

Cosplaying Lolita

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Report by Lang Leav – *2007 Churchill Fellow*

To study the underground fashion subcultures in Tokyo, Japan.

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Chapters

	Introduction <i>Kabuki</i>	<i>pg. 5</i>
I.	Philomena <i>The Tokyo Look Book</i>	<i>pg. 7</i>
II.	Amane <i>Austrade</i>	<i>pg. 10</i>
III.	Tokyo Dark Castle <i>Goth & Fetishism</i>	<i>pg. 13</i>
IV.	Malin <i>Swedish Lolita</i>	<i>pg. 16</i>
V.	Mizuki <i>Gothic Lolita</i>	<i>pg. 21</i>
VI.	Wonder Parlour Café <i>Cos-play</i>	<i>pg. 25</i>
VII.	Mary <i>Maid Café</i>	<i>pg. 30</i>
VIII.	James <i>Visual Kei</i>	<i>pg. 34</i>
IX.	Valérie <i>A Parisian Lolita</i>	<i>pg. 40</i>
X.	Junko <i>Blythe Dolls</i>	<i>pg. 44</i>
	Final Act The Curtain Closes	<i>pg. 47</i>
	Author Biography	<i>pg. 49</i>
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>pg. 50</i>

*'I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, Sir,
because I'm not myself you see.'*

- Alice in Wonderland. *(Lewis Carroll)*

Introduction

Kabuki

An artisan sets out on a journey to complete a task assigned to him by a wealthy aristocrat. As his story unfolds, the plot grows more intriguing as a simple narrative evolves into a complex tale of intertwining fates and chance encounters. The debut of each new character is interwoven into the story like threads meeting to form a spectacular garment.

I am sitting in a Kabuki theatre in Ginza and watch in awe as the spectacle comes to life before me. Suddenly, it strikes me how much the artisan's story resembles my own. It is eight weeks into my Winston Churchill Fellowship. I am a fashion designer sent from Australia to investigate the fashion subcultures in Japan with a focus on Lolita and *Cosplay* (Costume Play). Like the artisan, my journey has been filled with an assortment of characters. They have provided me a glimpse into the customs and etiquettes driving the carousel of fashion subcultures that have long since held a fascination with the rest of the world. The garments worn like second skins are brought to life by the thoughts and pulses of these trendsetters, who are shaping the ever changing, ever evolving kaleidoscope of Japanese fashion.

I arrive in Japan in the midst of the harsh July summer at my share house in Nishi-Kawaguchi, an infamous red light district north of Tokyo. While trying to navigate the security pin system, a Westerner approaches. I smile apologetically, 'sorry, I just moved in today.'

'Take your time,' he replies. We make small talk in the elevator and exchange numbers. Later I will learn that he is James Blumer, a model from L.A. who holds the second highest certification in Japanese. He is also the only Westerner to play in a Visual Kei band, a genre of music that is synonymous with the subcultures of my study. On impulse, I ask him if he will be my translator. 'I would love to,' he smiles.

My first visit to Japan was in May 2006 when my debut fashion collection won the Qantas Spirit of Youth Award. Prior to that, my exposure has been through snippets of pop culture that have trickled into the Western world in the form of Hello Kitty, Nintendo, Miyazaki films and Gwen Stefani's depiction of the 'Harajuku Girls.' I spent those four weeks absorbing the culture, the fashion and lifestyle. A friend took me to an exhibition of Blythe Dolls at Maruione in Shinjuku, a coveted shopping destination featuring several floors dedicated purely to Lolita fashion. There I was introduced to Baby The Stars Shine Bright, Mary Magdalene, Angelic Pretty and Metamorphose. The visions of bows, frills and ruffles stayed in my head long after I left and went on to decorate the garments in my own future collections.

At the time, my naivety and lack of knowledge about the world I wanted to infiltrate seemed to work in my favour as I would day after day, walk the streets of Harajuku, Shibuya, Daikanyama and Shinkjuku with a little suitcase of my work, showing the contents to anyone I came across. On the last day of my trip, I was sneaking some of my postcards on to the storefront of Closet Child when a man walked out towards me. I began to make my apologies when he motioned for me to come inside. He introduced himself as Tsuneyoshi and the buyer for Closet Child. My postcards had been very popular with his customers, he explained and he was interested in learning more. I opened my suitcase, taking out each garment, one at time, from my collection to show him. Immediately, he said he would like to buy my range to stock in his boutiques across Tokyo. It was a tremendous moment for me and I still think of it as one of the highlights in my career. Two years later, I have returned with the same suitcase, filled with different contents but exactly the same feeling of not quite knowing what to expect.

I. **Philomena**

The Tokyo Look Book

I meet Philomena Keet in a little bakery in Yotsuya, a few stops from Shinjuku. ‘I’m not sure if I can be of much help to you...’ she professes as we order lunch. Educated in England, she is an anthropologist with a PHD in Tokyo fashion and author of *The Tokyo Look Book*. We begin by chatting about her book and the journey that led to its conception.

Philomena can pinpoint the exact moment her fascination with Japanese fashion subcultures began. ‘I was eighteen years old when I went to my first Visual Kei concert to see Gackt from Malice Mizer perform.’ She had never seen so many people in costume, gathered in the one place. She was struck by the extravagant, over-the-top display before her and in that moment, she had her revelation.

The Visual Kei music movement emerged in the late 1980’s and was brought to prominence by bands such as X Japan, L’Arc-en-Ciel, Malice Mizer and sits under the J-Rock (Japanese rock) umbrella. Members of Visual Kei bands perform in elaborate periodical costumes, style their hair outrageously and paint their faces with make up to create an androgynous quality. The music draws its influence from classical, glam-rock, punk to metal and as the name ‘visual’ suggests, a strong emphasis is placed on the aesthetics of the band’s arrangement. It is largely understood that the movement has played an important role in inspiring the Lolita and Cosplay fashion subcultures and indeed a large majority of Lolita and Cosplayers are fans of Visual Kei.

‘Most books on Japanese fashion lump all the subcultures into one category and label it ‘weird,’ Philomena explains motioning at the other diners around the room. ‘For example, everyone here is dressed quite ordinarily but people have this impression that in Tokyo, everyone will wear crazy outfits,’ she continues, ‘but like any other nation you have your small pockets of people.’ The aim of her book was to define the different styles of dress, celebrating each individual one.

‘If you look at Lolita, Cosplay and Fruits,’ she explains, ‘they are all spectacular styles but this is where the similarities end.’ Cosplay is about escapism and fantasy, much like its Western equivalent, fancy dress. Individuals once in costume, adopt a persona to suit the style in which they are dressed.

On the other end of the scale is Fruits, a fashion style made famous through a series of books and exhibitions by photographer Shoichi Aoki. Where Cosplay is occasional and somewhat imitative, Fruits is a permanent style of dress, a personal statement reflecting the individuality of the wearer. The ‘anything goes’ nature of the style is conducive to the philosophy of Japanese youth that you are what you wear.

‘And then you have Lolita which sits a little in-between and depending on the person is either worn occasionally or adopted wholly as a personal style,’ says Philomena.

Influenced by the French Rococo period where art, architecture and fashion was at its most decorative, Lolita has rapidly grown in popularity spawning several other sub styles including Gothic, Sweet, Classic, Punk and Aristocratic Lolita. The style of dress is characterized by corsets, stockings, parasols, lace trimmings, bows, bodices, rocking horse shoes, charming headpieces, petticoats and frills- all in an effort to achieve a *kawaii* (cute) childlike, appearance. *The Gothic Lolita Bible*, a monthly publication that contains the ins and outs of being a Lolita, regulates the look.

‘Every time a new look appears on the scene, a publication will emerge to standardize the look,’ Philomena explains. ‘I don’t know if there is a style that can exist without a publication unless it is very underground.’

Today Lolita are seen out shopping, in cake stores, at concerts and themed events. They congregate mainly in Harajuku, Shibuya, Daikayama and Shinjuku. Although growing in popularity, the Lolita scene is still regarded as an oddity, inducing mixed reactions in the largely conservative Japan. However, the prevalence of movies such as Tetsuya Nakashima’s *Shimotsuma Monogatari* (Kamakazi Girls) is a good indication of the Lolita movement permeating popular culture. The lead

character of the film, Momoko is a Lolita who makes reference to Baby The Stars Shine Bright in an almost religious fervour, within a few minutes of the opening scene.

