A River Runs Through It: Creative Currents Through Aotearoa and Japan with Grace Mirams

by Jennifer Pastore

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Grace Mirams, *I'm at the river, I'll meet you by the sea* (installation view), Gallery Crossing, Minokamo, Gifu Prefecture, Japan, 6–20 August, 2023. Courtesy of Gallery Crossing, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: Masashi Kuromoto.



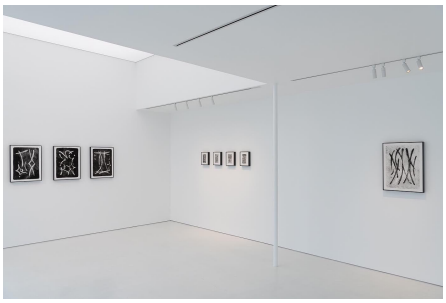
Artist talk at Gallery Crossing on 6 August, 2023. Mirams is seated at front centre with Yuka O'Shannessy of Public Record at her right and Misa Kuromoto of Gallery Crossing at her left. Courtesy of Gallery Crossing, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: Masashi Kuromoto.



Grace Mirams at work. Courtesy of Grace Mirams. Photo: Roxie Mohebbi.



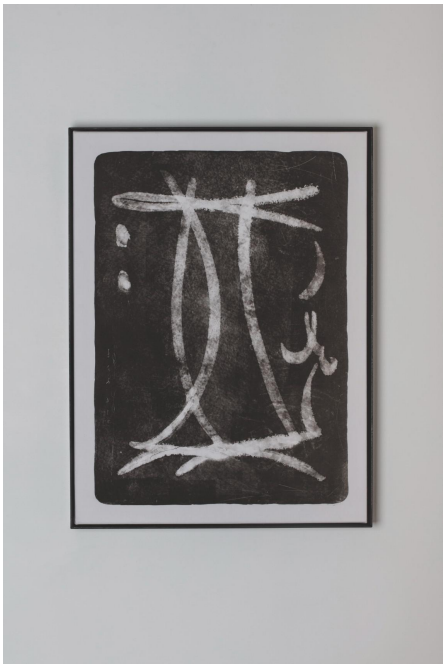
Grace Mirams, *whispers from the wetlands*, 2023, oil-based ink on silk-cotton blend, mild steel frame, H63 x W47.5 x D5 cm (framed). Unique edition 1/1. Courtesy of Gallery Crossing, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: Masashi Kuromoto.



Grace Mirams, *I'm at the river, I'll meet you by the sea* (installation view), Gallery Crossing, Minokamo, Gifu Prefecture, Japan, 6–20 August, 2023. Courtesy of Gallery Crossing, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: Masashi Kuromoto.



Gallery Crossing from the street. Courtesy of Public Record, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: Masami Ono.



Grace Mirams, *fishing for stars*, 2023, oil-based ink on silk-cotton blend, mild steel frame, H63 x W47.5 x D5 cm (framed). Unique edition 1/1. Courtesy of Public Record, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: Liz Clarkson.

In August, writer and translator Jennifer Pastore travelled west from her home in Tokyo to Gifu Prefecture, Japan, to visit the exhibition I'm at the river, I'll meet you by the sea *by printmaker and metalworker Grace Mirams. She met with Mirams, learning about the craft of monotype printmaking, the importance of place in creative production, and the poetic inspirations behind Mirams' work. Mirams also shared her experiences of meeting like-minded craft makers in Japan.*

It was Heraclitus of ancient Greece who pointed out that we never step into the same river twice.[01] Some six centuries later, the Japanese literary recluse Kamo no Chōmei would marry this idea to the Buddhist concept of impermanence:

> The flow of the river never ceases,
>
> And the water never stays the same.
>
> Bubbles float on the surface of pools,
>
> Bursting, re-forming, never lingering.

