



An artist of the floating world

Vogue travels to enigmatic Japan to consider the season's most visually arresting looks. Intricate embroidery, ornate florals and graphic silhouettes come to life against the dazzling backdrop of Honshu. Violet Henderson tells the story behind the shoot
Photographs by Tim Walker. Styling by Kate Phelan

The industrial flatlands of Matsumoto, in Nagano Prefecture, prove a fertile playground for models Mari and Yubi, dressed as apprentice geishas, to try their hand at operating GEN H-4 helicopters – the smallest in the world

Hair: Shon. Make-up: Sam Bryant. Local production: Iino Productions, Tokyo. Production: Jeff Delich at Padbury Production. Printing: Graeme Buleraig at Touch Digital. Model: Rianne Van Rompaey





With Yoshito Ohno, a legendary *butoh* dance performer, dressed as a white rabbit (the Japanese folkloric equivalent of the man in the moon), it's up to Marc Jacobs's nosegay prints to create a complementary Alice

Silk-mix dress with neck-tie, £3,145, Marc Jacobs. Velvet Mary-Janes, from a selection, Christian Louboutin for Jenny Packham



The twilight zone: dusk falling at the botanical gardens of Yamaguchi House, in Nagano, lends Balenciaga's ornamental florals and candy-cane tights a surreal charm

Crêpe, silk-georgette and stretch-jersey dress, £2,815. Striped tights, £85. Both Balenciaga. Leather ballet flats, £385. Junya Watanabe

There's an enchanting parallel between the movement of the *butoh* dancers and the expressive drapery of Rick Owens's separates

Cotton/silk draped top, £1,166. Matching draped shorts, £737. Both Rick Owens. Dancers: Masaharu Imazu, Yuta Ishiyana, Masashi Nakamura and Barabbas Okuyama







Louis Vuitton's athletic circular cut-outs are imbued with new energy in the light of the Japanese belief in the circle as a symbol of divinity and enlightenment

Cut-out dress and asymmetric jersey skirt, from £5,500. Patent-leather sandals, £760. All Louis Vuitton. Tabi socks, stylist's own. Geisha models: Chiharu Okunugi and Maaya Yoshiyama





Rain on me: the finely executed handiwork of Red Valentino's embroidered tulle feels right at home among rigorously clipped Nagano topiary

Embroidered dress, £2,410, Red Valentino. Patent-leather sandals, £760, Louis Vuitton

Yoshito Ohno, 83,
is the son of Kazuo
Ohno, a co-founder
of *butoh*. He was
dressed for his portrait
by his wife and his
make-up was applied
by his daughter, as is
the case when he
is preparing for
his astounding
performances



Nowhere else in the world can make a Westerner feel so entirely what it is to be foreign, in all its thrilling, unnerving “otherness”, as Japan. A constitutional empire that straddles 6,800 islands, it is a place of ancient rituals and mythologies, where the Shinto religion imbues nature with life-enhancing spirits, yet bullet trains hover above rails as they hurtle at over 300 miles per hour, conveying a society bewitched by technology. In Tokyo, the largest metropolis in the world, beyond the megawatt strobing of the famous Shibuya crossing, lanterns twinkle along Yokochō’s ramshackle low-rise alleys. Here, 90 per cent of mobile phones made are waterproof, to cater for the populace’s demand to shower with them, while geisha girls in traditional kimonos, their faces painted white, their movements balletic, continue to enthrall. But Japan’s dichotomies are more nuanced than just old versus new; beneath a veneer of manners – bowing has been an established greeting since the year 538 – and colourful traditional dress, there are tattoos, rebellion and counterculture.

Tim Walker had never been to Japan before this year, but its dramatic incongruities had long piqued his interest. Months before he landed on Japanese soil, conversations had begun with *Vogue* contributing fashion editor Kate Phelan on how best to capture “everything that you are feeling about a place. It becomes a challenge, as the whole of Tokyo rises up around you, to bring such a huge vision into a small frame,” recalls Walker in his east London studio, surrounded by the albums of research he makes for each of his stories. Walker concluded that he would discover Japan through people, because “extraordinary people make a good photograph”. But where to find them? Walker’s full-time producer, Jeff Delich, joined forces with Iino Productions, a Japanese company whose job was to scout talent and locations to fit specific requirements: the botanical gardens in which Dutch model Rianne van Rompaey is pictured are neither Japan’s largest or most spectacular, but they are “small, because anything that is built on small human scale tends to be incredibly photogenic.”