‘What are you hoping to achieve during your time here?’ Philomena asks me.

‘I want to find people who are immersed in these subcultures, who live and breathe it. I want to hear their stories.’

‘Have you heard of Tokyo Dark Castle?’ she asks me. I shake my head in response. ‘It’s a club where you will find the most hardcore people in the Tokyo underground scene. Go to Tokyo Dark Castle.’

II. Amane

Austrade

I arrive at the Australian Embassy, headquarters of Austrade, an organization facilitating entry into the Japanese market for Australian businesses. My representatives in Sydney use a simple analogy to explain their services. ‘Basically we are a dating agency.’ With several offices located throughout Japan, their role is to secure meetings with buyers and assist in forming other valuable business contacts.

I am buzzed in and walk through the large iron gates. My little suitcase clutched tightly in one hand is filled with designs completed in a frenzy, just hours before my flight. In addition to investigating fashion subcultures in Tokyo, I have come to find a place for my fashion label Akina, the one constant through the most tumultuous years of my life. My personal and creative struggles and triumphs are scattered across the pages of my hand-sculpted books, then stitched together in perfectly tailored garments. Somewhere in the world, a stranger is literally wearing my heart on their sleeve.

Amane greets me in the foyer. She is the Business Development Manager for the fashion division and has a brisk, no nonsense air about her. After our introductions, she asks to see my fashion collection. I swiftly pull out each garment, anxious to hear her appraisal.

‘Your label appeals to a very niche demographic,’ she says after a long pause, ‘I feel there could be a market for your label here but it won’t be easy to find.’

‘But there is potential?’ I ask hopefully.

‘Perhaps, but-’ she warns, ‘this is the kind of fieldwork you must do on your own. It is much too specialized an area for Austrade to venture into.’ It is not what I want to hear but regardless, I have come to Japan to see firsthand, the reality of the market. I take a deep breath and ask her to continue.

‘The Japanese fashion market is a large one- the second largest in the world after the States.’ Amane explains. She remembers a time when Australia was touted as

the next big thing among Japanese buyers but certain factors in the last two years have changed this. With the declining state of the economy and the Australian dollar almost on par with the US, buyers are now focusing their attention on the American and European market. In the last few months Amane has seen buyers becoming increasingly selective with their purchases, the buffer for experimenting with new designers, gone.

‘Contrary to popular belief, Japanese people don’t have bucket loads of money to throw around. Of course there is a small percentage of the population with a high disposable income but that applies to any other market,’ Amane adds. ‘It is an *extremely* finicky market and the rate at which it changes is quite astonishing.’

She illustrates her point by using an example of a domestic label. ‘They have their designers hang around the trendy areas of Harajuku and Shibuya to check out who’s wearing what.’ The label will then send the designer rip offs to produce in Chinese factories. The process can take as little as a week for new designs to hit the stores. ‘Which means,’ Amane informs, ‘we are going to see a widening gap between the high-end fashion and mass-produced market. You will get the twenty dollar blouse from a department store or the really expensive six thousand dollar dress from Dior and not much in between.’

‘Which is where my label sits.’

‘Exactly.’ She sorts through my garments again. ‘This is the kind of thing that is sold in very select boutiques,’ she explains, ‘and the select boutiques are getting more and more selective with what they stock.’

She sees the disappointment on my face and her voice softens to a more sympathetic tone. ‘Don’t be discouraged,’ she reassures me, ‘Japan is probably the most difficult market to crack in the world.’ We sit for a moment in silence while I contemplate all this new information. She examines one of my gowns.

‘Have you seen Kabuki?’ She questions, suddenly changing the subject.

‘What is Kabuki?’ I ask curiously.

‘It is a form of Japanese theatre. In the Edo period, they had a way of saying to ‘*Kabuki*’ was to be really showy with your clothes.’ My gown reminds her of the

costumes at a performance she attended the weekend before. 'I think you will really appreciate the attention to detail in the designs,' she tells me as I scribble '*Kabuki*' in my notebook.

'Have CWC gotten back to you yet?' she inquires. CWC, (Cross World Connections) is the company behind the resurgence of Blythe dolls. Concepted in the states in 1979, Blythe was taken off the shelf just a year later due to dismal sales. It wasn't until decades afterward that Blythe was plucked out of obscurity when Junko Wong came across photos taken of Blythe by doll collector Gina Garan. Recognising the potential for Blythe in the Japanese market, Junko pitched her idea to department store giant Parco. As a result, Blythe secured her position over several other top models as the face of their Christmas campaign, achieving nationwide fame through a televised commercial. Headed by the newly formed CWC and in collaboration with Hasbro and Takara, Blythe has since generated an entire industry of toys, fashion, cosmetics, books and stationery. With Junko's drive and passion CWC is a prominent creative force with a strong presence in both the Japanese and American market.

'I haven't gotten a response yet.'

'Keep trying, they sound ideal for you,' she advises.

I leave feeling a little dejected. In my mind I had a completely different picture of how this meeting would pan out. Now it dawns on me that just like before, I will have to make my own way.

III. Tokyo Dark Castle

Goth & Fetishism

James and I arrive at Tokyo Dark Castle in costume. My outfit was purchased the day before from a nondescript boutique in the backstreets of Harajuku. It crosses my mind I am Cosplaying Lolita and I wonder if I will be singled out as an imposter.

The place is smaller than I expected but crowded with a mixture of interesting characters. I was told this would be a freak show and I wasn't disappointed. All around me were Cyber Goths, *Guro* (grotesque), Goths, Lolita, Fruits and Cosplayers. James and I split up to scout for interesting people to interview.

I begin to make my way through the crowd. I walk past two Lolita, whose hands wander idly over each other's bodies while they sway their hips in rhythm to the thumping music. On stage there is an orchestrated orgy as two leather-clad women simulate sex with a man dressed in chains. A Westerner in his fifties and badly out of shape is dancing naked in the crowd. 'Why are you naked?' I yell to him over the music. He shrugs in response. 'Just feel like it,' he replies. I ask him to pose for a photo and he happily obliges.

A tall Westerner whose style sits somewhere between Gothic and Punk approaches. We scream out a conversation over the loud music.

Originally from L.A., Greg is in Japan teaching English. He developed an interest in the Gothic scene when his co-worker introduced him to a Gothic girl. She took him to underground club event Tokyo Decadence. 'Since then I pretty much go to all the events.' I ask him the event names.

'Midnight Mess, Alamode Nights, Club Theatric Show, Fetish Garden, Gothic Bar Heaven...' he lists.

The shoes I am wearing are starting to hurt my feet so we find a space to sit down at the back of the club. 'The girls who dress up do it as a form of rebellion,' Greg informs me as we are looking up at the crowd.

'I'm on an investigative project,' I reveal, 'I'm looking for girls to interview.'

‘It won’t be easy,’ he warns. ‘Can you imagine how many foreigners come out here wanting to interview the ‘crazy’ kids? They are *extremely* wary.’ I think back to my meeting with Philomena. ‘Foreigners are tolerated, not seen as an audience to please,’ she had cautioned.

‘If you don’t know the language,’ says Greg bringing me back to the present, ‘you’re going to have a really hard time getting your interviews.’

I notice a girl watching me from across the room. She has startling blue eyes, blonde hair and piercings on her face. Dressed in a little Tuxedo suit, she reminds me of my character Little Miss Liliput.

Later in the night I find myself dancing next to her in the crowd. She is screaming something out to me but the music is deafening and I can’t make out what she is saying. Afterward, we are crammed in the tiny bathroom touching up our make up. It is quieter and we can finally hear ourselves over the music.

Her name is Malin and she is a professional tattoo artist from Sweden. Her friends back home have idealised this place as the penultimate of the underground scene in Tokyo.

‘Today I said to them, I am going to Tokyo Dark Castle now, see you later, *bye bye!* They are so jealous!’ She laughs. We spend the next few minutes chattering about fashion and art before exchanging numbers.

When I find James in the crowd, he opens up his notebook to show me a page filled with the names and numbers of several Lolita girls. ‘Smooth!’ I cry, delighted.

‘I feel like a pimp,’ he chuckles.

