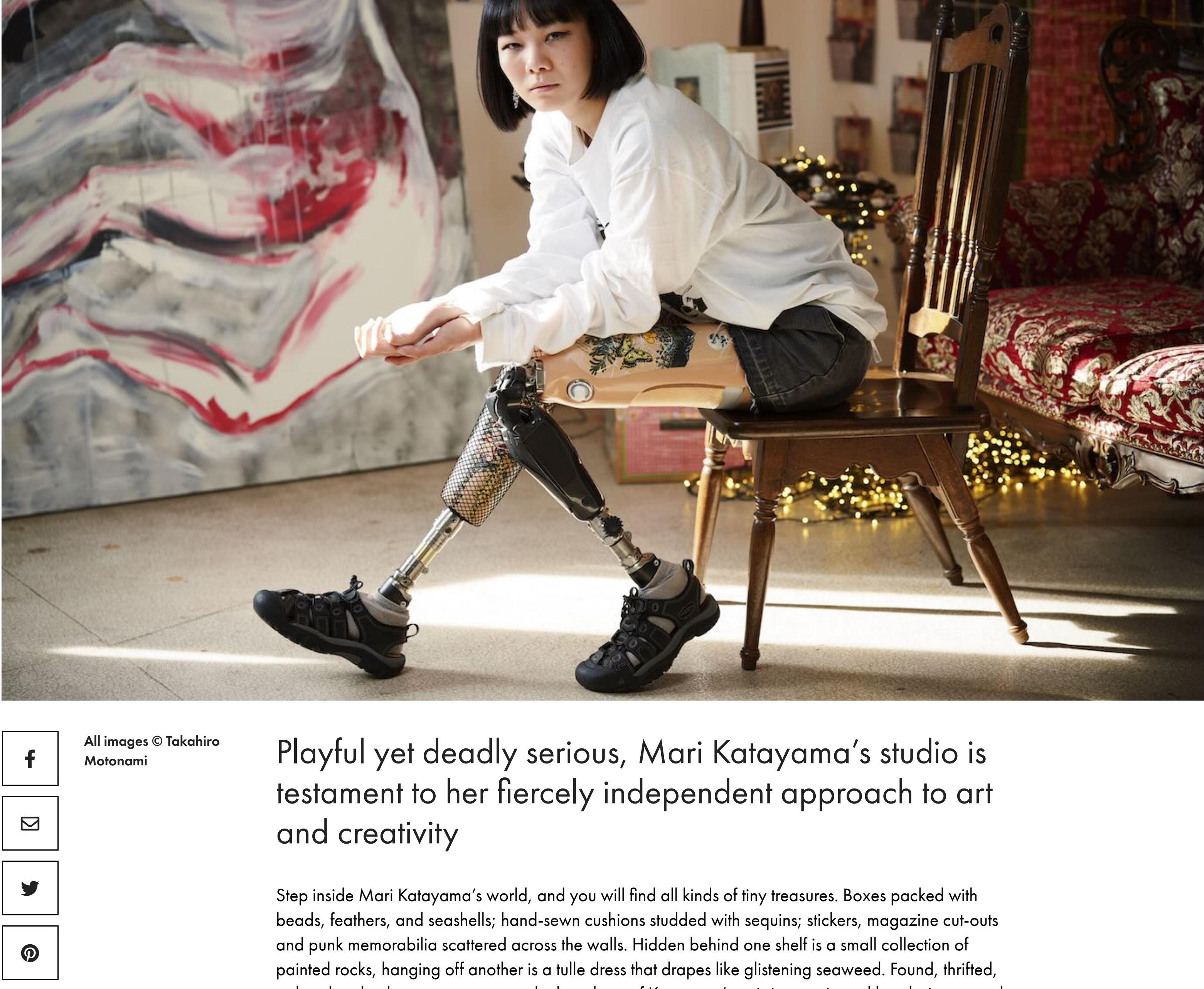


IN THE STUDIO, INTERVIEW | 11 SEPTEMBER 2024

# In the Studio with Mari Katayama

by MARIGOLD WARNER



All images © Takahiro Motonami



Playful yet deadly serious, Mari Katayama’s studio is testament to her fiercely independent approach to art and creativity

Step inside Mari Katayama’s world, and you will find all kinds of tiny treasures. Boxes packed with beads, feathers, and seashells; hand-sewn cushions studded with sequins; stickers, magazine cut-outs and punk memorabilia scattered across the walls. Hidden behind one shelf is a small collection of painted rocks, hanging off another is a tulle dress that drapes like glistening seaweed. Found, thrifted, or handmade, these ornaments are the heartbeat of Katayama’s artistic pursuit, and her desire to reach an “epitome of beauty”.