Occasionally Walker wanted the impossible. Some years before, leafing through *The Week* magazine, he spotted a picture of an early version of the GEN H-4 by Adeyto, the world’s smallest manned helicopter, made in Nagano Prefecture, selling for ¥30 million (£230,000) mostly as a toy for the very rich. Walker kept the picture, hoping one day to make use of the helicopter. Now he wanted to shoot two, at their factory, operated by two geishas. But to fly the helicopters you need airspace permission, and this was not going to happen. And no geisha (the name means *artist* and it takes six rigorous years of studying the

arts, music, dance and tea-ceremony rituals to lay claim to it) would agree to sit for this sort of photo shoot, governed as they are by strict principles. So Walker needed cranes and pulleys to suspend the helicopters, and models wearing the colourful dress of the *maiko* (apprentice geishas in the Kyoto region). The production company even found the woman who took the helicopter picture for *The Week*; she came along to the shoot to watch.

Walker was in Japan for two weeks, basing himself in Tokyo; remarkable in an era of fast fashion and even faster photoshoots. Week one he travelled around, meeting the people he would photograph. Week two he spent shooting, all day, every day – the schedule was tight, the distances long. From London, Phelan brought 19 trunks of clothes, brimming with 74 looks, 60 pairs of shoes, 34 pairs of gloves. This is the 28th *Vogue* story that they have worked on together; Walker says Phelan’s ability to read his scenes and translate them into fashion “is extraordinary and intuitive”.

He points to his photographs of models dressed as geishas rising up, peering in, wittily – and a little ominously – through holes cut into the white set, round parasols full splay, the thick raven hair of the traditional geisha wigs clasped into buns. The fashion that Rianne wears here “says something of Japan’s old versus new tension” says Walker. Of course, the images say more besides. In part they are a conscious homage to the American photographer Melvin Sokolsky, who spent much of his career obsessing over the visual power of the circle, in part they reference Japanese thinking and architecture, where the circle is a recurring symbol of enlightenment. And there is something of the Sixties about these studio pictures, a stylisation, a bend in the body: “I wanted to evoke that time when Japan itself was a kind of fashion,” says Walker.

Walker had not photographed Rianne before: a 21st-century pre-Raphaelite with auburn hair and wide-spaced eyes, her aesthetic is the perfect foil in its otherness to that which he uncovered in Japan. And besides, “I was bowled over by her. She’s probably the best model I’ve worked with in a very long time,” he says. By chance, Rianne was also ballet trained, useful because the Japan that Walker discovered sprung around the country’s obsession with dance: specifically, *butoh* dance. Developed during the aftermath of the Second World War, which had heaped human loss, humiliation and occupation on the country, the sinewy chalked-white near-naked practitioners of *butoh* reject earlier Western and Japanese conventions. The result is a strange, highly charged series of movements, which explores stillness via shaking limbs. Walker shot a clutch of dancers led by Kumotaro Mukai, a maestro, but he also features 83-year-old Yoshito Ohno, whose father, Kazuo, was the one of the two founders of *butoh*. Diminutive, muscled and melancholic, Yoshito’s > 237

Birds of a feather:
Alexander McQueen’s
pearlescent eiderdown
coat draws out the
spectacle of the boudoir

Embroidered and quilted
satin coat with marabou
feather lining, to order.
Embroidered tulle slip
dress, to order. Both
Alexander McQueen







Comme des Garçons' silk jacquards mutate into samurai armour when paired with faux-leather sleeves

This page: silk-jacquard dress, £9,075. Faux-leather sleeves, to order. Both Comme des Garçons. *Opposite:* printed cotton-mix jumpsuit, to order. Burgundy overalls, £9,075. Sneakers, £575. All Comme des Garçons. *Beauty note:* channel your inner samurai with fearlessly bold, bright blue brows. Try Max Factor Wild Shadow Pot in Sapphire Rage, £4.99



Caught in the crossfire: Constance Blackaller's silk wrap dress holds its own against the chalky drama of the *butoh* dance troupe, steered by Kumotaro Mukai

Hand-quilted silk wrap dress, £3,100, Constance Blackaller. Leather ballet flats, £385, Junya Watanabe







Even today, Japanese tattoos borrow from its traditional iconography. Gucci's printed dress is less of a commitment, but just as riveting

Printed silk-crêpe dress with pleat detail, £3,670, Gucci.
Male model: Yukihide Harada



performances are odes set to music. In Japan, the Ohno name is legendary. Before Walker photographed the dancers, they performed. "We watched in silence, because you don't want to over-direct people into doing something they wouldn't do. Our job, in a way, was to amplify the most beautiful aspects of what they say," he remembers.