We stumble out into the daylight and the street is littered with partygoers who have spent the night out, having missed their ride home. With the trains in Tokyo ceasing operation at midnight or shortly after, it is a city of Cinderellas. We are lost but I am happy in the only way you can be in a foreign country intoxicated by new

experiences. A Japanese man walks up to me and pinches my cheeks playfully, exclaiming '*Kawaii!*'

On the train ride home James and I compare notes on the evening. During the night he approached a number of girls with my look book explaining that I was a fashion designer looking for subjects to interview. I think back to Greg's earlier warning about the language barrier. James' fluency in Japanese, coupled with his charm has worked wonders and I am fast thinking of him as my secret weapon, a ticket into this surreal and exclusive world.

IV. Malin

Swedish Lolita



I take a train out to Matsudo where Malin is staying. She meets me at the station and we greet each other like old friends.

The first thing I notice are her drawings when we get to her little apartment. Strewn across the floor, on her bed and tacked to her walls are figures with long, lithe limbs captured in acts of love and violence.

A large teddy bear lies on her bed and looks strangely out of place. Following my glance, Malin explains it was a gift from a Lolita named Alicia, a girlfriend from home. ‘When I got it in the mail I thought, oh my *God*, you can’t even sleep without this thing.’ I am curious about Alicia and Malin’s eyes light up at the invitation to talk about her.

‘She was a true Lolita, she was my Alice.’ Malin is a natural storyteller, as adept at painting pictures with her words as she is with her brush. Shortly, I find myself transported down the rabbit hole where on the other side Alicia is playing host to a tea party in the picturesque gardens of Stockholm. Once a year, dozens of Lolita clad head to toe in lace and pretty frills gather to sip tea and nibble at cakes in a scene nestled between the pages of a Lewis Carroll book. Together they gush about their future plans to travel to Japan, the exotic, faraway destination where Lolita was conceived. ‘All they know how to say in Japanese is *‘kawaii’* so that is all they say,’ laughs Malin. Entry into this fanciful world comes at the fee of having the right look and wearing the right brands. ‘You must be beautiful to be part of this fashion,’ she says. Incidentally, all the coveted brands manufacture their designs in the one size, with just enough room to fit the tiny proportions of a petite Japanese schoolgirl. Those who fall short of these requisites will have to resign themselves to watching from the sidelines. ‘I wish I can sew them a dress so they can be part of the tea party,’ sighs Malin, ‘and not be the person who takes the photographs and gets the leftover cake at the end.’

Up until recently, Lolita fashion was a rare commodity. Brands previously refusing to ship outside of Japan forced European girls to get their fix from paying a go between to procure their garments. A comical image springs to mind of a Japanese businessman trafficking frilly dresses as part of a racket for illegally imported Lolita wear. Still, the sharp reality remains that this fashion is an addiction, a drug. ‘Alicia will save for months just to buy one little thing.’ To illustrate her point Malin tells me how Alicia commissioned a jeweller to craft a small crown for her. An almost identical one could be purchased at a fraction of the cost but it was crucial to get the right gemstones in the right colour to match her ensemble. No investment was too great to ensure her place at the head of the table.

The Lolita subculture in Japan is varied with some girls choosing to dress up occasionally and some who opt to wear Lolita all the time. ‘In Sweden a Lolita is a Lolita, full stop,’ Malin explains. Malin mocks the manic Swedish subculture where the girls never once step out of character. “‘I am Lolita, I only eat sweets and drink

tea all day long and I have bought this cute little rabbit and I will only feed it sweets-” she trills in a high pitched voice, ‘I tell them, “your rabbit is going to die, you know-”’ she delivers deadpan then back to her singsong voice, “-oh but when it dies I will put it in a cute fluffy coffin and have a little funeral for it!”’ We laugh at the madness of a starry eyed adolescent aiding the demise of her pet rabbit to play host to its Lolita themed funeral.

Malin pulls out a photo album from under her bed as we sit crossed legged on the floor, leisurely leafing through it. Alicia appears in many of the photographs with her perfect china doll features, coyly peering at the camera from under impossibly, long lashes. Malin pouts prettily, at various fashion parades, concerts and tea parties, one arm always draped protectively over Alicia’s shoulders.

‘She sent me an email, when I came to Japan,’ Malin reveals. She had wanted to respond with something thoughtful but now too much time has gone by. ‘Other people write to me and say, “Why haven’t you answered me yet bitch?” I have to reply or they will kill me-’ she moans, ‘but Alicia, she is so polite. She will only send me one letter and wait.’ Her face cringes suddenly as if a terrible thought has just dawned on her. ‘Oh *God!* She doesn’t even know her teddy bear made it here alive!’

Her words have struck a chord and my mind wanders to the one person I have wanted to write since I have come to Japan. Then I think of all the other people I have written instead. We sit quietly for a while, lost in our own thoughts. She makes lemonade and we spend the rest of the hot summer afternoon finding all the things we have in common, despite being from completely different parts of the world.

‘The scene here is not like I imagined,’ Malin states, ‘it is not so big.’ Later in the evening, we are sitting on her bed flicking through copies of *Kera* and *The Gothic Lolita Bible*. Earlier, we met some of her friends in the foyer. ‘They’re just normal people and they have no idea about the scene! They know nothing about Visual Kei except for bands like X Japan.’ When showing them her copy of *Kera*, they seemed stunned that this type of scene existed right under their noses.

‘It’s so strange how I got into the Japanese underground music scene,’ Malin reminisces. There was a new girl at school who Malin was put in charge of helping to adjust. ‘Oh *God* I thought she was so weird but I was a good student so I looked after her.’ The girl showed Malin a picture of Dir En Grey, a Visual Kei band in a magazine. She recoiled at the sight. ‘I said, God, these girls are brutally ugly and she tells me, “they are not girls, they are guys.”’ Despite her initial disgust towards the genre, Malin found herself listening to the music and she quickly grew to love it. Over time, she began meeting other people who were a part of the scene.

The community of J-Rock, Visual Kei fans in Stockholm is small and bands together. ‘This kind of music is not accepted. It’s Sweden, we are known for our Death Metal.’ Often, the J-Rockers will get lumped together with the Emo kids and Glam Rockers. ‘Sometimes we’ll go to a club and we’ll hang with the Glam Rockers all night and then at four in the morning someone will say, “has anyone heard of that band Dir en Grey?” and someone will say, “are you a J-Rocker?”’ A riot will ensue. ‘There is a lot of hate towards J-Rockers, they think we are so strange.’ The girl who introduced Malin to Visual Kei would feign disinterest in the music to avoid being bullied in school. “‘I only listen to Justin Timberlake,” she would say. Then they started picking on me instead. But-’ Malin smiles smugly, ‘-I couldn’t give a shit because I can draw which means there were always people who wanted to be my friend.’

She pauses on a spread in *The Gothic Lolita Bible* and points out a subject I recognise from Philomena’s book. ‘That’s Mana from Alice Mizer,’ she informs me. Aside from his musical talents, Mana is the creator of exclusive fashion label Moi-Meme-Moitie. Credited with pioneering the Gothic Lolita look, Mana is also the founder of *The Gothic Lolita Bible*. ‘He never talks you know,’ says Malin. In interviews, his fellow band members interpret Mana’s hand gestures as an indication of his ‘telepathic’ capabilities. ‘I hate him!’ Malin declares passionately, ‘he makes my day by being so ugly!’ She laughs telling me about how she would draw his caricature as Mana-banana to taunt her Lolita friends. ‘I would love one of his coats

though, just to show off. It is *shit* expensive but you know,' she rolls her eyes, 'it's Mana's thoughts you are wearing.'

In the next few weeks we wander the streets of Tokyo, never having a definite plan, getting lost and stumbling upon little, quaint boutiques wedged between skyscrapers. We try on pretty dresses and strike funny poses in the mirror. At her insistence she buys me a present. It is a necklace with a skull and cross bone pendant. As she takes her money from her wallet I catch a glimpse of her I.D. card and ask if it is hers. 'Yes, when I still resembled a human,' she laughs. At my request she hands it to me and I am looking at a teenage Malin with long, blonde hair and perfect skin. 'Boys,' she tells me, 'always try to change you. They say, maybe if you took out those piercings and wore a bikini, then maybe you will look like Barbie.' If it weren't for that peek at her card I could never have pictured Malin as a Barbie doll.

She has met a Japanese boy named Yusuke recently and they have a date later that evening. 'He is not very Japanese,' she says, 'we kiss on the street.' Yusuke is leaving for England to study at Oxford in October. 'Maybe I will go with him,' Malin says with a small shrug of her shoulders. Later, I meet him briefly and he is like a reincarnate of her manga drawings.