They're like the people in this world and their dwellings.[02]

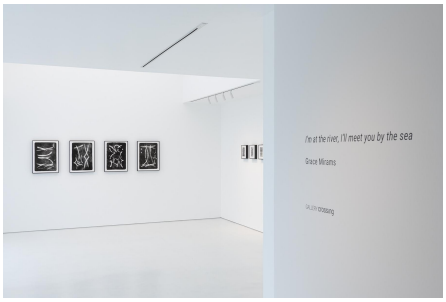
Grace Mirams' monotypes evoke a similar sentiment. Although the prints should be serial given their medium, each work is unique. She downplays printmaking's traditional emphasis on replication, making work heavily influenced by the materials and variables of the process such as applications of ink and solvent and degrees of pressure when running the imprints through the press.[03]

For her most recent exhibition, *I'm at the river, I'll meet you by the sea* at Gallery Crossing in central Japan (6–20 August 2023), Mirams continued with monotype, displaying twenty-three works in black, white and grey, all made specifically for the show and chosen from 200–300 candidates in her studio.[04] The works are printed on blends of cotton and silk, and framed in black steel welded by Mirams herself. They are minimalistic, abstract and mysterious, their imagery suggesting ink-brush writing, dappled light on water, or flitting dragonflies. Their subjects are derived from Mirams' research and personal recollections of the Taieri River, which runs near her hometown of Ōtepoti Dunedin in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Fishing for stars* (2023), a picture with curved white lines swept across a dark background, was inspired by the masts and sails of ships at the mouth of the Taieri where it meets the Pacific Ocean. A companion work, *new moon, while wading* (2023), interprets a cherished memory of dabbling in the river at dusk while spearfishing with her father. Horizontal white lines cross each other in the print, forming a fishlike figure as a crescent shape glints in the upper right corner. These works feel mystical, evoking the deep sanctity of evening.

In Search of Origins

With the works in *I'm at the river*, Mirams is seeking out roots—her own, but also those extending far beyond her. Besides her family connections to the Taieri River, which winds for 288 kilometres down Aotearoa's South Island, Te Waipounamu, she's interested in how people arrive at certain places, and how the art created by inhabitants of a place expresses their connections to the land. At her talk at Gallery Crossing on 6 August, she began with a mihi (introductory acknowledgements in te reo Māori) addressing her

Pākehā (European New Zealander) ancestry and the local river and mountains she grew up near. She remarked that she felt she could not venture abroad without first examining her origins. Later, when I asked her about the personal significance of rivers, she replied, “To me, a river signifies a past, present and future. It’s a place of respite and of gathering, where you can collect yourself and commune with others. It helps you understand your place in history and a larger ecosystem.”[05] For Mirams, the geographical is personal.



Grace Mirams, *I’m at the river, I’ll meet you by the sea* (installation view), Gallery Crossing, Minokamo, Gifu Prefecture, Japan, 6–20 August, 2023. Courtesy of Gallery Crossing, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: Masashi Kuromoto.



Grace Mirams, *new moon, while wading*, 2023, oil-based ink on silk-cotton blend, mild steel frame, H63 x W47.5 x D5 cm (framed). Unique edition 1/1. Courtesy of Public Record, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: Liz Clarkson.

Materials and Methods

Although still in her twenties, Mirams has already built a reputation and relationships with other artists. She studied design and fine arts at Toi Rauwhārangi College of Creative Arts at Massey University in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. She then honed her skills in commercial design in New York before returning to Aotearoa, where she now practises as an independent artist and works for Objectspace, a gallery in Tāmaki Makaurau and Ōtautahi Christchurch focused on craft, design and architecture.

Mirams developed her current approach to monotype with support from John Pusateri, founder of the Ruakākā print studio APS Editions. It was through Pusateri that she discovered an affinity for limestone, a base material allowing for rich textural detail in printmaking. When creating designs on stone or metal, she sometimes refers to photographs and sketches she has prepared. For the collection of works in *I'm at the river*, she documented the Taieri River similarly, also using sound recordings. Other times, she extemporaneously relies on instinct and imagination: "I think of printmaking as a kind of drawing," she says, noting that the medium's need for immediate action reminds her, in some ways, of creating ceramics.[06]

