

# Something Old, Something New: NEC Projectors Connect Past and Present in Japanese Artist's First Major Self-Curated Exhibition

## Facility:

- Seattle Art Museum's Asian Art Museum

## Vertical:

- Arts & Entertainment

## Location:

- Seattle

## Challenges:

- Create an immersive environment for a Japanese artist's multimedia exhibition that combined legacy museum pieces with cutting-edge digital works

## Solution:

- Five NEC NP-PA571W projectors with three NEC NP13ZL lenses; one NEC NP-PA571W projector with an NEC NP12ZL lens; one NEC NP-PA571W with an NEC NP30ZL lens; two NEC NP-P502HL projectors

## Result:

- Successful four-month exhibition that challenged visitors to see traditional Asian art in a new way

Traditionally, when a museum hosts a special exhibit, the artist creates, and the curator curates.

But when the Seattle Art Museum convinced a globally acclaimed Japanese artist that she was the right person to curate and organize her own multimedia exhibit, including digital technologies that would bring her creations to life, the artist was up for the challenge.

The artist Tabaimo is known for her immersive and thought-provoking video installations that combine hand-drawn images with digital manipulation, and offer a critical and complex view of modern Japanese society. She has been gaining recognition in North America with exhibits at museums like the San Jose Museum of Art, so after the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) received a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to enhance collaboration with Asian scholars and artists, the museum chose Tabaimo as its second guest curator.

"This was the first time Tabaimo curated a major show, and it took a little convincing," said Xiaojin Wu, curator of Japanese and Korean art for SAM. "When I went to Japan to meet her and proposed the idea that she curate, she was not sure if she could do it, but wanted to give it a try."

Tabaimo came to view the museum's collection and conceived the concept of the exhibition – in which the museum's own works would play an important role alongside her own, and even inspire her to create new art works for the exhibit.

## The Inspiration for the Exhibit

Tabaimo decided to organize the exhibit around the concept of utsushi, which refers to the emulation of a master artist's work as a way to understand their technique – but she gave this idea a twist, even creating a word to describe the state of being utsushi'd: utsutsushi, which combines utsushi with utsutsu ("reality; things that exist in the world"). Her interest in the concept of utsushi comes from her mother, a noted ceramicist who in particular admires Ogata Kenzan, a Japanese artist from several centuries ago.

"Tabaimo took this concept and gave it an almost modern definition," Wu said. "It's not easy to explain or understand. Tabaimo believes that if a work of art can connect the past and future through the present, you can call that work utsushi. So in a sense, what she is trying to do in this exhibition is to connect the past – our collection – to the future, through her present work."



Photo credit of @Kazuto Kakurai

To organize the exhibition, Tabaimo used four of her existing works, but also created four new works after studying SAM's collection.

"Sometimes when a museum has a special exhibit, it will commission the artist to create a new work, but we didn't commission her, so no one expected this," Wu said. "She created four within a year, which was remarkable. She probably broke her own record."

The four new works respond to and incorporate art objects from SAM's collection into Tabaimo's video installations – which meant that SAM's AV and design team had to start from scratch for much of the installation.



## Creating the Exhibit

Many of Tabaimo's works incorporate digital projectors. For this exhibit, she wanted to use her preferred projector supplier, NEC Display Solutions.

"Tabaimo knows NEC projectors very well and has been using them for years," Wu said. "She selected the ones she wanted for this exhibit, and gave us the specs and model numbers for the projectors she wanted for each piece. She already had in mind which NEC projectors would work well for her works."

After the conception and art creation stages, Tabaimo began working with museum staff to create the exhibition space.