Towards the end of my trip, Malin and I are sitting on the train. I am holding up a mirror for her while she retouches her make up when suddenly I look up and realise it is her stop. 'This is your station!' I cry. She gathers her things in a frenzy and we hug warmly in the space between the platform and the train. 'This is not goodbye!' She reassures me, 'we will meet again, somewhere in the world, a different platform, different train but still us.' She waves as the door closes. I watch her from the moving train until the crowd swallows her up.

v. **Mizuki**

Gothic Lolita



Mizuki waves at us from across the room. James and I are seated at an ice cream parlour on Takeshita Dori, the main strip of Harajuku. She greets us with a string of Japanese in her cartoon-like voice, fanning herself with one, delicate hand. ‘She’s complaining about the heat,’ James explains. It is hardly surprising. Wearing a dress from Innocent World, a label that sits within the top-drawer of Lolita fashion, she is corseted and cocooned in layers upon layers of bows and ruffles.

Mizuki is ethereal. As she sits down at our booth, I think back to Malin’s words; ‘The girls who are beautiful, tiny and delicate - best suit the part of Lolita.’ If those are the traits that make up the perfect Lolita, Mizuki like her gown, sits somewhere among its elite.

As I study her perfect, doll like features, from her large coquettish eyes framed by a fan of thick lashes, to her flawless milky complexion, I am reminded of my first

visit to Japan. Before I left I was advised, 'when you're in Japan, don't draw, just observe.' I didn't understand it at the time but I followed the advice. While in Japan, I crossed paths with girls like Mizuki day after day in what would be the most exciting turning point for me, creatively. Weeks later at home in my studio, I had built up an incredible reservoir of inspiration to tap into. I started to draw what began as concept sketches for my fashion garments which later evolved into artworks hung on gallery walls. My unexpected detour through the world of underground art has since shaped my garments into one of the most unique and celebrated emerging fashion labels in Australia.

'I am a Gothic Lolita,' Mizuki states, once we place our orders. The birth of Gothic Lolita is again attributed to Mana, Visual Kei artist from Malice Mizer. Before his time, Lolita fashion emerging in the 1970's mainly took on the form that is today referred to as the Sweet and Classic variety. The look was inspired by Victorian childrenswear and the French Rococo period, favouring light, pastel colours. Mana's arrival on the scene put a sinister spin to its child-like quality. His fashion label *Moi-Meme-Moitie*, consists of floor-length, Dracula-like coats with accessories such as crucifixes adorning the necks of his followers. Melancholic dresses, morose top hats and maudlin blouses lining the shelves of his boutiques compliment change rooms shaped as coffins.

Mizuki is lively and animated, her expressions and mannerisms are exaggeratedly childish. With the Lolita subculture holding youthfulness in such high regard, her personality is entirely befitting. She begins most of her sentences with, '*my favourite.*'

'My favourite flavour is strawberry,' she informs us between sips of her strawberry milkshake. She educates us with enthusiasm about the whimsical and frivolous world of Lolita, occasionally taking out trinkets from H. Naoto and Alice and the Pirates, treasures she acquired earlier from a shopping trip to La Foret, in a charming show and tell.

‘My favourite shopping place is Maruione in Shinjuku,’ she says. Maruione are legendary for organising Lolita themed fashion shows, competitions, exhibitions and tea parties. ‘Once they ran a competition with Kera Magazine,’ says Mizuki. A call was put out for Lolita to come, dressed in their favourite outfits. The best ones were selected to be photographed and featured in Kera magazine. ‘I lined up for many hours! But I got my picture in the magazine,’ Mizuki beams proudly. The line had snaked from the seventh floor, winding all the way to the street.

‘My mother was a fan of Malice Mizer,’ Mizuki reveals. James and I exchange knowing looks. Though it wasn’t said, we were both wondering how a girl in junior high could afford such lavish outfits. Because of the perennial youth attached to the Lolita subculture, it takes my mind a few moments to adjust to the idea that one of its own is able to age enough to give birth to a new generation. ‘My mother used to dress up too,’ says Mizuki, ‘now she collects dolls.’ I imagine Mizuki as the prized one in her mother’s collection.

‘Is there a pecking order for Lolita? Factions?’ We ask Mizuki.

‘No,’ says Mizuki shaking her head. However there is an unofficial hierarchy where your age determines what style of Lolita and their accompanying brands you should wear. ‘It is a bit like a family tree,’ explains Mizuki. ‘The elders have more of an Aristocratic look. They wear Moi-Meme-Moitie.’ Creating its own niche within a niche, Moi-Meme-Moitie have laid claim to the terms *Elegant Gothic Lolita* or *Elegant Gothic Aristocrat*. With the label’s couture-like items selling at thousands of yen per piece, there is a definite focus towards a more mature market.

‘After Aristocratic, there is Classic Lolita,’ Mizuki tells us. Drawing its influence from the Baroque and Rocaille period, labels, which fall under the Classic umbrella, include Angelic Pretty, Victorian Maiden, and Mary Magdalene.

Then there is Sweet Lolita, the style influenced by children’s dresses from the French Rococo period. Catering to this younger market are brands including Baby The Stars Shine Bright and Innocent World. Sweet Lolita will carry teddy bears and dolls as accessories, in an extension of the theme.

Gothic Lolita sits on its own tangent and extends across all age groups. A number of Lolita brands create garments that aren't intended to be Gothic Lolita but can be worn as such. 'As long as most of the outfit is black,' says Mizuki. Accessories such as religious symbols, bat shaped bags and dark make up help to solidify the look.

Aside from these main Lolita sub-groups are watered down versions of the fashion including *Wa* Lolita (combining traditional Japanese kimono elements) and Punk Lolita as well as a number of other indefinable spin offs. In what is sometimes labelled as fake or *itai* (painful) Lolita, these offsprings have seen piercings and different coloured hair integrated as part of the fashion. Those who purchase copycat brands or make their own clothes also fall into the unfortunate category. If Lolita is a religion, the brands are its Gods and acceptance is granted only to those who worship the correct ones.

'My first time as Lolita, I wore a H. Naoto dress,' recalls Mizuki, 'the scenery around me seemed to change and I was looking at everything with new eyes.' Mizuki may liken her conversion to Lolita as a religious experience but there are indeed few who worship the subculture enough to brave her outfit in the stifling heat.

As we say our goodbyes, a stranger asks Mizuka for a photo. She agrees with a well-practiced pose. My notebook sits open on the table and I am surprised to see I have unconsciously sketched a portrait of her.

VI. Wonder Parlour Café

Cosplay

On exiting Ikebukuro station, I am met with a wave of suffocating heat. Craving cold Soba noodles and air conditioning, I make my way to the nearest restaurant. The lady at the counter shakes her head and crosses both arms, to indicate the restaurant is full. Reluctant to go back into the heat, I decide to stay put. Unsure of what to do, the waitress carries on with her work, occasionally casting wary looks my way. Finally, after a period of ignoring me in the hope I will leave, she consults another staff member who gestures for me to follow her, to the back corner of the room. There is a man sitting alone at his table, his head buried in a book and opposite him is the only empty seat in the restaurant. To my surprise, he is reading Robinson Crusoe. I smile sheepishly as he looks up from his book.

‘Do you mind?’

‘Go ahead,’ he replies.

His name is Evan, a journalist from Sydney. He is in Japan on a stopover before heading to London on a one-way ticket, a move he decided on just a few weeks earlier. ‘I’m kind of impulsive,’ he explains. He has a warm smile that produces dimples. His eyes, the colour of chestnuts, invite adventure.

‘I like your name,’ he states after I introduce myself. He repeats my full name out loud a few times. ‘It has a really nice flow to it.’ Our conversation jumps from alliteration, to tree houses, to comic book heroes. I am surprised at how much I am enjoying myself.

‘How long are you here for?’ I ask.

‘I leave early tomorrow morning,’ he replies and I am surprised to find I am disappointed. ‘Any suggestions on what to do?’ It is his first time in Japan. I take out a pen and paper.

‘Let’s make a list,’ I say. We plan out a long schedule of things we can’t possibly fit in before he leaves. ‘I can keep that list for next time,’ he reasons.

‘Do you know what a Maid Café is?’ I ask.

