Text by Kensho Tambara

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 the period. For many adolescent 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*, as in franchises like *Sailor Moon* and the *Cutie Honey* series, these images held out the possibility that girls, too, could become someone. Yet for the adolescent generation growing up in a country newly cautious of radical change after the collapse of its golden era, that promise remained bound to traditional expectations about how femininity should appear and behave. What these images offered, in other words, was not freedom from such norms, but a way of moving within them, by learning how to become visible in recognizable terms. And while it is easy to look back at the cultural imagery of this era and point to its limitations, Kusano's work suggests that these templates have not disappeared. Rather, they continue to shape how femininity is performed, recognized, and negotiated today, across new platforms and systems of circulation.

What makes Kusano's work distinctive is that it approaches these figures not as a historical image-bank to be decoded from afar, but as a formative visual environment. In her new series, *Ornament Survival*, she returns to them from within a position of attachment as well as critique. She has spoken of how she looked up to these images growing up, while also recognizing, in retrospect, the ways in which they were shaped by gendered expectations and the male gaze. In a present-day context, the figures she revisits in her new series may be concerning or even dystopian, but Kusano dually acknowledges that they are also part of the environment through which her own sense of self was formed, and through which certain ways of appearing, desiring, and becoming socially legible were first learned. This raises a question that extends well beyond the specific imagery of the 1990s: what becomes of intimate ideas of empowerment, femininity, and social agency first encountered as a young child, once they are revisited through adult reflection and critique? And how do these reflections shape the forms through which such images are returned to, reworked, and lived with in the present, under conditions of intensified circulation?

At the center of *Ornament Survival* is a body of AI-generated images in which Kusano uses her own identity image to stage speculative selves in various occupations and identities associated with these childhood images. Kusano has spoken of how AI image generation extends a mode of play shaped by her childhood experiences of dressing Licca dolls, assigning them roles, and repeatedly constructing scenes through small variations. In doll play, clothing, pose, setting, and profession are not superficial additions to a fixed self. They are the means through which a figure becomes imaginable in the first place. To assign a doll a role and restage that role with variations is to understand identity as compositional, iterative, and learned through repetition. What matters here is not the revelation of an authentic core (*Who am I?*), but the repeated "testing" of forms through which a self can appear.

This biographical anecdote of doll play implies that the AI figures that emerge in *Ornament Survival* are not fantasy depictions of individual and alternative identities so much as a sequence of iterative attempts by a single artist to make sense of these familiar roles through shifts in styling, posture, and social setting. This renewed form of rehearsal and play, in which identity is approached as something compositional and explorative rather than innate, reactivates the formative logic of doll play. Repetition here does not

produce mimicry or distance, but intimate variation within constraint: each image is generated through modifications in the prompt script that only underscore how difficult these inherited structures are to fully escape. If earlier practices of staged self-imaging, from Cindy Sherman onward, made clear that identity in photographs is assembled through inherited visual codes, Kusano pushes that problem into a different technical condition, where the self is no longer only staged, but generated through a system trained on existing images.

The decisive shift in the work lies not simply in AI-generated variation, but in the specific terms under which that variation is produced. Kusano's use of a custom-trained model built from her own face and body transforms the self into something legible to systems: repeatable, modifiable, and scalable. As she suggests, this involves turning oneself into a kind of "standard," a format that can be processed and reproduced within a system. What is rehearsed here is not only identity, but its conversion into data. It reveals that the issue is no longer only one of representation or role-play: the self becomes model-compatible material, capable of circulating as variation without requiring the singular body to be present.

In a present-day image economy, this shift carries consequences beyond the artist's personal negotiation with identity. Once the self is rendered as something repeatable, processable, and available for circulation, appearance no longer functions simply as a surface or style. It becomes a site of negotiation, one through which visibility must be continually secured and maintained. This is especially resonant in Kusano's repeated return to figures associated with care, service, and stylized femininity: nurses, receptionists, attendants, idols. Such figures do not only belong to a childhood archive of feminine imagery, but model forms of public presence structured by composure, attractiveness, responsiveness, and social legibility. In this sense, *Ornament Survival* suggests that the performance of femininity today is not only a matter of representation, but increasingly one of adaptation. What begins as rehearsal starts to resemble a strategy for enduring systems that reward certain modes of appearance while rendering others difficult to recognize at all.

If the AI-generated images reveal what kinds of conduct, affect, and self-adjustment these social images demand today, the central sculpture suggests how the self may become operable within these contemporary systems. Pointing to an earlier era in which transformation was already mediated through objects, gestures, and interfaces, the work takes the form of an enlarged plastic toy makeup compact modeled on the fictional transformation devices familiar from magical girl franchises in Japan, such as *Sailor Moon*. This layered translation, from fiction to toy to sculpture, preserves the object's association with mass-produced play even as it removes it from use, suspending it between fantasy and the present. By taking the toy, rather than the fictional device itself, as its reference, the sculpture preserves and resimulates the gestures through which transformation was once rehearsed: handling, opening, role-playing, repeating. In this sense, the compact is more than a nostalgic emblem. It is a small apparatus of conversion grounded in a transformative experience in childhood, a "magical" object through which ordinariness is turned into stylized visibility. In doing so, it also points to the limited but meaningful autonomy such objects once afforded, mediating a child's relation to identity through imagery by making transformation feel tangible, repeatable, and momentarily one's own. Enlarged into sculpture, it reveals that the logic of transformation at stake in Kusano's work did not begin with AI, but was already embedded in the objects and rituals through which femininity was rehearsed in childhood.

The question *Ornament Survival* ultimately presses is what becomes of those intimate ideas of empowerment, femininity, and social agency first encountered in childhood once they are revisited through adult reflection and critique. Kusano's answer is not that such images can simply be discarded, nor that they remain intact as sources of uncomplicated identification. Rather, they persist in altered form: no longer innocent, yet still formative; no longer fully inhabitable, yet not fully escapable either. The

figures she returns to remain available, inhabited, and repeated, but now under conditions in which their promises and constraints can be seen at once. In this sense, reflection does not dissolve these inherited forms so much as change the way they are lived with. They are returned to not as stable ideals, but as sites of ongoing negotiation, reworked through repetition, variation, and critique. Under contemporary conditions of circulation, where visibility must be continually secured and maintained, this negotiation becomes especially charged. Appearance no longer functions simply as surface, but as a field in which legibility, desirability, and social operability are constantly adjusted. Survival, here, names that quiet but pervasive labor: the effort to remain visible and intelligible within systems shaped by images one has inherited but did not choose. By re-entering these forms rather than rejecting them from a distance, Kusano shows how deeply they persist within the self, and asks what it means to continue living through them now.

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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).