Her methods for monotype printmaking involve directly covering the base material with ink, then using various forms of rubbing, blotting with fabrics, applying solvents and scratching away the ink. Next the impression is rolled through a press or applied to silk with manual pressure. Contours of the limestone appear as greyish backgrounds with grainy textures in the prints, which can seem abstract or granularly realistic. Through interplays of chance and control, she strives to create "a feeling of water" through techniques she admires for their ability to capture movement.[07]

Fully committed to process, Mirams feels her works are not complete until given three-dimensionality in the form of unique frames. She creates these using welding skills learned from her father and brother in a family tradition that resonated with artists she visited in Japan, where creative practices are often passed down through generations. Her desire to give her works a sculptural element reflects her commitment to creating unique pieces and challenging preconceptions of printmaking as serial and two-dimensional. She also appreciates the contrast between the hardness of the frames and the softness of the silk on which her designs are printed, a juxtaposition with which she finds resonance in *mono-ha*, a twentieth-century Japanese art movement that experimented with interplays of materials.[08]



Grace Mirams, *horizon (flat)*, 2023, oil-based ink on silk-cotton blend, mild steel frame, H27.5 x W21.7 x D5 cm (framed). Unique edition 1/1. Courtesy of Public Record, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: Liz Clarkson.



Grace Mirams at her artist talk, 6 August 2023, Gallery Crossing, Minokamo, Japan. Courtesy of Gallery Crossing, Minokamo. Photo: Masashi Kuromoto.



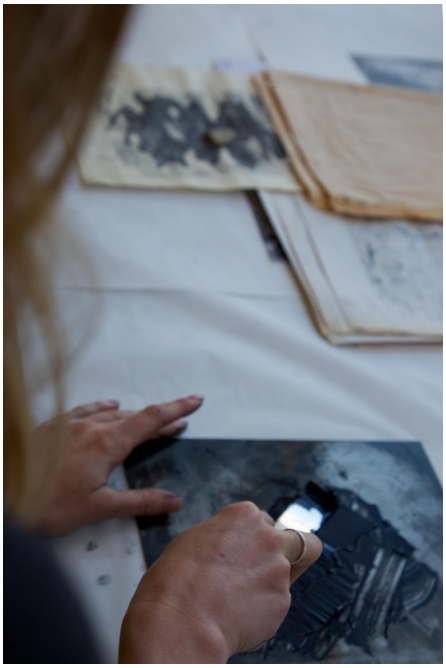
Grace Mirams, *great south sky*, 2023, oil-based ink on silk-cotton blend, mild steel frame, H63 x W47.5 x D5 cm (framed). Unique edition 1/1. Courtesy of Gallery Crossing, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: Masashi Kuromoto.



Grace Mirams, *I'm at the river, I'll meet you by the sea* (installation view), Gallery Crossing, Minokamo, Gifu Prefecture, Japan, 6–20 August, 2023. Courtesy of Gallery Crossing, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: Masashi Kuromoto.



Grace Mirams at her studio in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Courtesy of Public Record, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: Kristen Lindesay.



Grace Mirams at work. Courtesy of Grace Mirams. Photo: Roxie Mohebbi.



Grace Mirams, (left to right) *which way the spirit goes*, 2023, oil-based ink on silk-cotton blend, mild steel frame, H63 x W47.5 x D5 cm (framed). Unique edition 1/1; *crossing*, 2023, oil-based ink on silk-cotton blend, mild steel frame, H63 x W47.5 x D5 cm (framed). Unique edition 1/1. Courtesy of Public Record, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: Liz Clarkson.



Grace Mirams, *forest chime*, 2023, oil-based ink on silk-cotton blend, mild steel frame, H27.5 × W21.7 × D5cm (framed). Unique edition 1/1. Courtesy of Public Record, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: Masashi Kuromoto.