‘Maid café?’ He has a quizzical look on his face.

The famous or infamous Maid Cafés are themed restaurants waitressed by girls in maid costumes. They are scattered across Akihabara and Ikebukuro, known for their comic book stores, electronic apparatuses and technology-aided escapism, these cities are breeding grounds for the Cosplay subculture. The service in Maid Cafés will go above and beyond the duties you would normally expect from wait staff. In some places, customers are acknowledged as *goshujinsama*, (Master) and are spoon-fed or have their faces wiped after meals.

‘That definitely needs to go on the list,’ says Evan when I give him a quick description. I add it to our list. ‘Underline it,’ he says pointedly and I oblige laughingly.

‘I guess that’s our first stop.’

As we are walking down a little alleyway, on our mission to find a Maid Café, I spot a shop sign displaying a silhouette image of a maid under the title: *Wonder Parlour Café*. ‘Ah hah!’ I point to it triumphantly.

An elegant, soft-spoken girl greets us at the door. As she guides us to our table, my eyes are drawn to the large bow sitting on her lower back, impeccably tied to secure her apron. It reminds me of a chastity belt, the finishing touch to her conservative uniform which conceals all trace of skin. Her nametag reading *Mary* is an obvious pseudonym and preludes a world of fantasy where patrons come to dine and play house. The room is decorated in a distinctly British style, from framed artworks by Arthur J. Elsley to cheap, tacky coasters of modern day London, to a replica of a nineteenth century gramophone. Instruments of make believe, transported from someone’s junkyard to breathe life into the charade.

There is a little silver bell on the table. ‘That can’t be what I think it is,’ Evan wonders aloud. We have a conversation with our eyes where he silently dares me to use it. I pick up the bell and ring it. At once Mary appears at our table and curtsies deeply, proving it to be a tool of summons and not just table decoration. She presents

the menu to us in Japanese and I ask if they have an English menu. She returns with one almost instantly.

Among a variety of cakes there are over fifty kinds of teas, including a notable *'Maid Flavoured Tea.'* After we place our orders, I ask for permission to take pictures. Mary shakes her head no, then after disappearing briefly, presents me with a photo album. She points to a price tag to indicate the pictures can be purchased for three hundred yen a piece. Evan and I exchange bemused glances as we flick through the photos. A few pages in, there are a sequence of shots taken of one particular maid in time-lapse. In the first image she is carrying a tray of tea. Next, she has stumbled and is caught in motion as the teapot is slipping from her tray. In the third photo, she is on her hands and knees in a provocative position cleaning up the accident.

As we leave, Mary follows demurely and to our surprise, walks out onto the street, curtsying and casting long-winded farewells behind us. 'Let's keep her,' Evan jokes.

We catch a train to Akihabara, the ultimate geek's paradise, where gaming and entertainment dominate the skyscrapers and storefronts under the guise of selling electronic equipment are gateways to levels upon levels of pornography. We venture into one such building when the storekeeper appears, looking extremely flustered. Head bowed to avoid eye contact, he points to a sign on the wall that reads: *'No Women Allowed!'* I turn to Evan and shrug with a grin. 'Rules are rules.'

A little while later, he meets me outside. 'It gets weirder as you go up the levels,' he informs me.

'I've been.'

He raises his eyebrows.

'For research purposes,' I quickly explain.

'This must be our third date today,' says Evan as we slide into our seats. We are at a Yakitori restaurant. His comment starts a debate on what constitutes an actual date.

‘We’ve been on six then,’ I conclude.

‘That makes no sense but we’ll go with that,’ he says agreeably.

We share chicken on skewers along with the adventures of imaginary heroes from our favourite novels. Our conversations start and end in the most unexpected places, exchanging between fact and fiction until we settle on the topic of our past. We begin to share our experiences in a fast flowing banter, far from the job interview like manner of awkward first dates.

Evan knew he wanted to be a writer at ten years of age when he presented his teacher with a note he forged to get out of class. The note was so creative that his teacher, rather than punishing him, gave him a notebook and told him to start writing. ‘I still have that notebook,’ he smiles, enjoying the memory. Many other notebooks followed, consequently leading to a publishing deal for his first book. ‘It just takes that one person to believe in you.’

‘I have a story similar to yours,’ I grin. Being a delinquent in my school years, it wasn’t unusual for me to be summoned to the principal’s office. One occasion when I was sent there, my principal greeted me with a smile, instead of the usual scowl. ‘John Marsden called up our school today,’ he said referring to the best selling Australian author. I had written a short story he was judging that I hadn’t entered. Plucking up the courage, I sent the story to him months later, forgetting to leave my return address. Because of my unusual name, he was able to track me down after calling several schools. I spoke to him on the phone, under the careful supervision of my Principal. ‘Yours could have been the winner, if you had entered,’ he told me. From then on, I entered everything.

I continue telling Evan about the milestones that led me from that experience to the one where I was standing terrified, in front of the Churchill board members, justifying to them why they should send me to Japan. ‘And now I have this report to write,’ I sigh. ‘I haven’t written anything longer than an email since College and I have no idea where to begin.’

‘Show me something you’ve written,’ prompts Evan. After hesitating for a moment, I pull out my notebook and hand it to him. He wears a look of concentration

as he reads through it. Finally, he lays my notebook out flat on the table and flips it around to show me a page where I had written in narrative form, about a past love.

‘That’s how you should write your report,’ he says. He sees the look of doubt cross my face and smiles encouragingly. ‘From what you have told me, you have an amazing story to tell,’ he taps the same page with his fingers, ‘do it justice by writing it like this.’ It occurs to me that he is right. I think of all the people I am meeting on my journey. It wouldn’t be fair to categorise them neatly, into point form, to transpose their stories into their awkward first date equivalent. I am feeling inspired in a way I haven’t felt in a long time.

‘I also like this one.’ Evan interrupts my thoughts as he starts to read aloud, from a page, with a much more intimate account of the same past love. I snatch the book away from him and stuff it back into my bag. ‘You should put a lock on that thing,’ he teases.

By the end of our night I am half hoping for a first date kiss, half hoping for a goodbye one. The scale of either sitting on opposite ends. He leans in and kisses me on the cheek. I am pleased and dismayed. The surprising events of the day come rushing back to me. Like a Cosplayer slipping into costume, I have fallen into an impromptu, romantic fantasy.

‘Will I ever see you again?’ I ask wistfully, stepping into character.

He laughs. ‘You can bet on it.’

VII. **Mary**
Maid Café



James is standing on the platform of Chiba station, speaking on his phone when I arrive. ‘Sorry I’m late,’ I apologise, when he hangs up.

‘No worries,’ he says. ‘I was just on the phone to Wonder Parlour again.’ Earlier that week, I passed their card on to him and he has arranged a meeting today, with Mary, the maid.

‘Wonder Parlour actually doubles as a Butler Café too,’ he mentions as we begin strolling towards Mary’s house.

‘Butler Café?’ I question.

‘Yeah, girls who dress up as male butlers.’

Also referred to as Takarazuka Cafés, (named after a form of Japanese theatre where women play male roles) Butler cafés create a fantasy environment where awkwardly shy adolescent girls can feign interaction with the opposite sex.

‘They have a completely different set of wait staff during Butler week,’ says James, ‘and a completely different set of customers.’ My imagination soars to the top of Enid Blyton’s Faraway Tree and its rotating worlds.

‘And,’ he looks at me sideways, grinning broadly, ‘it wasn’t easy but I just talked them into letting us do some photos.’

‘You,’ I squeeze his arm, ‘are amazing!’

We stop in front of a modest townhouse. ‘This is it,’ says James holding up a piece of paper with the scrawled address. I ring the bell.

The door opens to reveal a middle-aged lady with an elegant air about her. She introduces herself as Mary’s mother and leads us along a corridor, into the living room. She motions for us to sit on cushions atop *tatami* mats. ‘Mary is at the shop but will be back soon,’ she informs us, while serving green tea and a plate of decorative sweets, too pretty to eat.

Mary’s mother admits she was initially alarmed when she discovered her daughter was working for a Maid Café. ‘I have heard many bad things about these places,’ she says softly. Indeed, there is a strong stigma attached to girls who work in these establishments. They are hired not only to serve condiments but the fantasies of their male clientele, who they pamper in a manner that most consider a fine line away from working in a hostess bar. ‘I think Mary is a good girl and after seeing the place she works, my mind is at ease,’ she says, reassuring herself as much as she is reassuring us. Wonder Parlour, despite being a world away from the many other notoriously sleazy Maid Cafés, with their flaunting of long, bare legs in garter belts and mini skirts, still retains the sexual undertones, associated with role-play.