Katayama’s practice encompasses photography, craft, installation, and performance, but she is most known for her mesmerising self-portraits, shooting herself against intricately crafted backdrops. These have been exhibited in some of the world’s top institutions, including Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Mori Art Museum, and Tate Modern, where she currently has a display on show until February 2025. In May 2025, she will unveil a new commission for the V&A’s Parasol Foundation Women in Photography project.

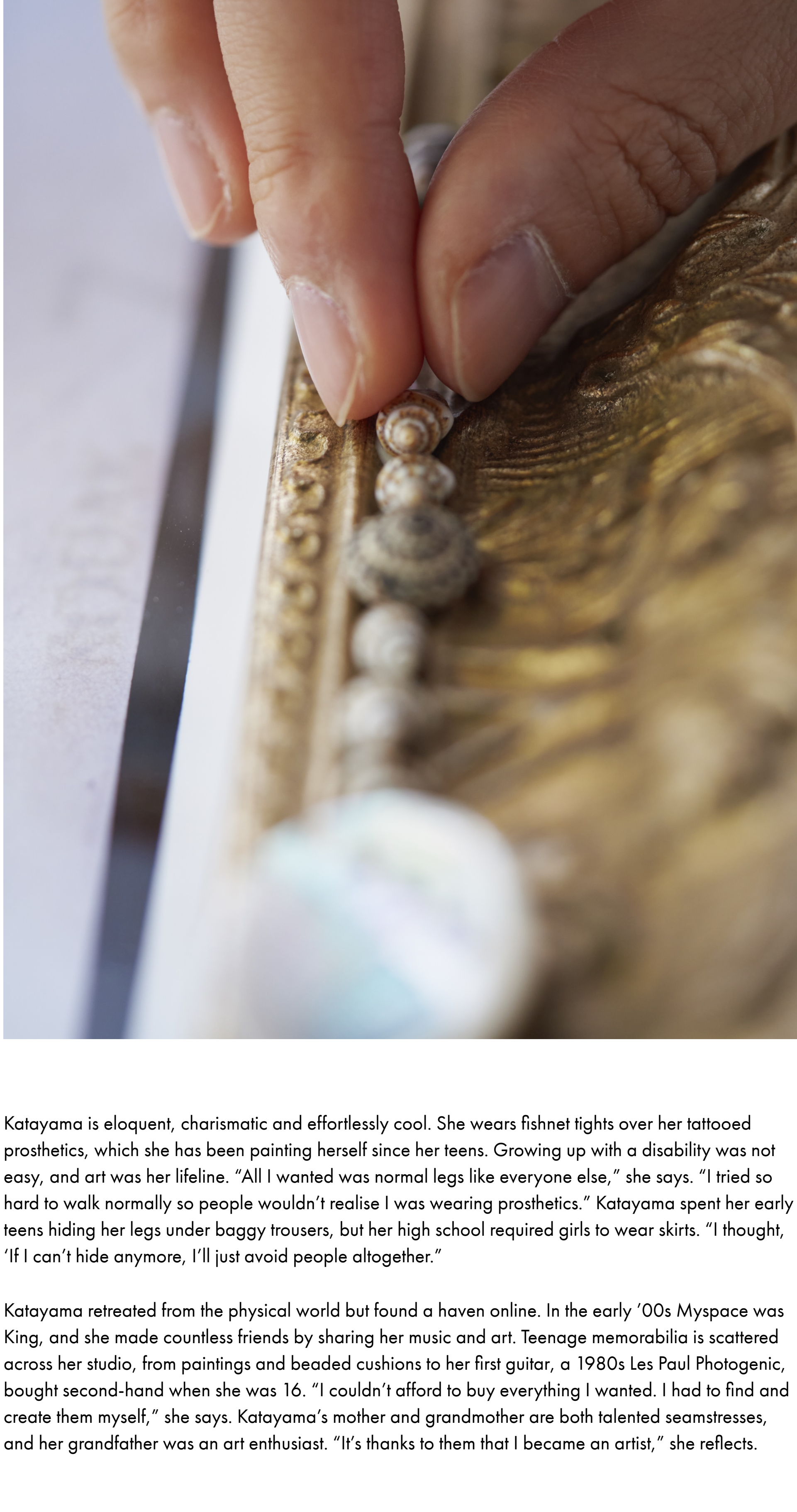


“If it ever comes to a point where I can’t walk, at least I can still get to the studio in a wheelchair”

Katayama works from a one-story studio located in her home-prefecture Gunma, a mountainous region in northwest Japan. “It would have been near-impossible for me to afford a studio in Tokyo,” says the 37-year-old artist, who lived in the capital for two years after graduating with a masters from Tokyo University of the Arts in 2012. “If I was going to take my craft seriously, I had to go back to Gunma.” Katayama rented out a two-room apartment, where she spent her formative years as a working artist, kneading plaster, stitching cushions, and decorating the ornate frames she uses to exhibit her portraits.

