

Emi Kusano Exhibition, *Ornament Survival*

Opening Saturday, May 16 at √K Contemporary, Kagurazaka

The acclaimed new series presented at Art Basel Hong Kong Zero10 makes its Japan debut



√K Contemporary (Tokyo, Shinjuku) is pleased to present *Ornament Survival*, a solo exhibition by artist Emi Kusano, on view from Saturday, May 16 through Saturday, June 20, 2026.

This exhibition marks the Japan debut of Kusano's new series *Ornament Survival*, first unveiled to critical acclaim at Art Basel Hong Kong's digital art sector, Zero10, in March 2026. Alongside new works that further develop the series, the exhibition also features signature pieces such as *Office Ladies*, offering an opportunity to trace the evolution of Kusano's practice.

Kusano is a leading figure among a new generation of international digital artists, having established a distinctive position in the field. Long before AI-based expression became widespread, she was creating works using a customized AI model trained on her own imagery, presenting them at major institutions in Japan and abroad, including M+ and the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa. Since the early emergence of NFTs as a new mode of circulation and reception for digital art, she has continued to produce and release work, and in recent years has expanded her practice beyond that framework to explore expressions that traverse the boundary between the physical and the digital. At Art Basel Hong Kong 2026's Zero10 sector, she presented her first sculptural work, further demonstrating the breadth of her practice.

Ornament Survival now makes its Japan debut.

In an age in which individuals are swept up in accelerating flows of information, the desire for recognition—both self-directed and from others—continues to proliferate without ever being fulfilled, becoming a resource within an information-capitalist society. Emotions are reduced to their surfaces, extracted as data, and ultimately replaced by technology, blurring even the contours of our existence. Today, as the nostalgia Kusano once felt for the Japanese culture of the 1980s and 1990s is itself consumed and reconfigured, the boundary between reality and fiction grows increasingly unstable.

In this series, Kusano transforms inner anguish and desire into creative energy. Positioning this as a model for women living in the present, she intertwines it with her own childhood longing for transformation, continuing to “survive = create” in order to construct a new realm of expression.

We invite you to experience a new phase in Emi Kusano’s practice.

Emi Kusano, *Ornament Survival*

Dates | Saturday, May 16 – Saturday, June 20, 2026

Venue | √K Contemporary

Address | 6 Minami-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo

Hours | 1pm -7pm

Closed | Sundays and Mondays

Organized by | √K Contemporary

Supported by | Tsubasa Koshide, Matsui Manufacturing Company, Tomoya Kishimoto, Kensho Tambara, Eriko Kimura

Printing | FLATLABO

Exhibition web | https://root-k.jp/exhibitions_en/emi-kusano_ornament-survival/

***Please check the gallery website and social media for the latest information.**

■ **Comment by Kensho Tambara (Curator)**

The figures that recur in Kusano’s work; 80s Japanese pop idols, mahou-shoujo magical girls, nurses, receptionists, and other stylized feminine archetypes, did more than populate the visual culture of their time. For many girls growing up in Japan in the 1990s, they offered recognizable models through which transformation, visibility, and agency could be imagined. Yet their appeal was inseparable from highly coded forms of femininity within a male-dominated, post-bubble Japan, carrying expectations around appearance, desirability, and behavior. Amidst a growing trend in popular anime toward female protagonists who transform, or *henshin* (変身), as in franchises like *Sailor Moon*, these images held out the possibility that girls, too, could become something else. Even so, that possibility remained bound to familiar norms governing how femininity should appear and behave.

In her new series, *Ornament Survival*, Kusano approaches this tension from within. She has spoken of how she admired these images growing up, while also recognizing how they were shaped by gendered expectations and the male gaze. This dual position underpins the work. The figures she returns to are part of a visual environment that

informed her sense of self, shaping how transformation, femininity, and agency were first encountered as lived experience.

Rather than resolving this tension, Kusano re-enters these images. Drawing on childhood play; dressing dolls, assigning roles, and staging scenes, she treats identity as something assembled through rehearsal rather than something fixed. At the center of *Ornament Survival* is a body of AI-generated images in which she uses her own image to stage speculative selves. These images unfold as a sequence of attempts, each adjusting familiar roles through shifts in styling, posture, and context. What emerges is not a set of parallel what-if universes, but a continuous recomposition of culturally learned roles. The central sculpture taking the form of an enlarged toy makeup compact, echoes the transformation devices from magical girl culture and reinforces this element of childhood play.