Mary arrives and greets us shyly. Dressed in jeans and a plain, white blouse, she looks like any other teenager. ‘I only wear my costume when I am working,’ she explains. ‘Normally I just wear this.’ She points to her simple outfit. Wonder

Parlour is Mary's first job, a role she acquired through an internet advertisement. 'They thought I was a bit too young but they liked my atmosphere.'

I remember her graceful demeanour and how well she fitted the part of a nineteenth century English maid. She beams proudly when I make a point of it.

'The most difficult part of my work,' she reveals, 'is leaving my real self at the door.' The restaurant employs strict rules of conduct for its staff to adhere to. 'I have to speak in a higher form of Japanese,' Mary says.

'It's a very eloquent way of speaking.' James explains further, 'the dialect has its own set of verbs and noun constructions, completely different to its colloquial counterpart.' The style of language goes hand in hand with the prim ideology from an era where table legs considered distasteful, were concealed behind cloths. 'That is the theme of Wonder Parlour,' says Mary, 'it's very idealistic, like a dream world.'

A black cat wanders over to me and rubs himself against my leg. I pick him up and put him in my lap, stroking his head while he purrs contentedly. Mary introduces her cat as L, named after a character in *Death Note*, a manga series I am currently reading. Through James, we discuss characters and speculate about plot developments. 'Ikebukuro is a city famous for comic books,' Mary tells us, 'a lot of the customers at Wonder Parlour are fans of Japanese manga.'

She pours more tea with the graceful expertise taught by her employers at Wonder Parlour. I stretch out my legs and wander over to the mantelpiece. Mary grows up in pictures as my eyes skim over the photographs decorating its shelves. In many of the snapshots, she is with her mum and a tall Westerner.

'My dad is English,' Mary explains. He was raised in Japan and though fluent in English, has never taught the language to Mary. 'I will learn English someday,' she says, 'to feel more connected to my ancestry.'

Boléro an orchestral piece by Maurice Ravel plays on repeat in the background. 'I listen to this over and over again,' sighs Mary. Outside, the sounds of wind chimes play against the symphony, as if vainly hoping to imprint itself into the orchestrated sounds. It makes me think of Mary and others like her, wanting to

belong to this romantic aesthetic of yesteryear, an ambition made only possible beneath a shroud of fantasy.

Her mother enters the room and politely hints that we should leave. Because of her part time job, Mary has schoolwork to catch up on. Mary sees us out, waving as we go. I turn back when we get to the end of the street and she is still there.

VIII. **James**
 Visual Kei



I walk down a narrow flight of steps leading into the entrance of Narciss, an underground club in Saitama. James' band *Laverite* are third in the line up of seven performing that night. I arrive during an intermission and a black curtain is drawn across the stage. The speakers play music barely audible under the ear-splitting beat. There is a cross section of predominantly female, Goths, Punks, Cosplayers and Lolita.

I brush past a table of merchandise and knock some fliers to the ground. As I bend down to pick them up, I notice a young girl sitting cross-legged under the table, her head bent into her lap, swings lethargically to the beat. As I get up, I bump into a girl with short, curly blonde hair who glares at me behind cold, grey eyes. Her lithe figure is clad in tight, black leather and spikes. I smile and in an attempt to make

conversation ask, 'Do you know when Laverite are coming on?'

'I'm just here to see Skull F**k,' she answers dryly before pushing past me.

There is a brief moment of silence before the curtain opens. It takes me a few moments to recognise James. His face under layers of makeup framed by wildly teased hair gives him an almost feline appearance. He is dressed in a sleek, white tuxedo decorated with studs and chains. Clearly in his element, he moves with his bass as if it were an extension of his body. Ryota, the guitarist is eerily beautiful in a full-length red, velvet gown. From sunken cheeks, Yue the vocalist emits a deep and throaty voice that belies his petite frame. As their grungy rock tunes fill the room, the audience dance in synchronization, as if their limbs were attached to strings manoeuvred by an invisible puppeteer. Later I am told these dance moves are created by the vocalist then shared among fans of the music.

After the gig I meet James in a little alley behind the club. We cross the street and wander over to a restaurant. It is almost like an alternate universe when we step inside. A life-size cardboard cut out of Marilyn Munroe leans seductively against a vintage Coca-Cola machine, while James Dean walks down the Boulevard of Broken Dreams, in a picture-frame on the wall. Elvis croons '*You were always on my mind*' from a brightly lit jukebox. Behind the counter stands a tiny Japanese man, dressed in a suit and bowler hat. Next to him is a Japanese woman, in a rockabilly dress, her hair set in a hairspray-sticky beehive. '*Diner*' spelt out in pink neon lights beams down from the wall behind them. It is as though we have wandered into 1950's America or a David Lynch film-set. We slide into a booth upholstered in synthetic, red vinyl. Scanning the menu of burgers and milkshakes, I notice the place is completely empty of other patrons, adding to the surreal atmosphere.

We are as alien to the couple as they seem to us. They wear identical expressions of puzzlement, trying to make sense of why a Westerner is speaking their language fluently and translating to a girl who looks like one of their own in a foreign tongue.

‘What inspires your music?’ I ask after we’ve placed our orders. Make up scrubbed clean and wearing a plain t-shirt and jeans, he has made the impossible transformation from Visual Kei performer back to James, my translator.

‘The universal themes, you know... love, desire, heartbreak,’ he lists, ‘the same themes I see in your artworks. The girls you paint, they are beautiful yet so haunted.’ I nod. ‘My last painting, I created her when I was falling in love. She wears a look of tenderness on her face, while cradling a carnivorous plant in her arms.’

‘Art imitates life huh?’ he muses. ‘There is a similar element to our work that has drawn us both into this world. We are foreigners but do you feel...’

‘Like I belong here more than anywhere else in the world?’ I interject.

‘Yes! That’s exactly how I feel,’ he agrees. His expression grows concentrated, as though trying to recall something. ‘*You came to learn the pleasure of life and art. Perhaps you are here to learn something so much more wonderful,*’ he says quoting Oscar Wilde, ‘*the meaning of sorrow and its beauty.*’

‘Yes,’ I agree. ‘There is a strange beauty in that sadness.’

‘And that’s when I write my songs, when I am in that abyss.’ He is quiet for a moment, collecting his thoughts.

‘There is a girl...’ he confesses in a soft voice. He tells me about a guitarist who also plays in a Visual Kei band. Their communication transpires conceptually through words penned in their song lyrics. ‘If it ends in heartbreak,’ he explains, ‘that’s cool, but-’ he pauses, ‘for our connection to dissipate into something mundane, something day to day, that would be the worst thing.’

‘Aren’t the greatest love stories tragedies?’

‘Absolutely,’ he affirms.

Our meals are served to us in the overly polite manner I have been accustomed to since being here. The attentive service is something I have always appreciated about the culture but tonight it feels fabricated, like the plastic linoleum lining the floor.

‘Love is a mirage,’ says James, biting into his burger. ‘You can spend a lifetime with someone who won’t move you. Then you can spend one brief moment

with another and for some inexplicable reason, they suddenly know you more intimately than anyone else.’ He sighs deeply and leans back. ‘Isn’t that really, the only pure love? Something that is never tainted with ordinariness?’

‘Maybe that’s why we have our idols, things that are kept as fantasy,’ I point out.

‘Yeah, our fans...’

‘You mean groupies,’ I cut in, making him laugh.

‘Our groupies,’ he corrects himself, ‘are mostly teenage girls.’

‘I noticed at your gig earlier.’

‘I think the androgyny of Visual Kei allows them a safe outlet to focus all those crazy hormones they are going through at that age. It’s kind of like the equivalent of boy bands in the Western world.’ James takes out a packet of cigarettes from his jeans pocket and puts them on the table. Getting up, he wanders over to the counter to ask for an ashtray. I gaze around the room, thinking of my first job where I waitressed in a fifties themed diner not unlike this one. The setting and our conversation evoke memories of myself at fourteen years of age and falling in love for the first time. Our entire relationship was built on furtive glances and hand scribbled notes passed to each other during class. At an age where sex is a growing curiosity, there is a safety in keeping that distance. In a traditionalist nation like Japan where public displays of affection are frowned upon, perhaps there is a safety in breeding sexless idols.