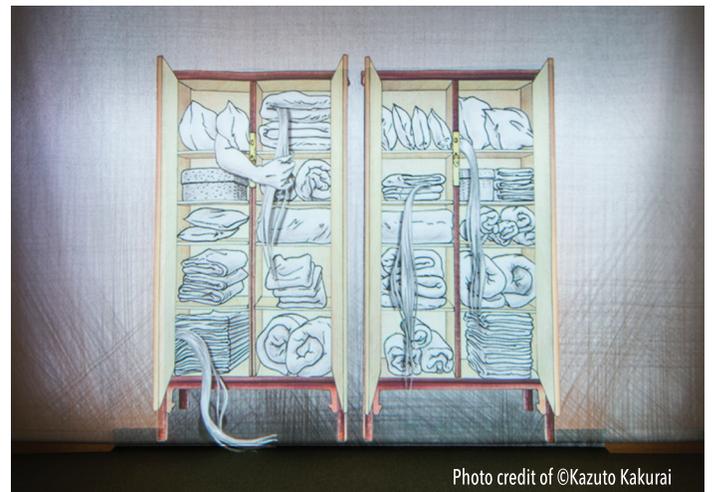
"All her video installations require some sort of buildout, and they can be very complex for large-scale works," Wu said. "SAM's Asian Art Museum is in an Art Deco building from 1933, so she understood there were limitations to the building – we couldn't suspend projectors from the ceiling because they can't bear much weight, for example. There were lots of things to overcome to make it the way she wanted."

The museum's AV and design team also consulted with the San Jose Museum of Art design team to talk through some of the challenges involved in Tabaimo's installations.

"We went down there and got an idea of what worked for them and what didn't, which was really helpful," said Kevin Higinbotham, manager of audiovisual services for SAM. "We got a sense of what it needed to look like before it started, and because her work uses interesting geometry in the space, it's more technical than most video artists' work."

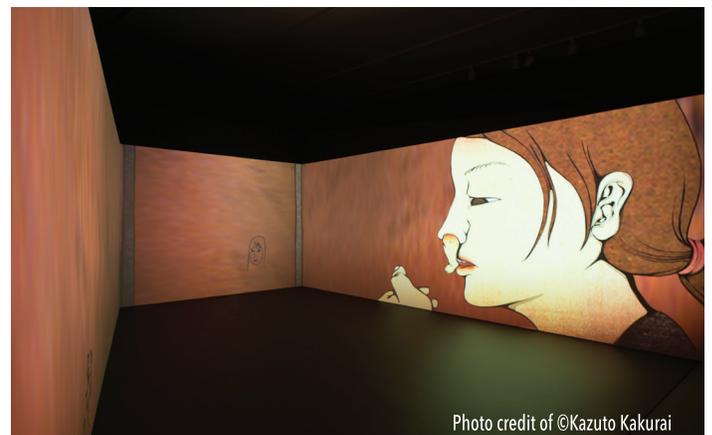
The four existing works already had detailed drawings that included installation specs, so those spaces just needed to be built, but Higinbotham said the new works took some experimentation and a bit of trial and error to create their spaces.

"We had to move things around quite a bit, which is pretty standard with new works," he said. "When an artist creates something brand-new, until you get it up in the space, you don't know what it will look



like. Plus, Tabaimo was actually animating the works onsite while at the museum by projecting a grid onto a wall, marking grid notations on the computer, and then re-editing the video to match the geometry of the walls – even up until the exhibit opened."

To account for the aging building, the installation team added buildouts like false walls and shelving to come up with places to set the projectors at the correct angles.



"Tabaimo uses a forced perspective, with the artwork angled in a specific way, and the projectors will match that angle," Higinbotham said. "One thing we had to do is get specific projectors from NEC designed for vertical images, because most projectors will burn out if

you run them vertically, but NEC has a number of projectors that will function vertically.”

Higinbotham's entire team, Tabaimo, Tabaimo's studio manager and one of her techs from Japan collaborated to get the space built and outfitted in time for the November 2016 opening of the exhibit, working right up until the eleventh hour to make sure everything was perfect.

“It took quite a bit of work and teamwork to figure out, and the exhibition was only ready in the morning of the press preview, but we made it,” Wu said.

## The Exhibit

The exhibit occupied half of SAM's Asian Art Museum's galleries, comprising approximately 6,000 feet divided into six galleries, with eight video works juxtaposed with historic works selected from the museum's permanent collection.

One SAM-inspired work, “Two,” used a pair of 16th-century Chinese cabinets and an NEC NP-PA571W projector with an NEC NP12ZL lens to create a multilayered image.

