

# FEATURES



Japanese Pasta

By Kate Wolf

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“Have you ever been to Japan?” Olympus Visionary photographer Maki Kawakita is asking. “Because maybe then you’d understand. Let’s say you have a Japanese dish – it’s pasta – but then you’ll have seaweed on top of it, and sea urchin and raw fish, and there will be some Chinese seasoning on top of it too. That’s what we call Japanese pasta. We do this all the time.” Kawakita is using local cuisine in an attempt to explain the diverse, layered quality of Japanese culture. Similarly, her pictures draw from a wealth of different influences and associations, and have a distinct way of relating back to her. Quietly energetic, this petite young woman makes a type of stylized, colorful work that has a quirky flavor all its own.

### Maki Kawakita



[VIEW IMAGES](#)

Born and raised in Tokyo, Kawakita practiced Kabuki-style dancing from a young age thanks to her mother, a Japanese dance instructor. From a nook beside her desk in the lower Manhattan apartment that also serves as her studio, she pulls out a red folder and takes out a picture of herself as an adolescent. She is in full Kabuki-style regalia—her face caked in white makeup with red bow-shaped lips and framed by an elaborate black bouffant wig. She wears a coquettish look. “All my work is very animated and colorful, like that picture when I was little; it really comes from there,” she says.

The Kabuki influence is clear in the next images Kawakita pulls from the red folder, recent portrait assignments of Missy Elliott and Hilary Duff. In the pictures, the two pop stars’ heads are enclosed in cardboard boxes, surrounded by packing material and looking disembodied. These striking images relate to a previous personal project, “Doll Box” in which an Asian model named Rila posed with her head nestled in various cardboard boxes filled with bubble wrap and Express mail envelopes.

As a former dancer who studied graphic design in Tokyo, Kawakita’s interest in photography began when her university armed design students with cameras and sent them to South America for a month. While in Paraguay and Brazil—shooting in black and white—Kawakita discovered two of her great passions: photography and Latin culture. In 1999, following the advice of a mentor in Japan, she came to the United States to study photography at Rochester Institute of Technology. Kawakita later transferred to the School of Visual Arts in New York, where she found another mentor, *LIFE* magazine’s George Pitts, who was formerly with *Vibe*.

Although she was the only fashion photographer to receive a Masters of Fine Art at SVA, Kawakita says that she's not interested in conventional fashion so much as in the use of costume and makeup. While at Rochester, she experimented by using dancer friends in her photos. Some of her early pictures feature tutu-clad ballerinas striking poses at 7-11s and greasy-spoon diners, their fragile beauty contrasting with the grungy surroundings. Other early Rochester pictures find a league of silver-painted girls wading knee-deep in a pond surrounded by silver balloons. Here it is easy to see the influence of Surrealist painters like Dali, who Kawakita says she adores. Movement has also played a key role in her work: a recent series featured skaters and rappers jumping supernaturally high in the air.

Kawakita's first big publishing success came with her "Barbie" series, in which she dressed models to resemble the famous doll and posed them with their limbs jutting at stiff angles, or wearing garish make-up. After one of the images was published on the cover of *Future Original* magazine in 2000, Kawakita's career took off. These days she is overwhelmingly busy: the day before speaking with *VisionAge* she had stayed up all night working on the pictures of Missy Elliott and Hilary Duff. She is also looking to find a gallery in New York where she can show her solo work. But she seems to thrive off this type of pressure and energy. She loves working in New York and also visiting her hometown of Tokyo, where she goes on assignment at least twice a year. There, she does fashion shoots and makes portraits of celebrities for various clients—and if this isn't enough, she is also working on a solo project called "Makirama."

In "Makirama," Kawakita draws on her enthusiasm for pop art (an obsession with Andy Warhol being one of her initial reasons for moving to New York) and re-imagines the sixties pop landscape in a totally new way, using a collage of graphic design and photo. "It's a way for me to look at my own culture, my own life and how I grew up, and now being here," she says of the project.

Each "Makirama" image begins with a photograph of a confident, hip young woman, shot with the Olympus E-1 camera. "I love the E-1 system because the lens is great," Kawakita says. "My work requires a crisp, sharp look and the E-1 gives crisp results because of its self-cleaning system. The 14-54mm lens is also great for intimate shots."

In addition to photographs, "Makirama" also includes illustrations created by Kawakita's sister Yuki, a graphic designer. The women in the images are set against a colorful, graphic sea of pop neon signs and logos. Sometimes, they are taking on giant Godzilla monsters, or simply sauntering through a vibrant, multi-ethnic urban landscape.

It seems a fitting representation for the story of someone looking to define herself against a sea of ever changing locations and interests. The work is "all about me," Kawakita admits. Like the pasta composed of so many different ingredients, the series allows her to express and reflect the disparate interests and influences in her life.