‘The idea of androgyny has always intrigued me,’ admits James. He sits back down at the table and lights up a cigarette. Growing up in a standard American heterosexual community where football is king, his introduction to Visual Kei was a shock to his system. ‘I was in Japan modelling and doing some television shows before I got the music itch again.’ He answered the call by joining a band. Having grown up in a family of musicians, music was an area that had always come naturally to him. ‘I was looking for a hard rock or metal group to join and just happened to come across a Visual Kei band.’ He was struck by the brutality of the music, the

harsh sounds that held a stark contrast to its visual aesthetics. ‘The artists looked so otherworldly, so eerie. The idea that with clothing and make up, people can be beautiful as men or as women or as half-things really intrigues me.’ During college James wrote his final paper on Takarazuka, a form of Japanese theatre that is made up of an all female ensemble. The storylines often follow the form of a romance novel from nineteenth century England where the lead character played by a woman portrays the perfect man. Coming into fruition during the First World War while the men were away fighting, Takarazuka had a primarily female audience. It was common for women in the audience to fall in love with the female performers under the guise of them being men. ‘They [the women audience] would be married with families but they would write love letters to these female actors,’ says James.

Where Takarazuka comprises of an all female cast, Kabuki is its equal opposite with an all-male cast playing both gender roles. Though both styles of theatre are markedly different, (Takarazuka has a strong Western influence whereas Kabuki is strictly traditional) the blurring of gender lines is highly apparent in each. ‘It doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with a gay scene,’ says James, ‘the men study the movements of women to convey them to the audience but like with Visual Kei, you are well aware they are boys. It doesn’t strike you as odd though, because it’s a performance, a representation.’

It is getting late in the evening and my mind is wandering into that zone where it digs at things it is content to leave on the surface in the light of day. I am likening my experience of Japan to James and I, a cultural paradox of each other, where nothing is ever what it seems. But there is a strange allure in this deceit that has drawn myself and so many others here.

‘You’ve been really inspiring, you know,’ James remarks, interrupting my thoughts.

‘Oh?’ I ask.

‘Yeah...’ he begins, ‘your attitude about things... you’re totally fearless.’ The other day I was on the train when a stranger arrogantly asked if he was making me blush after paying me a superficial compliment. ‘No, it’s the heat,’ I had shot back.

Now I am actually blushing, genuinely flattered by James' comment. 'Well I'm *sure* glad I met you,' I say turning the conversation back to him.

'What *would* you have done without me?' He asks, grinning widely. It is a rhetorical question but I answer it anyway by bringing up our favourite science fiction author H.P. Lovecraft. His writing style will often substitute a sequence of events with sentences like '*it was too frightful to describe,*' leaving it entirely up to the reader's imagination to interpret.

'I'm going to pull a H.P. Lovecraft right now by telling you I can't find words to express the role you have played in this project,' I give him a meaningful look, 'it's been too important.' The conversation is edging towards being overly sentimental and I try to think of something funny to say that will lighten the mood.

'There was this H.P. Lovecraft convention,' says James breaking up the awkward silence. I chuckle quietly, listening to his story. The fans gathered at the convention were discussing why they were so drawn to Lovecraft's work. Each were coming up with theories more elaborate than the other. 'So this comic book artist Dave Carson stands up and says, "f**k all that, I love H.P. Lovecraft because I just like drawing monsters."' And that pretty much sums up how I feel about Visual Kei,' expresses James, 'I love music and I love pretty things.'

IX. Valérie

A Parisian Lolita



‘Versailles...’ Valérie sighs dreamily.

We are lying, chins propped on hands, on the bed of her hotel room in Shibuya, having just watched Sofia Coppola’s version of *Marie Antoinette*. The intricate patterns decorating sumptuous fabrics, shoes and the delicate china serving cakes at endless tea parties, swirl around my head. The opulent lifestyle of the insatiably overindulgent Marie Antoinette makes it no wonder she is idolised by the growing number of modern day Lolita who wander the streets of Paris.

‘Marie Antoinette,’ says Valérie, confirming my thoughts ‘was the perfect Lolita.’

Valérie, a Classic Lolita and student of theatre is on her annual trip to Japan to stock up on the latest offerings from Mary Magdalene, Angelic Pretty and Baby the

Stars Shine Bright. I met her the day before in Ladurée, a cake shop in Ginza. She was dressed in an Angelic Pretty gown, her arms weighed down by shopping bags. I made a comment about her outfit and we struck up a conversation before deciding to share a table.

‘It was on sale at Maruione One,’ she had whispered, while her lips curving into a mischievous smile, bore her a striking resemblance to Hollywood actress Scarlett Johansson.

As we ate decadent cakes in the equally lavish interior of Ladurée, she had given me a fascinating insight into the newly emerging Lolita subculture in Paris. Her breathy, French accent had lent a romantic touch to every morsel of information she shared about the world inhabited by Parisian Lolita.

Recently, Valérie founded *Le Boudoir des Lolitas*, an association to raise awareness about Lolita in France. ‘There are many of us, and Lolita is getting more and more famous in Paris.’ Together, they visit art galleries, the Opera, stroll through gardens or dine at Ladurée patisseries.

‘How about Visual Kei concerts?’ I had asked.

‘No.’ She shook her head firmly. ‘In Paris, Visual Kei is not Lolita.’ Where the subculture is intrinsically linked to Visual Kei in Japan, the musical movement is regarded as almost tacky in the critical eyes of French Lolita. ‘French Lolita are proud to say, “We don’t listen to Visual Kei, we don’t care about manga,”’ said Valérie. With little interest in the Japanese culture other than the specific labels that belong to its country, France is perhaps the only place in the world who have recreated Lolita as their own, rather than duplicating it.

‘What is the attitude towards French Lolita in Japan?’ I had asked her.

Valérie grinned proudly. ‘Yesterday I talked to Japanese Lolita and they said to me, “Oh! You are *French*, you are a *real* Lolita.”’ The degree of respect for French Lolita derives from the knowledge that Lolita draws its influence from eighteenth century French fashion.

In spite of her indifference to Visual Kei, Valérie’s first introduction to Lolita was during boarding school, where she roomed with a girl who was a follower of the

music. 'She showed me a picture of a Mary Magdalene dress in a magazine. I fell in love,' Valérie had gushed. This was just a few short years ago when it was impossible to find Lolita fashion outside of Japan. 'They have only just opened a Baby The Stars Shine Bright store in Paris,' Valérie smiled, 'that makes me very, very happy.'

'French Lolita are very proud,' Valérie says, breaking up my reverie. We are lying on our backs staring at the ceiling, discussing scenes from the movie. 'We follow the etiquette of Marie Antoinette.'

As Valérie begins to list the rules, my mind wanders to a scene in the movie, where a naked and shivering Marie Antoinette stood, waiting to be clothed. The custom at the time was she had to be dressed by the highest-ranking Courtier in the room. As each new Courtier entered the room, her garment was passed through several hands before it was finally slipped over her head. 'This is ridiculous!' Marie Antoinette had declared.

'This Madam, is Versailles!' She was reprimanded.

'...As a Lolita, you must always wear socks, you cannot show your legs,' Valérie continues to list the protocols. While Valérie does not abide by all the rules, ('Lolita is my fashion style, not a role I play,' she explains) she does however, put on a different persona when she is dressed in Lolita. 'I feel a little more proud, more elegant.'

'What do you think, lies at the heart of Lolita's appeal?' I ask.

'I think,' says Valérie, 'every girl dreams of being a princess. When we are children, we are given dolls to play with. We are read fairytales.' She is aware of the negative connotation that may be attached to the ideals coveted by Lolita. 'It's not about being silly or stupid,' says Valérie, who is a well-read, literary scholar with talents ranging from fire dancing to embroidery. 'People may judge it as frivolous or childish but I think it is like theatre, an art-form.'

Each Lolita I have interviewed have shown such varying personalities that it makes their reasons to partake in this fashion so hard to pinpoint. However, there is

a certain formula to Lolita that is continuously adapted to every coming of age story from once upon a time through to our present day.

‘Perhaps,’ I offer, ‘Lolita is the fairytale. The glamorous parties, the dresses, the shoes...’

