

WILD ART

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Venture to Japan's islands or mountains to discover the creativity that flourishes in the most secluded of spaces.

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The sun is about to rise. I am lying flat on my back on a futon laid out upon a tatami mat floor, a cloud-like duvet pushed up to my chin to keep out the morning chill while my eyes stare wide open.

This does not mean that I am looking inane at a boring white ceiling while suffering from insomnia - fortunately the reality is a little more dreamlike. I am in fact gazing at a patch of slowly-awakening sky through a perfectly square skylight cut into the roof, created courtesy of the American artist James Turrell.

My encounter with the artwork above my head takes place at a location that is as unexpected as it is remote - inside the confines of the traditional wooden House of Light, created by Turrell among the snow-shrouded mountains of rural Niigata Prefecture in northwest Japan.

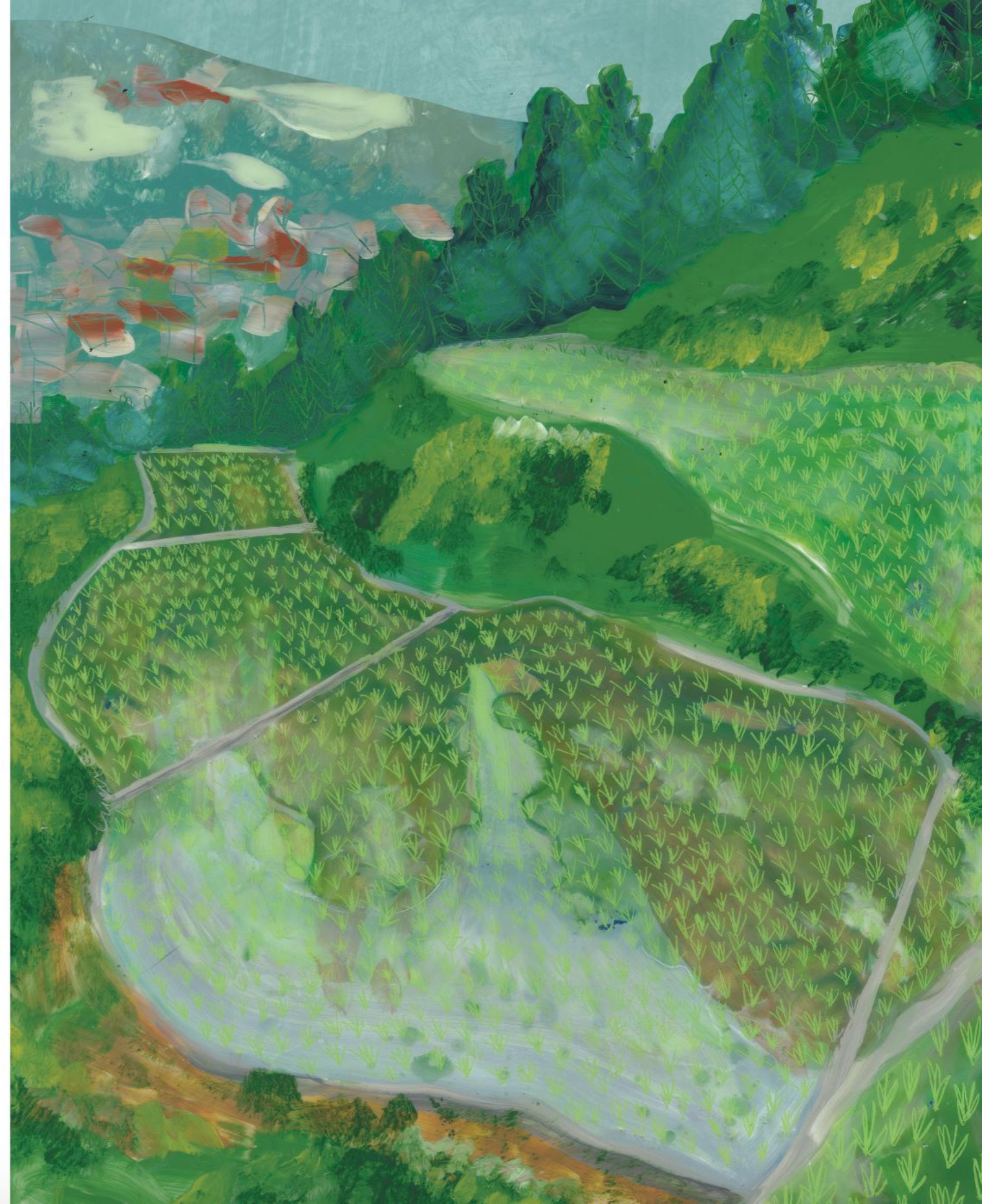
The isolated house alone is worth the journey from Tokyo (around two hours by train and taxi). There sits its clean-lined wooden architecture, the Turrell-style, rainbow-bright lighting installations throughout (complete with a light show at sunset and sunrise) plus its tatami mat rooms, bento box dinner deliveries and the atmospheric Japanese-style bath overlooking the snowy landscape. But these are not the the only reasons art-lover to travel to this far-flung

region: the area is home to one of Japan's biggest outdoor art projects, the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale.

