

culture



Kenshi Yonezu provided music for the film “Chainsaw Man – The Movie: Reze Arc.” COURTESY OF SONY MUSIC

Kenshi Yonezu and the art of pop ubiquity

Music: Sound Off

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If you're nostalgic for the idea of a monoculture, then Japan is currently the place to be. In recent months the country has been unified by a shared enthusiasm for the film “Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba Infinity Castle,” the Osaka Expo and the continued on-field achievements of baseball player Shohei Ohtani.

Add Kenshi Yonezu to that list. His blippy, fidgety single, “Iris Out,” dropped in mid-September and was an instant hit. It broke Spotify Japan’s record for most streams by a song on its release day ever, and hasn’t budged from the top of the streamers’ domestic Top 50 since. The video has racked up more than 72 million views in under two months, while the track has topped the Billboard Japan Hot 100 for six straight weeks.

Helping to make “Iris Out” inescapable is its connection to another megahit: “Chainsaw Man – The Movie: Reze Arc,” which hit Japanese cinemas on Sept. 19. The feature-length installment of the popular manga and anime series about a teen who transforms into the titular monster to slice up demons won the box office in its opening week, and has held the top spot for six weeks.

“Chainsaw Man” has become one of Japan’s biggest theatrical hits of the year — and its international success has only accelerated. The film opened at No. 1 in the United States last week, pulling in \$18 million and easily cutting through the competition, including a Bruce Springsteen biopic — proof that Gen Z prefers Japanese animation over New Jersey rock. The placement helped bring its worldwide total past \$100 million.

The film also boosted Yonezu’s reach. “Iris Out” plays prominently early in the movie, keeping it lodged at the top of the charts. The only songs to come close to dethroning it are also by Yonezu. His duet with Hikaru Utada, “Jane Doe” — “Chainsaw Man’s” ending theme — trails closely behind, as does the glitchy pop of “1991,” featured in the live-action adaptation of Makoto Shinkai’s “5 Centimeters Per Second.”

J-pop in the 2020s has been heavily shaped by anime, with many of its biggest hits at home and abroad propelled by animation tie-ins, highlighted by the success of Yoa-sobi’s “Idol” with “Oshi No Ko” in 2023 and Creepy Nuts and their viral hit “Bling-Bang-Bang-Born” in 2024 from “Mashle: Magic And Muscles.” It’s a double-edged sword, though, as that link can make the music feel secondary to the visuals, a concern voiced by the CEO of talent agency Cloud Nine earlier this year.

It’s a valid worry, but the balance is struck perfectly between Yonezu and “Chainsaw Man.” Both have long been beloved in their fields, but here, they elevate each other. “Iris Out” and “Jane Doe” deepen the film’s impact, while the movie amplifies the music in return. (I specifically saw “Chainsaw Man” in the theater to hear Yonezu’s tracks for the first time in full.)

It recalls the success of “KPop Demon Hunters,” another 2025 music-meets-film crossover, where Netflix viewers discovered the hit “Golden,” which went on to top U.S. charts for eight weeks.

Together, “Chainsaw Man” and Yonezu’s music show how the right fusion of film and sound can unite an increasingly fragmented pop culture — and define a year in the process.

In the light of Issey Miyake's expanding universe

A new generation of designers carry fusion of craft and technology

Art

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The minimalist concrete room is aglow with lamps, their fabric shades like cloth cocoons spun by an insect of the future with geometric intentions. Delicate metallic frames surround the fabric from the outside, subverting expectations.

The lampshades’ sharp pleats and fractal repetitions recall clothing by fashion designer Issey Miyake — and with good reason. They are part of “Type-XIII Atelier Oi project by A-POC Able Issey Miyake,” an exhibition marking a collaboration between one of Miyake’s brands and Atelier Oi, a Swiss architecture and design firm. Fittingly for an interdisciplinary project, the setting is 21_21 Design Sight, a museum born from a collaboration between Miyake and award-winning architect Tadao Ando in Tokyo’s Minato Ward.

On view until Nov. 24, the free exhibition is A-POC Able’s first venture outside fashion, though it follows in the footsteps of its founder, who launched a lighting collection in 2011 with Italian company Artemide.

Over a career spanning more than four decades, Miyake built a reputation for pushing the boundaries of fabric, fashion and the runway — his Spring/Summer 2020 show in Paris featured models in colorful, billowing jumpsuits riding motorized skateboards. Perhaps best known for Pleats Please, which imbued garments with permanent pleats, and Bao Bao bags made of puzzle-like triangles, Miyake incorporated computer-programmed knitting and weaving machines. Even after his death in 2022, at 84, the Miyake Design Studio continues to innovate, adopting new technologies while honoring traditional Japanese craftsmanship.

The A-POC Able exhibition showcases how fashion can extend beyond clothing. The lampshades demonstrate the brand’s signature steam-stretch technique, which involves programming and weaving a design into a single piece of cloth made with heat-retractable, shrinkable thread. As with Miyake’s 1999 red dress — a single garment worn by 25 runway models — this technique allows for customizable lampshades that connect multiple light fixtures into unique shapes and designs.