Paths to and through Japan

In 2021, Mirams' work caught the attention of Yuka O'Shannessy at Public Record, a gallery in Tāmaki Makaurau that represents Japanese artists in Aotearoa and Aotearoa artists in Japan. Public Record offers workshops by contemporary artists such as Mirams, and gives demonstrations of Japanese craft making, spotlighting art created with natural materials in traditional and original practices. O'Shannessy arranged for Mirams' prints to be shown in Japan through her relationship with Gallery Crossing's Director Misa Kuromoto, with whom she cross-promotes artists. Both gallerists found parallels between the restrained, timeless style of Mirams' work and Japanese crafts such as ceramics and textiles, seeing potential for Mirams and Japanese artists to learn from each other.[09]

Gallery Crossing, which opened in 2017, is located about three hours west of Tokyo. Kuromoto selected the gallery's rural location for the open possibilities of the space and its relative lack of commercial constraints compared to Tokyo or other major cities. At the same time, its position is more than practical, as it is symbolically situated in the town of Minokamo, along the old Nakasendo Highway by the Kiso River. Like the Taieri, the Kiso River flows for more than 200 kilometres before emptying into the sea. Winding through Nagano, Gifu, Aichi and Mie Prefectures, this waterway sometimes called the Japan Rhine has been a cradle of culture since ancient times. Castles were built along its banks, and

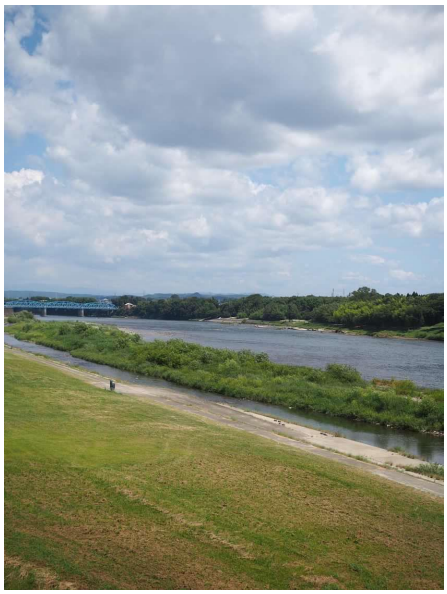
the tradition of *ukai*—night-time cormorant fishing lit by flames—has been practised on it for 1,300 years. The Kiso Road runs along the river, as well. Traversed for nearly a millennium and memorialised by poets and artists, the route comprises an important part of the Nakasendo Highway, which prospered as a samurai road from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Extending from Kyoto to Edo (now Tokyo), the Nakasendo was a crucial inland artery for military, commercial and cultural purposes. It was also important in the name Gallery Crossing, which evokes the image of travellers who once crossed rivers and travelled along highways.[10]



Masami Ono, Yuka O'Shannessy, Grace Mirams, Misa Kuromoto (left to right). Courtesy of Gallery Crossing, Minokamo. Photo: Masashi Kuromoto.



Gallery Crossing from the street. Courtesy of Public Record, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: Masami Ono.



The Kiso River in Minokamo, Gifu Prefecture. Courtesy of Public Record, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: Masami Ono.

Adjacent to the greenery of an open lot, the gallery's modernist ground floor appears unexpectedly among old-style shops and residences. The white-walled interior lent Mirams' works breathing space free of distraction. While her prints have been convincingly displayed in other settings, such as rooms with *tatami* straw mats and other Japanese architectural features, amid the airiness and abundant natural light of Gallery Crossing, they revealed details in tone and texture that added nuance to the stories to which they alluded: of oceans crossed, of rivers stepped in, of time gone by and destinations unknown; of archetypes and metaphors, of losing and finding oneself in a larger picture.

Mirams' initial attraction to Japanese culture was its poetry—specifically the eleventh-century anthology *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu (One Hundred Poets, One Poem Each)*, compiled by the poet and scholar Fujiwara no Teika (1162–1241). The titles of her prints demonstrate her lyrical inclinations: *whispers from the wetlands* (2023), *which way the spirit goes* (2023), *forest chime* (2023). Like the poetry of *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu*, Mirams' prints are nature centred and subtly evocative in their sparsity. This poem by Fujiwara no Sadayori seems as though it could have been written about one, or several, of her works:

> As the fog rises
>
> and thins in patches,
>
> in the shallows appear
>
> stakes of the fishing nets—
>
> Winter, dawn, the Uji river.[11]

Conversations in and on Craft

Thanks largely to their geographic and social confluences, the regions surrounding the Kiso River and the Nakasendo developed strong creative traditions. Aichi and Gifu Prefectures, and the Mino area in particular, have been renowned for centuries for their crafts. *Minoyaki* ceramics, with their modest colours and rustic styles, were prized as tea ceremony wares by *daimyo* feudal lords. The city of Tajimi in southern Gifu became synonymous with tile production. *Mino-washi* papermaking, a practice that emerged in part owing to the purity of the area's river water, goes back more than 1,300 years. Made from mulberry plants native to Mino, this paper is still used in applications ranging from *shoji* sliding doors to calligraphy and art restoration.