Turrell's house is one of hundreds of high profile art projects, by artists from Japan and beyond, that are scattered across an impressive 760 square kilometre rural site (larger than the 23 wards of central Tokyo). And so stationed within and across rice fields, old wooden houses, abandoned schools and remote forests are countless surprise art installations, unexpected sculptures and explorative exhibitions, effectively transforming the entire region into a giant art treasure hunt.

Fortunately for Japanese art lovers, Echigo-Tsumari is not an isolated venture. A string of regional projects are revolutionising not only the way that art can be appreciated, strictly outside the traditional confines of a minimal inner city gallery, but also revitalising struggling rural communities.

This is no mean feat. Rural Japan is suffering from a depressingly long list of social issues. A rapidly ageing society, low birth and marriage rates plus an on-going exodus of young from rural to urban locations have resulted in an endless trail of ghost-like towns with shrinking populations, empty buildings and dwindling farming industries.





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Yet over the past decade Japan has emerged as something of a global pioneer of rural arts projects. Among them the most well known is perhaps Naoshima (a.k.a. 'The Art Island'), a tiny secluded fishing island in the southern Seto Inland Sea, an area dubbed the 'Mediterranean of Japan' due to its penchant for olive growing and temperate climate. This small island is the unlikely setting for a string of globally-acclaimed art projects, including several iconic minimal concrete museums by Tadao Ando (one of which famously houses a subterranean collection of Monet's 'Water Lilies' illuminated only by natural sunlight).

Naoshima was, serendipitously I like to think, one of the first places I visited in Japan over a decade ago. I recall standing on the deck of the ferry as it slowly chugged into Naoshima's port and being transfixed by the sight of a vast spotted red pumpkin by the sea (by the cult artist Yayoi Kusama of course), with several elderly fishermen sitting next to it smoking nonchalantly. I was instantly smitten.

Today Naoshima is one of 12 small islands that take part in the Setouchi Triennale, a major event in the Japanese art calendar, although many projects are open permanently making it a year-round Mecca for art-lovers. On more recent visits, I have eaten fish burgers alongside local grannies and glasses-wearing hipsters alike in a tiny garage-turned-cafe; cycled across nearby Teshima Island with my baby daughter

strapped to my back to revel in a large minimal white space, inspired by a drop of water, by artist Rei Naito and architect Ryue Nishizawa; been silenced by the primordial and meditative minimalism of an Ando-designed museum devoted to artist Lee Ufan; and recorded my heartbeat for Christian Boltanski in a small building on an empty beach.

There is perhaps one person who is the biggest force behind Japan's rural art revolution; the no-nonsense, chain-smoking, sharp-as-a-tack and deeply insightful Fram Kitagawa, who runs Art Front Gallery in Tokyo's Daikanyama district and is the Founding Director of both Triennale events in Setouchi and Echigo-Tsumari. Explaining the rich creative appeal of staging art events in unconventional settings, Kitagawa observes: "In rural Japan, there remains a hybrid culture of different ages, ranging from the ancient Jōmon period (a hunting and gathering society) to the current contemporary age. It is fascinating to see how artists think and respond to these farming villages which expose layers of different times."

Many of these once deathly quiet rural spots have been completely transformed by these events - a surge in tourism has bolstered local economies and a small but determinedly growing number of young creatives are defying demographic trends by choosing to settle in areas such as Naoshima and Niigata, triggering a previously rare sense of optimism.

But it has not always been a smooth path. I recall how Kitagawa once told me, as we sat in a defunct but art-filled school in Niigata, that when he first proposed the idea of Echigo-Tsumari every politician in the region was opposed to it and it took four years and 2,000 meetings before they changed their minds (the event first launched in 2000 and the Triennale has grown expansively since then). "One challenge is that local people don't always immediately recognise art as a means of discovering and exposing the potentials and charms of life, but just as decoration," says Kitagawa. "It is enjoyable to see the process of local people changing and discovering the role of art. I like to do things that provide pleasure to local people and give them pride in their own communities."

For artists there are perhaps few more refreshing challenges than taking their creative processes outside a conventional gallery context and being dropped into the middle of remote Japan. Leandro Erlich, the Argentinean artist, knows this all too well, having created several bewitchingly magic-like art installations both in Niigata and Megijima, a small mountainous island near Naoshima. "It is always a challenge to display art outside art spaces," he confides. "But it is indeed in this action that resides a great meaning. Art outside its comfort zone looks to engage the community and this encounter is fresh and spontaneous ... The highest reward is for sure to be able to create a

bond with the public. We are able to communicate without words with people from very different cultural backgrounds. I think the positive impact arises when we stop thinking about rural or urban communities. The positive action is to inspire, to surprise, to produce emotions on people despite their background."

Mounir Fatmi, the Moroccan artist based in Paris whose work has also been showcased on Awashima in the Setouchi Triennale, adds that "exhibiting on this island is like being part of a family. It is very interesting for rural communities to see works by artists from all over the world ... It also shows that the whole world is small and not just an island. I really like this connection between the global and the local, the world and the island, the whole humanity and just an individual person."

As I lie on my futon in the wooden house in the mountains of Niigata, the clouds rolling across the brightening morning sky at a deliciously slow and unrushed pace, it's clearly a moment to be treasured. And, bearing in mind the rise of such projects, hopefully it will become one of many more unexpected art memories to be enjoyed across rural Japan in the future, be it up a mountain, by the sea or among the rice fields.

setouchi-artfest.jp
echigo-tsumari.jp
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