Valérie’s lips curve into the same cheeky smile. ‘The Prince,’ she adds ‘and the happy ending.’

X. Junko

Blythe Dolls

An email sits in my inbox. I blink, waiting for the address of the sender to register. It is from the licensing department of CWC. After weeks without a reply, my time was running short and I had given up. I take a deep breath and click open the email.

My heart is racing as my eyes scan over the line reading, '*our president Junko Wong would like to meet with you.*' A time and date is mentioned and I reply right away to confirm it. I was due to leave two days before but this meeting but this was an opportunity I couldn't miss.

Days later, I am sitting in the waiting room at CWC studios in Daikanyama. There is a Japanese girl who sits across from me, her portfolio held protectively across her lap. We exchange nervous smiles. The room is filled with Blythe paraphernalia reminding me of my first visit to Maruione, where I was given a preface to the alluring world of Lolita through the Blythe dolls in their miniature outfits, crafted by the most sought after Lolita labels. In that defining moment, I knew I wanted to be a part of it but like the dolls kept behind glass panes, I had the sense that it was out of my reach.

Later, an assistant who informs me I have half an hour ushers me in to Junko's office. Having only just arrived in Japan, Junko has back-to-back meetings scheduled throughout the day.

Junko smiles warmly when I enter the room. 'You must be the Australian.' It is my cue to introduce myself, which becomes a tumble of words that sound painfully inarticulate to my ears. However, she is welcoming and after my initial nerves our conversation begins to flow freely.

‘A lot of our fans are Lolita,’ she says after I briefly summarise my research project, ‘I think that is mostly due to the events we run at Maruione.’ She takes a book from her shelf and places it on the desk in front of us. ‘We just did this exhibition recently, Once Upon a Wonderland.’ The exhibition was in celebration of Blythe’s seventh anniversary. ‘I wanted to do storytelling so much, for so long,’ she explains. The exhibition invited several top artists including Yuko Yamaguchi, designer for Hello Kitty to customize their own Blythe Doll based on a fairytale story. ‘It was amazing,’ she breathes, ‘every corner of the room was like opening up a new page of a storybook.’

While we pour over enchanting pictures of Blythe dressed as Little Red Riding Hood, Nutcracker and Anne of Green Gables, Junko begins to emphasize the importance of storytelling. ‘Most artists create a pretty picture with no substance behind it,’ she reveals. My mind traces back through the roles I have played in my career as an artist, illustrator and designer. At the core of it, I have always wanted to tell stories. These were simply the tools I used to convey them. I share this with Junko and the conversation turns to Akina.

After giving her a brief history, I ask if I can show her my work.

‘Please,’ she invites. I place my suitcase on her desk and it is déjà vu. I am back in that little store in Harajuku, only this time the buyer is Junko Wong, a key figure in the Japanese creative industry, whose approval will lend major credibility to my work.

I take out a selection of things, from my hand-stitched garments to my books and accessories. I study Junko’s face nervously as she examines them.

‘This is adorable,’ she declares, after a long silence. She is holding a silver charm of Miss Liliput in her hand, the result of a collaboration I did with jeweller Zoe Sernack. She pauses briefly before punctuating each word for a second time, ‘this – is – *adorable!*’ Intuitively, I sense that something important is about to happen.

‘You know,’ she says, ‘we are opening up a store in Maruione, a Gothic Lolita store.’ I hold my breath and wait for her to continue. ‘I would love, *love* to feature Akina in my store.’

It is a surreal moment for me. Particularly with the knowledge that Maruione favours Japanese brands, making the prestigious department store an impenetrable fortress for foreign labels.

‘Blythe was conceived in America but she has been adopted by the Japanese,’ Junko says as if reading my thoughts. ‘Akina has the same feeling, I think. I see you building up your own little following here.’ She spends more time exploring the contents of my suitcase.

‘What are your plans for the rest of your stay here?’ She enquires.

‘I’m going to my first Visual Kei concert tomorrow night,’ I tell her. Visual Kei reminds her of *The Rose of Versailles*, a manga she read as a teenager. In the story, the male lead is effeminate, with long, flowing locks and perfect skin. ‘Not a hair on the chin!’ She laughs. The series was famously adapted into a Takarazuka performance.

‘My mother was a Takarazuka dancer,’ Junko reveals. ‘I remember going backstage and my heart would be racing,’ her hand flutters against her chest to mimic the sensation, ‘you forget that these beautiful men are in fact, women.’

Her next meeting is due to begin shortly so I gather my things strewn across her desk and start to pack them away in my suitcase. ‘I believe,’ Junko says suddenly. I pause to meet her eyes with mine, ‘Takarazuka, Lolita, Visual Kei, Blythe, it is all connected.’ The meaning behind her carefully chosen words have a profound impact on me. ‘Music, fashion, theatre, it is the history and the lifestyle of the people here.’

All at once, I feel I have come full circle.

Final Act

The Curtain Closes

I have lost my friends on a crowded rooftop party to celebrate a fireworks display in Asakusa when I overhear a conversation spoken in an Australian accent. I turn around to see two men, beer cans in hand, grinning broadly at each other while they banter back and forth. The familiarity of the scene makes me think fondly of home. It has been awhile since I have come across a fellow Aussie so I join in, much to their surprise. Wearing a *yukata*, (Japanese kimono) customary for these festivities, I can easily pass as one of the natives. During our conversation, one of the men excuses himself and I remain talking to Stuart.

‘I know nothing about fashion,’ he admits, ‘but I do know a little bit about culture.’ In stark contrast to our multicultural Australia, he tells me, there are less than one percent of foreigners living in Japan. For a nation with such a long history that is so steeped in tradition, the experience here is one that is fiercely unique to the country.

‘Have you heard of the Naked Man Festival?’ Stuart asks. I am intrigued. ‘Once a year, scores of men will gather at a shrine in Saidaiji, on the coldest day of winter.’ I listen enthralled as he describes his personal experience of the bizarre event. ‘We strip down to a *fundoshi* which is pretty much, a g-string.’ The men then drink *sake* (an alcoholic beverage) and run in circles through the snow to warm themselves. Once they have worked up a sweat, they jump into a freezing cold lake to purify their bodies.

Afterwards the men congregate outside the temple where a stick is thrown out at the crowd. ‘I caught it because I was the tallest,’ says Stuart, ‘but if I knew I would have been assaulted from every angle by scores of scantily clad men all vying for it...’ he trails off, shaking his head in mock regret. The person who catches the stick is rewarded with a year of luck and prosperity.

Stuart's story is most peculiar and to a Westerner such as myself, I can't even begin to imagine what led to the creation of this ritual. Yet, every Japanese person I meet in the next few weeks knows of this event, while they are rarely familiar with the subcultures I am studying. I find it ironic that the underground subcultures in Japan are better known elsewhere around the world than in the country to which they belong. On the surface, these subversions may appear to be a rebellion against the conformity of Japanese culture but upon closer inspection could just as readily be another one of Japan's consumer products, one that has been remarkably successful at holding a captive audience on the world stage. Whether intentional, the result has produced some of the most spectacular displays of self-expression ever seen in history, by the very individuals, whose attempts at breaking away from old traditions are forming new ones in the process.

The Artisan has come to the end of his journey and recites his last monologue to the audience. The curtain closes to the roaring sound of applause. Tomorrow I will fly out to Sydney, back to a familiar life that now seems so otherworldly. My brief glimpse into this world will once again inspire my garments and hang as artworks on gallery walls. But as an outsider looking in, they will never truly capture the essence of the Tokyo underground fashion scene. I have barely scratched the surface in my time here and to decipher its many complex layers may take a lifetime. So I will keep trying.

Author Biography



Lang Leav (centre)

Contemporary Sydney artist, Lang Leav weaves the enchanting world of Akina. Her imagination stretches across a variety of disciplines encompassing fashion, art, journalism, poetry and books.

Known for her versatility, Lang has completed a wide range of projects both independently and through a number of exciting collaborations. The distinct nature of her work alternates between the whimsical and melancholy, expressing an underlying complexity beneath its child-like facade.

Lang is a former recipient of The Qantas Spirit of Youth Award and later was granted a prestigious Churchill Fellowship. Her fashion label Akina has achieved critical and commercial success, stocked in key boutiques around Australia and later in cutting edge Harajuku, Japan.

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Valérie

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Stuart

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Hana

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Matt

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