She moved to her current studio in 2019, just before her breakthrough exhibition at the 58th Venice Biennale. She shares the space with her husband, a DJ and musician, and adjacent to their home, it is split into three rooms – Katayama’s atelier, her husband’s studio, and a shared office with DJ decks and a collection of thousands of records. The couple have just one rule, never bring the work home. “I’m finding that hard to stick to,” Katayama admits, with a laugh. “I do a lot of my sewing work without my prosthetics, on the floor. Sometimes it’s more comfortable to spread the work across one of the spare rooms in the house.”

For Katayama, accessibility between the house and studio is essential. She was born with congenital tibial hemimelia and, at nine years old, opted to have her legs amputated. “If it ever comes to a point where I can’t walk, at least I can still get to the studio in a wheelchair,” she says. Her plastic toolboxes are all marked with silver heart-shaped labels – cute, but also practical. On days when she is tired or in pain, even her six-year-old daughter can collect the materials she needs.



Katayama is eloquent, charismatic and effortlessly cool. She wears fishnet tights over her tattooed prosthetics, which she has been painting herself since her teens. Growing up with a disability was not easy, and art was her lifeline. “All I wanted was normal legs like everyone else,” she says. “I tried so hard to walk normally so people wouldn’t realise I was wearing prosthetics.” Katayama spent her early teens hiding her legs under baggy trousers, but her high school required girls to wear skirts. “I thought, ‘If I can’t hide anymore, I’ll just avoid people altogether.”

Katayama retreated from the physical world but found a haven online. In the early ‘00s Myspace was King, and she made countless friends by sharing her music and art. Teenage memorabilia is scattered across her studio, from paintings and beaded cushions to her first guitar, a 1980s Les Paul Photogenic, bought second-hand when she was 16. “I couldn’t afford to buy everything I wanted. I had to find and create them myself,” she says. Katayama’s mother and grandmother are both talented seamstresses, and her grandfather was an art enthusiast. “It’s thanks to them that I became an artist,” she reflects.



In the beginning, photography was a tool for Katayama to share her creations, and in many ways, it still is. Her process usually begins with constructing installations, which can take up to a week to set up. The photographic process is comparatively short, she says, 30 minutes to an hour at most. None of this is to say that Katayama is a complacent photographer. In fact, there was a time when she was obsessed with camera gear. The photographic world, particularly in Japan, can be dominated by older men who tend to fixate on technical details. As a young artist, Katayama was often condescended and questioned by these men.

“These people were more interested in how you handle the camera, your technique and knowledge, rather than what was in the picture, or what it was trying to express,” she says, and this ignited a fire inside her. She tested digital cameras by all the major brands, studied printing techniques, and experimented with darkroom processes. “If someone questions me now, I’m confident that I know so much more than them,” she grins.



Throughout the day, the artist constantly chews on gummy bears. “It’s not even like I absolutely love them, it’s just become a habit,” she shrugs. This is an understatement, because there are at least 30 identical prints of Haribo packaging dotted around the studio. Katayama’s love of the sweets dates back to when she was 18, and spent a few weeks in a homestay with the professor of aesthetics at Dusseldorf’s fine art university. The professor’s husband was a painter and he was always stress-eating Haribos.

“Before I left, he said he would take me to his favourite place. It turned out to be the Haribo shop. I kept one of the empty packets I bought that day, and took a photo of it,” she says. Almost 20 years later, Katayama still uses the image in her installations. “Haribos were there for me at an important turning point in my life,” she says. “I had no intention of becoming an artist back then, but I loved art. [The professor] said I should carry on in that path... Every time I see Haribos, it reminds me of that.”

Poignant but playful, this anecdote is emblematic of Katayama’s approach. Her work is always personal and is propelled by a genuine love and admiration for artistic expression, be it literature, painting, music, or her grandmother’s handmade garments. “Many people tell me I have so much courage, showing myself ‘as I am,’” says Katayama. “I’m not making art with that intention at all. It’s not about the rights of people with disabilities, it’s about the human condition.” In opening the doors to her world, adorned with lace, sequins, and glistening fairy lights, Katayama urges us to seek out the beauty in our own treasures and bodies.

[marikatayama.com](http://marikatayama.com)

TAGS: DISABILITY, EXHIBITION, IN THE STUDIO, INTERVIEW, JAPAN

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