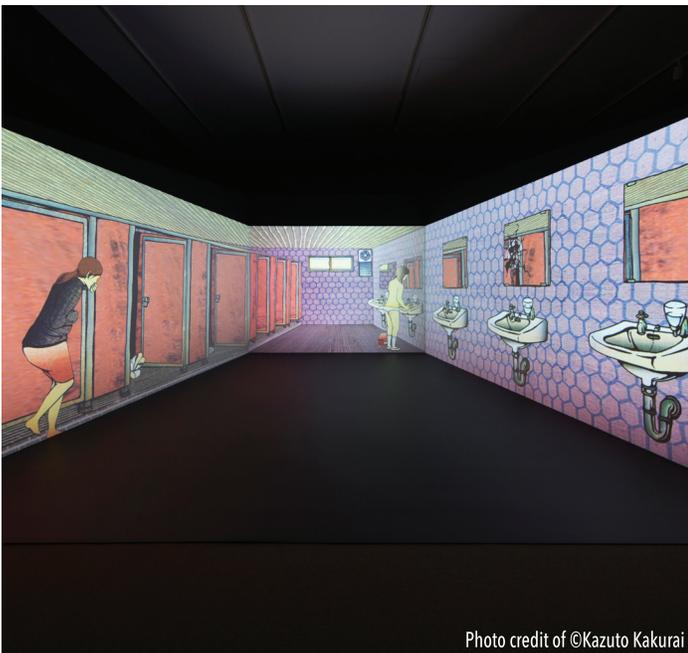


Photo credit of @Kazuto Kakurai

The real cabinets were placed on one side of a translucent screen, with animated video projected onto the other side of the screen scaled to exactly match the real, physical cabinets, as if they were a shadow – but the video adds a hallucinatory element when revealing the contents of the cabinets as Tabaimo imagined them.

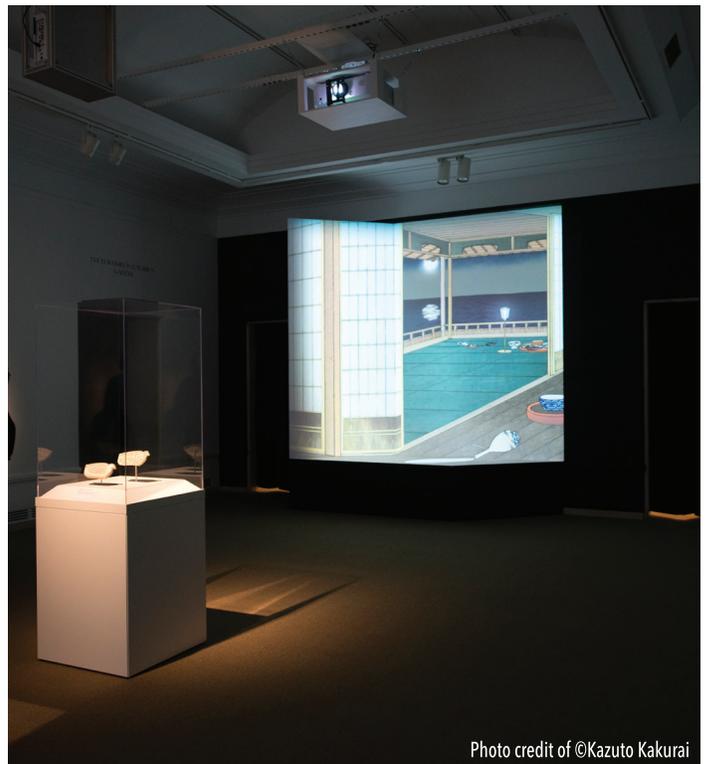


Photo credit of @Kazuto Kakurai

Tabaimo took inspiration from SAM's 1857 Hiroshige woodblock print for “The Obscuring Moon,” which used an NEC NP-PA571W projector and NEC NP30ZL lens to project imagery like writhing octopus arms onto a custom buildout that includes two angled walls.

“Even with just one projector, you get a 3-D image – you feel like you're in a room, you see a door open and close,” Wu said.

Wu said that the show was a popular – and thought-provoking – feature in the Asian art museum.

“Her work is not as easily accessible as other Japanese contemporary video work, so whenever I took a group through, they would tell me how much more they understood it with me guiding them versus seeing it on their own,” Wu said. “She is very meticulous and puts a lot of thought into her work, but until it's pointed out, you might not see it, so it was a joy for me to walk people through and point out the details.”

Wu added that the show would have been challenging for SAM to put together without NEC's support.

“Without them, this show would have been much more difficult to mount,” she said.

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