“Until now, our focus was on a piece of cloth and the human body, and how to make clothes based on these two elements,” A-POC Able lead designer Yoshiyuki Miyama explains in the exhibition’s introductory video. “But when you look at everyday life, cloth offers many possibilities. From the body it can extend to space, or become a chair or a light.”



Origami origins

On the first floor of the Cube at Issey Miyake Ginza, various garments are suspended and slowly rotating, revealing their full shape and form. They are part of another Issey Miyake exhibition, “Folded Forms, Formed Reflections,” which showcases the design philosophy of the 132.5 brand and runs until Nov. 11.

“The designs created by 132.5 are innovative in that they redefine the concept of clothing, but also have an aspect that is rooted in the Japanese culture of folding,” says Shiho Sato, a PR representative from Issey Miyake.

The exhibition demonstrates how a piece of 2D cloth can transform into a 3D structure, much like origami folded from a single sheet of paper. Visitors can even dress a miniature mannequin with a flat piece of folded cloth that “falls” into shape.

Significant floor space is devoted to the production process and tools, as well as the artisans who made them. The brand draws on manufacturing techniques from across Japan, from foil processing in Osaka Prefecture to dyeing in Ishikawa Prefecture. In line with its mission “to develop new materials for the future,” Issey Miyake Studio has devised high-purity recycled polyester weaves from plastic bottles to produce eco-friendly fabrics.

Carrying the torch further

Beyond Miyake Studio’s brands, Miyake’s approach to fashion has influenced new generations of designers who’ve gained international acclaim. Maiko Kurogouchi, who worked at Miyake Design Studio for roughly three years, founded her womenswear brand Mame Kurogouchi in 2010. Kurogouchi’s time at the studio inspired her to think differently about materials.

Above: The current exhibition at 21_21 Design Site is A-POC Able’s first venture outside fashion, though it follows in the footsteps of its founder Issey Miyake, who launched a lighting collection in 2011 with Italian company Artemide. Right: Michail Gkinis Aoyama’s Coat Stole won a Design for Asia Award for its innovative design of a sleeve that doubles as a cushion cover. © ISSEY MIYAKE INC.; SHUN TAKANO, COURTESY OF MICHAEL GKINIS AOYAMA



“In the fabric-making process, I was not only exposed to the background of fabric production but also to the production of materials from fields that are generally thought to have no connection to textile production, such as paper,” Kurogouchi tells The Japan Times via email. “This cross-disciplinary manufacturing contributes to the creation of products from a broader perspective. This perspective carries design inspiration to the next idea.”

Miyake’s first non-Japanese intern more than two decades ago, Michail Gkinis, shares a similar love of materials and experimentation. A fashion student in London before coming to Japan, Miyake’s work was his introduction to the country where he has since built a life and career. He runs the

Michail Gkinis Aoyama atelier and shop with his wife, Yuko Aoyama Gkinis, who brings what he calls a “Japanese perspective” to his Greek sensibility.

The form, use of space and customizability of Michail’s designs recall Miyake’s work, though he says that was never intentional. The brand’s award-winning Coat Stole — a long, flowing garment that can be zipped and rearranged in six ways — exemplifies this. The duo has cultivated close relationships with producers across Japan, from Fukui lace to Wakayama cotton, using scrap cuts in multicolored patchwork designs that form what Yuko calls a “museum of fabric.”

Michail Gkinis Aoyama will host a one-day pop-up at Gallery Echo-ann in Ginza featuring Albos, a portable lamp that doubles as a speaker. Visitors can walk among Gkinis’ designs displayed amid atmospheric lighting and sound. “The concept... relates to interior and personal space between architecture and sound and light, so it’s very close to my theme,” Michail says.

The brand’s latest iteration of the Coat Stole merges fashion and product design and recently won them a second Design for Asia Award, which recognizes creativity and human-centered innovation alongside aesthetics and sustainability. The new version features sleeves inspired by kimono that unzip to form a cushion cover. The concept underscores the potential of fashion when design of all kinds is given ample space — just as Miyake did, and his studio and brands continue to do.

Asked what inspired him most about Miyake as a student, Michail doesn’t hesitate: “Freedom of expression,” he says, “and technology in a new way.”