In Kusano's hands, the use of generative AI continues a lifelong process through which identity is formed in relation to existing images. At the same time, her use of a model trained on her own face and body marks a decisive shift: the self is rendered into a form that can be repeated, modified, and scaled, approaching what she describes as a "standard" within a system. What is rehearsed here is not only identity, but its conversion into data. By engaging how these forms persist through repetition, Kusano opens onto a broader question: how images continue to instruct the self as they circulate with unprecedented speed and intimacy, and how identity is continuously adjusted to remain visible and legible, where appearance becomes a site of negotiation, and where performing these forms begins to resemble a means of survival.

Kensho TAMBARA (b. 1992, Tokyo) is a performance artist and curator interested in investigating the role of contemporary rites and symbolic gestures in interpersonal relationships and societies. Having studied art history at Harvard University, Kensho returned to Tokyo to do-found various art spaces in Japan such as Shinokubo UGO and Sonoaida #Shin-Yurakucho. Kensho is also an advisor to a number of prolific art collectors. Past exhibitions include *Future and the Arts* (2020, Mori Art Museum as collective *Another Farm*), *Dream Play Sequence* (2021, within Toyama Prefectural Museum of Art and Design), *Debugging Landscapes* (2022, ANB Tokyo) and *Unmanned Arc* (2023, Osaka Kansai International Art Festival, Osaka).

■ Events

A series of talk events is planned during the exhibition, exploring Kusano's creative background and thought, including themes such as AI and art that are drawing widespread attention today.

On Saturday, June 13 at 16:00, a dialogue will be held between Eriko Kimura (Curator / Director, Hirosaki Museum of Contemporary Art) and Emi Kusano.

Talk Event | Eriko Kimura × Emi Kusano

Date: Saturday, June 13, 2026, 16:00–

Free admission, reservation required

RSVP ► info@root-k.jp

Additional events are being planned. Details will be announced on the website and social media as they are confirmed.

■ **Artist | Emi Kusano (1990 -)**



Emi Kusano (b. 1990, Tokyo) is a multidisciplinary artist and a leading figure in the global Generative AI art scene. She began her career as a teenage street photographer documenting Harajuku fashion, with early works featured at the Victoria and Albert Museum. These early experiences in fashion and photography informed her vision of how mass media shapes individual and collective identities. Since then, her practice has evolved to integrate emerging technologies—positioning AI as a collaborative partner rather than a defining element. Through this process, she critically explores nostalgia, pop culture, and collective memory in the digital age.

Her work has been exhibited internationally in over 20 countries at major institutions including M+ Museum (Hong Kong), Saatchi Gallery (London), Grand Palais Immersif (Paris), Museum Francisco Carolinum (Linz), and the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa. She has also participated in major international art fairs such as Frieze and Untitled Art Miami. Notably, her acclaimed series Office Ladies was featured at Paris Photo, garnering global

attention for its unique fusion of photographic sensibilities and AI generation.

Kusano's market presence continues to rise, highlighted by her participation in a Gucci-Christie's auction in 2023 and a charity auction by Christie's and UNHCR in 2024. Beyond visual art, she is the founder and lead singer of the music group Satellite Young, reinterpreting 1980s J-POP through a contemporary sci-fi lens at global events like SXSW. In 2025, she was recognized as a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum.

Most recently, Kusano held her first New York solo exhibition, *Ego in the Shell*, a collaboration with cyber punk anime series *Ghost in the Shell*, which received strong critical acclaim. She was the sole Japanese artist selected for the digital art section, Zero10, at Art Basel Hong Kong 2026, where her work attracted significant attention.

IG : @emiksn | X : @emikusano

■ **Exhibited Works**



《Magical Compact 02: Aqua Halo》 (2026) Plastic, AI-Photography printed on acrylic



(from left)

《Blue Core Assembly》 (2026) Print on acrylic board, 145.6×103cm

《Model Audience》 (2026) Print on acrylic board, 119×84cm

《Transit Bouquet》 (2026) Print on acrylic board, 84 × 59 cm

《Nursing the Machine》 (2026) Print on acrylic board, AP,119×84cm

■ About √K Contemporary

Established in 2020 in Kagurazaka, Tokyo, √K Contemporary is a contemporary art gallery that transcends borders of genre, generation, and nationality. With a 300-square-meter space reminiscent of a gallery in outer space, √K Contemporary redefines the relationship between artwork and viewer. The gallery curates exhibitions with a distinctive aesthetic, presenting exceptional artists from prewar Japan to the contemporary era. By engaging deeply with works that span art history, the gallery fosters a dialogue that links past and present, and contributes to the shaping of future cultural landscapes.

Web | <https://root-k.jp> | FB : @rootkcontemporary | X / IG : @rk_contemporary

For inquiries:

√K Contemporary (Operated by SEI-RIN Co., Ltd.)

Address: 6 Minamicho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo | Tel: +81-3-6280-8808 | Email: pr@sei-rin.com | Website: <https://root-k.jp>