Mirams was able to interact with contemporary practitioners of crafts such as these during her six-week visit to Japan. She participated in a *shibori* dyeing workshop, visited the Mosaic Tile Museum in Tajimi, and paid visits to the studios of ceramicists

Rando Aso and Shiho Hayashi and the printmaker Natsumi Kobayashi. These encounters provided her with insights into how crafts in Japan are being modernised while remaining rooted in their long-established methods of creation. The ways in which lineages of craft are both treasured and innovated upon echo Mirams' ability to meld the traditions of limestone, silk, ink and steel into something surprising.

Rando Aso runs a studio with a self-made kiln at a *kominka* (traditional-style house) in the vicinity of Gallery Crossing. Experimenting with ancient firing techniques such as *noyaki*, grass burning, he creates earthenware pieces that range from unglazed vessels to tile murals and large-scale installations. He is also an instructor, and Mirams was impressed with his commitment to passing on clay-working skills to future generations.[12]

Mirams also attended a workshop at textile brand Suzusan, which utilises dyeing techniques practised for over a century by the Murase family in Arimatsu, Aichi Prefecture. Suzusan is working to revive their craft as part of a larger tradition of *shibori*, which goes back some 400 years and involves tying, sewing, folding then dyeing cloth to produce a variety of designs. Respect for an intricate process and commitment to cultivating craft for the future were just two of many lessons Mirams absorbed from Suzusan’s artisans.



Grace Mirams, *A hand from stone* (installation view), Public Record, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 26 August–11 September, 2022. Courtesy of Public Record, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: Masami Ono.



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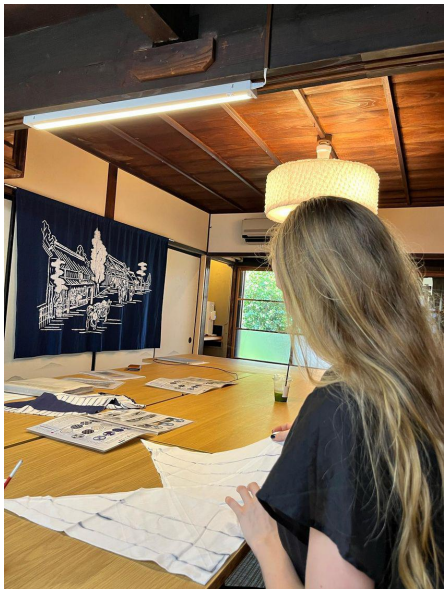


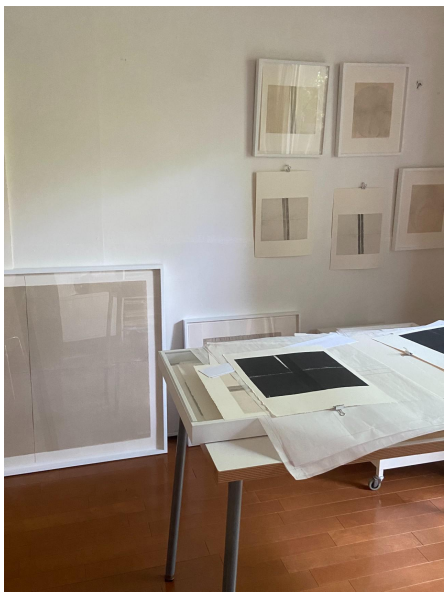
Arimatsu shibori dyeing workshop at Suzusan in Nagoya, Aichi Prefecture. Photo: Yuka O'Shannessy.