Tokyo’s first European Photography Month carves out its space

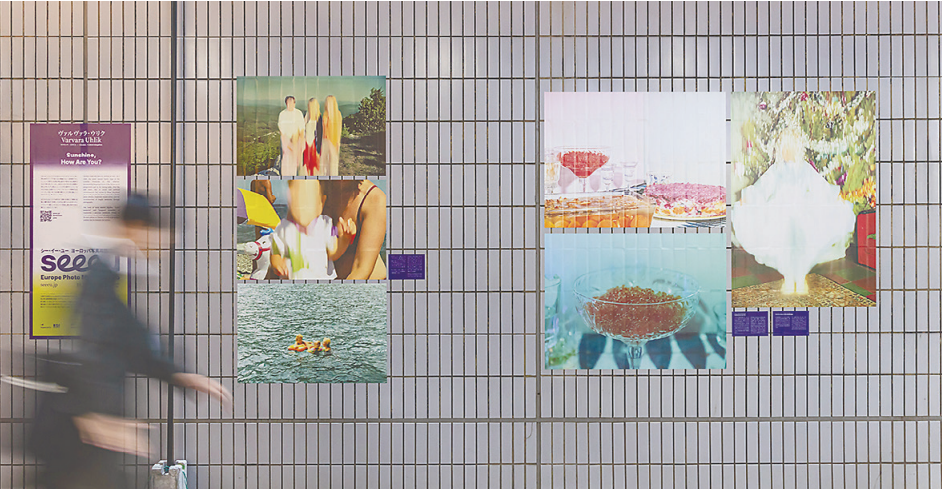
Art

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The European Photography Month, an arts network that has been holding events in different cities across Europe since 2004, has come to Japan for the first time. The theme is “Reframing Realities,” which it’s shockingly good at, thanks to a keen contemporaneity in its methods and subject matter.

Titled “Seeuu: Europe Photo Month Tokyo 2025,” the event runs until Nov. 23, with all work free to view, shown in a mixture of public and commercial spaces including WPU Hotel, Hven night club, Jinny Street Gallery’s display cases built into the columns of streetlamps and temporary construction site walls. The choice of exhibition sites reflects an intent to break out of traditional white cube venues, but is also indicative of the financial, bureaucratic and institutional headaches that go with developing new art projects in big cities.

Co-curated by Amsterdam-based artist Kim Boske and Mutsuko Ota, editorial director of photography magazine Ima, the selection of 14 artists is a powerful mixture of aesthetic innovation, introspection and



London-based Ukrainian photographer Varvara Uhlik shows a juxtaposition of childlike innocence and uncertainty in “Sunshine, How Are You?” exhibited at “Seeuu.” © TATSUHIKO NAKAGAWA

commentary on our times.

“Seeuu” does important work in providing visibility to artists from parts of the world that otherwise get scant attention in Japan. Anna Tihanyi’s surreal, elegiac collage series “Budapest A-Z,” exhibited at Ginza Coffee 2, depicts the entanglement of personal memory and narratives of the state and popular culture. “Comfort Zone,” Lithuanian artist Tadao Cern’s unflinching portrayal of European sunbathers, speaks to the deception

inherent in advertising and commercial photography.

Varvara Uhlik’s “Sunshine, How Are You?” displayed on the exterior walls of the Tamachi Center Building Piata, takes its title from phone messages to the London-based Ukrainian from her mother. “It’s difficult to answer other than ‘I’m ok,’ which is typical for people in post-Soviet societies, where personal expression is tightly controlled,” Uhlik told the press in Tokyo on Oct. 22.

Images in the series, which take their cue from the amateur family snapshot, oscillate between childlike delight and disturbance. Uhlik photographs icons of innocence — Christmas tree ornaments, brightly colored party food and playground equipment — but with a frantic and unsettled energy.

Displayed at Jinny Street Gallery, “Imagined Images” by Athens-based artist Maria Mavropoulou also explores the family snapshot, but uses AI to generate images that were lost due to repeated moving from country to country. What would otherwise be unremarkable family photographs are rendered nightmarish; on a visual level of faces being grotesquely distorted and in an existential sense by the gap between human sensitivity toward our own species and computer software’s indifference toward us.

Belgian artist Laure Winant’s photos, which appear on a temporary construction site wall in Akasaka, are the result of fieldwork in Iceland and the remote Norwegian administered territory of Svalbard. Depictions of lava from the series “Phenomena” and colored light refracted through eons-old ice crystals from the project “Time Capsule” are simultaneously images of wonder, but also mechanical records of interaction between materials in which the role of the artist is problematized. Utilizing imaging

techniques such as LIDAR, 3D modeling and cameraless contact printing where samples of permafrost have been placed on light-sensitive paper, Winant’s work reaches for the sublime from the grounded methodology of the natural sciences.

The climate change crisis hangs over Winant’s work, as it does for the project “Water Column” by Swiss duo Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs. Exhibited at the construction site of the now demolished EX Theater Roppongi, images of brightly colored billows of dye in the Red Sea look like astrophotography from the Hubble Space telescope. Staged monochrome images of unreal sea creatures recall our prehistoric past, and project us into a future world submerged by the melting of the polar ice caps, with a stopover in the visual territory of 1950s schlock sci-fi horror.

On whether Europe Photography Month will be back next year, organizer Sergej Grigorjev says there is a wish to do so, but it’s too early for plans. “Right now, the vibe seems great. I only counted 72 mistakes we made as a startup festival, and that’s a good ratio,” Grigorjev adds.

“Seeuu: Europe Photo Month Tokyo 2025” runs until Nov. 23 at various locations. For more information, visit seeuu.jp.