

Japan Cuts offers a diverse snapshot of a nation's film bounty

By [Daniel Eagan](#) Jul 18, 2018

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The 12th edition of [Japan Cuts](#), running July 19-29, is the largest yet, with screenings of 28 features, including three world premieres. Over 20 filmmakers will appear during the festival, which covers documentaries and experimental films as well as mainstream features. Screenings take place at Japan Society (333 E. 47th Street in Manhattan).

"Our mission is to provide a diverse snapshot of cinematic activity in and around Japan over the past year," Joel Neville Anderson explains in a phone interview. "At the same time, we think about how we can bring films to New York that will be fun for Japanese ex-pats to see."

Anderson is one of three programmers for Japan Cuts, along with Aiko Masubuchi and Kazu Watanabe, who also curate other Japan Society film series throughout the year. Anderson estimates that the team screens upwards of 300 titles to assemble the Japan Cuts program.

"We really do try to emphasize 'in and around Japan,'" Anderson says. "We've stretched out a bit over the years to include voices, filmmakers from Japan working in other cultural contexts. So we have Asian-American films produced in North America, as well as a title produced in Liberia with an African cast and a largely Japanese crew."

Opening the series is *Ramen Shop* (July 19), directed by Singapore *auteur* Eric Khoo and starring Takumi Saitoh (both will appear at the screening). Saitoh, a popular star in Japan, can also be seen in *Last Winter, We Parted* (July 21), a thriller about an unsolved death in the art world. On top of that, the series will show Saitoh's directing debut, *blank 13* (July 20), a mix of drama and comedy centered on the funeral of a long-lost father who abandoned his family.

The series' centerpiece presentation is *Mori, The Artist's Habitat* (July 26), an idiosyncratic account of artist Morikazu Kumagai, who spent the last 30 years of his life almost entirely within his rural Ikebukuro home

and garden. Director Shuichi Okita uses pristine nature photography to imagine the inspiration behind Mori's work, and sprinkles the film with wry, deadpan humor.

The extraordinary actress Kirin Kiki, who plays the painter's wife Hideko in *Mori, The Artist's Habitat*, will be receiving the "Cut Above Award for Outstanding Performance in Film." Now 75, Kiki has collaborated with directors from Seijun Suzuki (*Pistol Opera*) to Hirokazu Kore-eda (*After the Storm*). Japan Cuts honors Kiki by screening *Still Walking* (July 27), Kore-eda's emotionally devastating drama about a family marking the anniversary of a son's death. Kiki's direct, powerful performances, skillful and endearing, make her one of world cinema's great presences.

The Japan Cuts programmers are on a remarkable streak. In 2016 the "Cut Above" award went to Lily Franky, another frequent Kore-eda collaborator. And the year before that, Sakura Ando won. This year the two performers joined Kiki in *Shoplifters*, Kore-eda's Palme d'Or winner at Cannes.

The series' closing film is *Hanagatami* (July 29), an unnerving adaptation of a 1937 novella about teenagers in an idyllic coastal town dealing with (or ignoring) the approaching Pacific War. Eighty-year-old director Nobuhiko Obayashi, who had been working on this project since the mid-'70s, uses his trademark special effects and quick editing to disorient both his characters and viewers.



Also in the retrospective section is a restored version of *Abnormal Family* (July 27), a 1984 title receiving its North American premiere. Directed by Masayuki Suo, who filmed the award-winning *Shall We Dance?* in 1996, *Abnormal Family* is part of a Japanese genre known as "pink films," soft-core sex dramas and comedies for adult audiences.

"Pink films created opportunities for young, independent-minded filmmakers," Anderson points out. "*Abnormal Family* screened at the Berlinale, but it's the kind of movie that's unlikely to be selected for the New York Film Festival or Tribeca."

Hollywood directors sometimes used similar paths into the industry, like Francis Ford Coppola, whose first feature was the 1962 soft-core comedy *Tonight for Sure*. The Japan Cuts programmers include several more explicit titles like the blood-soaked *Violence Voyager* (July 20); *Side Job* (July 22), in which a neglected daughter becomes a hotel prostitute; and *Call Boy* (July 23), a melodrama about a male escort service. And long-time provocateur Takeshi Kitano directs and stars in the stylized, hyper-violent *Outrage Coda* (July 28), the third entry in his organized crime series.

Anderson points to *Bleach* (July 28), a live-action adaptation of a blockbuster manga and anime series, as one of the more eagerly awaited titles in Japan Cuts. Director Shinsuke Sato will introduce the film and take part in a post-screening Q&A discussion.

Another distinctive, highly entertaining title is *Amiko* (July 29), a coming-of-age comedy made on a micro-budget by twenty-something director Yoko Yamanaka. Pitched at a slightly older demographic, *Tremble All You Want* (July 28) finds a young career woman obsessed with one guy (named "Ichi," or "One"), only to be asked on a date by another ("Ni," or "Two"). Akiko Ohku directed this adaptation of Risa Wataya's novel.

This year's Japan Cuts also addresses pressing social issues. In *Passage of Life* (July 21), director Akio Fujimoto uses non-actors to depict the problems undocumented Burmese face in contemporary Japanese society.

Titles in the documentary section are even more pointed. In *Toward a Common Tenderness* (July 22), director Kaori Oda confronts her own parents about her queer identity. And in the crowd-funded *Of Love & Law* (July 20), director Hikaru Toda looks at law cases being argued by Japan's first openly gay law firm.



Anderson is especially excited about *Sennan Asbestos Disaster* (July 22), a piece by Kazuo Hara, who will be attending along with his producer Sachiko Kobayashi and some of the participants in the film. Hara's *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* should be on "every documentary film syllabus," Anderson says. In it, Hara confronted pre-World War II colonialists to get them to admit to cannibalism and other atrocities.

"Hara started working in the 1970s, during a period of collectivist documentary groups," Anderson goes on. "He developed a vividly personal style of filmmaking in *Extreme Private Eros: Love Song 1974*, which was about his lingering fascination with his ex-wife, a feminist activist in a women's group in Okinawa fighting for the rights of sex workers who were victims of the U.S. military occupation."

Hara breaks conventional documentary rules about intervention and objectivity. Anderson believes *Sennan Asbestos Disaster* marks a real development as a filmmaker because he deals with a group of normal, everyday citizens instead of individual iconoclasts.

Anderson also singled out Japan Cuts' experimental titles. On July 27, the series offers a program of experimental shorts, including two by dancer and filmmaker Nao Yoshigai.

Japan Cuts offers a consistently strong, varied program with films New Yorkers cannot see anywhere else. While one or two titles from each year usually end up on Netflix or another streaming service, there's the real possibility that once the series is over, you may not be able to see them again.

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