Unfinished works at Rando Aso's studio in Minokamo, Gifu Prefecture. Photo: Grace Mirams.



Shiho Hayashi's studio in Tajimi, Gifu Prefecture. Photo: Grace Mirams.



Prints in Natsumi Kobayashi's studio in Tokyo. Photo: Grace Mirams.

Many of the common threads Mirams found between her works and those of the artists she encountered—a focus on procedure, abstraction in form, austerity in style, expressions of nature—were also elements that visitors to her show picked up on. A Japanese guest at the artist's talk spoke about how the landscapes of Aotearoa had reminded them of a Japan of the past, and how Mirams' prints captured their impression of the willow trees "over there," which seemed similar to those in Gifu. In this way, the

international voyage taken by the works underscored their ability to speak to many audiences.

During my conversation with Mirams, she reflected on parallels between her experiences in Aotearoa and Japan, noting similarities between Māori and Japanese craft practices. She commented on a mutual respect for materials and their origins, and an emphasis on harnessing mental and spiritual energy when creating. At the Japanese studios she observed a feeling of community and a collective energy she had also witnessed with Māori weaving using harakeke (a plant native to Aotearoa, *Phormium tenax*). She commented that such encounters in both hemispheres reminded her of the joys of working with and making things for others. She noted that although she can find printmaking isolating, she derives a sense of collaboration and clarity from interactions with O'Shannessy, family, friends and other artists when preparing for a show.[13]

Mirams' time in Japan gave her an opportunity for contemplation about not only her work, but creative practice in general. When I asked for her thoughts on debates about art versus craft, she responded that she uses printmaking as a medium, without concerning herself too much about categorising it. Still, she sees distinctions between art and craft—namely, that the latter is something more universal and deeply rooted. Ever appreciative of the larger picture, she says, "My practice has a long way to go before it can be considered craft. It needs a lot more time".[14]

Footnotes

01. Daniel W. Graham, "Heraclitus," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford, CA: The Metaphysics Research Lab, Department of Philosophy, Stanford University, 2019), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/

02. Matthew Stavros, *Hōjōki: A Hermit's Hut as Metaphor* (New South Wales: Vicus Lusorum, 2020), 1–2.

03. "Grace Mirams: From Here, On," ADJO, https://adjo.co.nz/exhibition/grace-mirams

04. Grace Mirams, in conversation with the author, 19 August 2023.

05. "Grace Mirams: I'm at the river, I'll meet you by the sea," Gallery Crossing, 6 August 2023, https://gallerycrossing.com/en/exhibitions/gracemirams2023

06. Ibid.

07. Ibid.

08. Grace Mirams, in conversation with the author and Yuka O'Shannessy, 31 July 2023.

09. Ibid.

10. "About Crossing," Gallery Crossing, https://gallerycrossing.com/en/about

11. Peter McMillan, ed., *One Hundred Poets, One Poem Each: A Translation of the Ogura Hyakunin Isshu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 66.

12. Grace Mirams, in conversation with the author, 19 August 2023.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

Biographies



Grace Mirams (b. 1996 Ōtepoti, Aotearoa) is an artist working across the fields of drawing, printmaking, metalwork and design. Her practice considers ideas of materiality, creative process and timelessness. She holds a bachelor of Visual Communication Design with a minor in Fine Arts from Toi Rauwhārangi College of Creative Arts at Massey University, in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. Previous exhibitions include *this hand from stone*, Public Record, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland (2022); *The keep and its keepers*, The Keep, Tāmaki Makaurau (2022); *from here, on*, ADJØ, Ōtepoti Dunedin (2021); *Mondegreen*, Tory St Art Space, Te Whanganui-a-Tara (2018). Grace is currently based in Tāmaki Makaurau, working as a designer at Objectspace and preparing for a show at Public Record come February 2024. https://gracemirams.com/



Jennifer Pastore is a US-born art writer, editor and translator based in Tokyo. She has been covering the Japanese art scene for more than a decade in publications such as *Artnet*, *Tokyo Weekender*, *ArtAsiaPacific* and *Artscape Japan*. https://authory.com/JenniferPastore

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