to Work

*Before children learn
responsibility, they
are first trusted with it.*

RESPONSIBILITY BEGINS WITH BEING TRUSTED



Walk into certain Lush stores in Japan and, if you're lucky, you'll encounter something unexpected.

Among the staff are children. Not pretending to work. Working.

A black apron hangs almost to their knees. They are shown how to greet customers, prepare products, wrap purchases and explain what makes the company different. An employee remains beside them, but only just. The child is encouraged to do as much as possible themselves.

For an hour or two, the shop becomes something else. Not quite a classroom. Not quite a workplace. Somewhere in between.

It would be easy to dismiss this as marketing.

I suspect that would be the least interesting way to look at it.

Japan has always treated childhood differently. Independence arrives early. Primary school students clean their own classrooms, serve lunch to one another and, in many towns, catch trains to school alone. The assumption is that responsibility is not something that suddenly appears at adulthood. It is practised, little by little, until it becomes ordinary.

Seen in that context, Lush's workshops make far more sense.

The products happen to be soap

and bath bombs.

The lesson is something else entirely.

The company speaks openly about animal welfare, ethical sourcing and reducing waste. Those ideas are certainly present, but they are not delivered as slogans. Children hold unpacked products in their hands. They learn why they exit. They see that an object can be designed differently, and that those decisions have consequences beyond the shop itself.

The understanding begins in the fingers before it reaches the intellect.

It is a distinctly Japanese way of teaching. Knowledge is allowed to arrive through experience rather than explanation.

There is another layer that is easily overlooked.

Watch the children closely and you notice they are not only learning about products. They are learning about work itself.

Many adults carry an uneasy relationship with work. It is spoken about as necessity, obligation or survival. Yet these children encounter something different. They are thanked by customers. They contribute to a team. Small achievements are recognised immediately. The workplace becomes associated with curiosity instead of pressure.

This emotional memory may be far more important than the information they retain about the products.

Japan has long understood that confidence grows from participation. This is why places such as KidZania attract so many families. Children do not simply imagine adulthood; they rehearse for it. For a few hours they become firefighters, pilots, doctors or chefs. Lush is participating in the same tradition, albeit in a quieter, less theatrical way.



*The child leaves with more
than a souvenir.*

*They leave having discovered
that they can be useful.*

From Lush's perspective, the decision is undoubtedly a wise commercial one. Parents remember experiences like these. So do children.

Years later, when they encounter the brand again, they will not be recalling an advertisement. They will be remembering how they felt.

Most businesses spend extraordinary amounts of money trying to persuade people to like them.

Very few invite people inside and allow that affection to grow naturally.

This might just be where the program becomes most interesting.

The workshop is ostensibly about soap, customer service and sustainability.

In reality, it is teaching patience, communication, responsibility and care.

None of those qualities appear on the receipt.

Yet they are precisely the qualities that every society hopes to cultivate in the adults its children will become.

We often ask how cultures preserve themselves across generations.

The answer is rarely found in monuments or government policy.

More often it appears in ordinary places. A school corridor, a neighbourhood café, or, unexpectedly, behind the counter of a cosmetics shop, where a child in a black apron is discovering that contributing to the world can be an enjoyable thing to do.

That lesson may last considerably longer than the scent of the bath bomb they made.

Author

Richard Bywater



THE SPACE BETWEEN THINGS

SPECIAL FOCUS
JAPAN EDITION

Richard Bywater

Founder, editor and writer

The Space Between Things began with a simple observation: many of the decisions that shape our lives are the ones we rarely notice.

Through conversations with designers, founders, artists, chefs and craftspeople, the journal explores how atmosphere, culture and thoughtful design influence the way we experience the world.

Based on the Gold Coast, Richard writes from a long-standing interest in Japan, business, architecture and the everyday acts of consideration that often pass unseen.

*A journal about what becomes
visible when we learn to notice.*

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The Unspoken Gesture

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