It was also to peel back to the veneer of manners and, as Phelan says, "catch a glimpse of Japan's underbelly". Nowhere is this objective more successful than in the inky-blue light of the tattoo parlour. There the air is charged with tension, and well it might be: while calligraphy is one of the country's most celebrated skills, tattoo art troubles mainstream Japan thanks to its historical connections to punitive branding and gangster culture. Tattooed Japanese are not allowed to enter public pools, while in rural areas the sight of them can still inspire fear among the older generation. And yet, Japan's tattoo artists borrow again and again the typography and aesthetics of ancient calligraphy.

Over the past decade Walker's photography has subtly changed focus: it has turned darker, a little more subversive. "Darkness fascinates me," Walker says quietly. "I think there is great beauty in darkness." The photographer read Junichiro Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* before the shoot. First published in 1933, this essay – part rumination on architecture, part philosophy – considers Japan's appreciation of light. "We delight in the mere sight of the delicate glow of fading rays clinging to the surface of a dusky wall, there to live out what little life remains to them," Tanizaki writes. Walker's manipulation of light has been thoroughly Japanese, then: this story tells of a world of margins and half-lights, where what lurks in the shadows says as much as that which the light shines on.

And straddling the most disturbing margin of all, that shaky, ineffable line that makes us human, is the Geminoid, an unnervingly lifelike robot, created by Hiroshi Ishiguro in his own image. Operating at the cutting edge of artificial intelligence, the Geminoid can read and mimic human facial reactions, walk, sit and respond to simple questions. "He was quite unnerving," concedes Walker. "To touch, he was cold and rubbery with bones of metal. It is that whole 'uncanny valley' concept, which we tend to find very difficult to digest." But the Japanese find it less difficult, captivated instead by the progress of technology – whether or not that entails human estrangement. ■

There is no denying the ceremonial authority of Junya Watanabe's avant-garde dress, even barefoot on the beach at Kujukuri, in the Chiba Prefecture

Laser-cut dress, £1,660, Junya Watanabe





Turning Japanese:
JW Anderson's
leather cape and
Jetsons minidress
have a Sixties
spin that evokes a
time when "Japan
itself was a kind
of fashion", as
Walker puts it

White cotton dress
with striped hem,
£795. Quilted leather
capelet, £535. Both
JW Anderson

Twin set: Hiroshi Ishiguro, a leading roboticist at Osaka University, sits beside the Geminoid, the doppelgänger android he made in his own image





Against the stark futurism of a room riddled with Swiss-cheese holes, Loewe's pop of red silk feels as vivid as a geisha's painted lips

Layered cotton/silk dress, to order, Loewe. Resin earrings, £185, Giorgio Armani. Rings, £120 each, Uncommon Matters, at Valery Demure. Beauty note: only the sleekest topknot is fit to adorn a geisha. Apply Kérastase Laque Couture, £16, for a flawlessly smooth hold

Line in the sand: Awake's floral robe makes a louche contrast with the traditional kimono

Red floral-print silk-mix dress, £832, Awake, at Matchesfashion.com







In the ramshackle Tokyo backstreet known as Nonbei Yokocho -
"drunkard's alley" - Gucci's silk flounces invite a moment of reflection

Pink silk-satin dress with lace flounce and velvet ribbon belt, £3,670, Gucci.
Socks, £11, Falke. Leather ballet flats, £385, Junya Watanabe

Miuccia Prada's goal this season is "to share with other people, other cultures". Indulge her vision of a techno vagabond and take to the skies

Faille coat, £2,715. Sleeveless faille dress, from a selection. Black jacket, £865. Sleeveless poloneck, £370. Elasticated belt, £115. Faille hat, £250. Rubber sandals, from a selection. Socks, from £105. All Prada. Leather trousers, £945. Sadie Williams. With thanks to Adrian Joffe at Dover Street Market, GEN Corporation, Minoru Asada, Hisashi Ishihara, Osaka University, Mineko Hayashi and Sagami Ningyo-shibai Shimonakaza, Ojoya Yamaguchi, Todoroki, Azumino Tourism Association, Masashi Nagai, Jeremy Joyce, Yu Sakaguchi, Sarah Lloyd, Tony Ivanov, Studio Nana-iro, Iino Studios and staff, and the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, Tokyo. For stockists, all pages, see *Vogue Information*

