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Research Article

Rethinking *Nihonga* from Okinawa: Transmission, Institutionalization, and Japanese Art History

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Abstract

This article reconsiders *nihonga* (Japanese-style painting) through the case of Okinawa. While often framed as the bearer of "Japanese tradition," *nihonga* emerged as a modern institutional category shaped by state policy and art education. In Okinawa, its transmission followed a discontinuous trajectory marked by annexation, war, and delayed institutionalization. Through an analysis of works by Taira Yūki (b. 1989), Nizoe Marina (b. 1993), and Kyan Chie (b. 1969), this article demonstrates how contemporary artists engage and reconfigure *nihonga* from within. Their practices reveal the genre not as a stable inheritance, but as a historically mediated framework shaped by uneven transmission and institutional structures.

Keywords: *Nihonga*; Okinawan Art; Transmission; Institutionalization; Japanese Art History

Introduction

A symmetrical tableau unfolds across a patterned ground in Nizoe Marina's *Mermaid Tomb* (2018): peacocks flank a central dugong, lotus blossoms rise in saturated pinks, and butterflies drift across a field reminiscent of *bingata* (Ryukyuan stencil-dyed) textiles (Figure 1).

Rendered in mineral pigments on silk, the work clearly draws on the material language of *nihonga*. At the same time, its chromatic density, cosmological structure, and patterned surface sit somewhat uneasily with the idea of the genre as the bearer of a continuous "Japanese tradition," particularly when viewed from Okinawa's distinct historical and cultural context. To approach this tension, this article shifts attention away from questions of technique or lineage and instead considers how *nihonga* has been historically constituted as a category. Satō Dōshin has shown that modern "art" in Japan emerged through the interplay of state policy, artistic practice, and institutional formation within which distinctions such as *nihonga* and *yōga* (Western-style painting) took shape (2011). Kitazawa similarly argues that *bijutsu* (fine art) did not designate a pre-existing domain but emerged historically through the reorganization of visual practices and ways of seeing (Kitazawa 1989; see also Kitazawa 2014: 229–30). Chelsea Foxwell, in turn, demonstrates how *nihonga* developed in relation to changing audiences and exhibitionary contexts, as artists reformulated pictorial practices under new conditions of display (2015).

More recently, Kitazawa Noriaki has argued that reconsidering *nihonga* from the perspective of East Asia enables it to be understood beyond the framework of national art history and within broader regional artistic relationships (Kitazawa 2020: 1–22). Amano Kazuo likewise suggests that *nihonga* should be examined not only through inherited traditions but also through its modern relationships with China, Korea, and Taiwan, enabling it to be understood as part of a wider East Asian pictorial culture (Amano 2020: 161). Building on Kitazawa Noriaki's characterization of *nihonga* as a "creole painting" (Kitazawa 2015), Furuta Ryō likewise reconsiders *nihonga* as a historically constituted formation rather than the continuation of an unbroken native tradition (Furuta 2018: 4). Taken together, these studies suggest that *nihonga* is better understood not as the transmission of a continuous national tradition but as a historically constituted and relational category whose formation can be reconsidered within wider East Asian artistic histories.

Japan annexed the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1879, at a moment when the modern category of *bijutsu* was still taking shape and *nihonga* was emerging as a pedagogical and exhibitionary genre. At the time of annexation, Okinawa already possessed a well-established painting tradition rooted in the court culture of the Ryukyu Kingdom. As Hirakawa Nobuyuki has shown, Ryukyuan painting developed within distinctive courtly and governmental structures and evolved through sustained exchanges with China and the wider East Asian world.

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Figure 1: Nizoe Marina, *Mermaid Tomb*, 2018. Color on silk, 116 × 200 cm. Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Art Museum.

(Hirakawa 2022, 2024). Kobayashi Junko, in turn, has traced how this tradition was transformed under the modern Japanese art education and exhibition system after the dissolution of the Ryukyu Kingdom (Kobayashi 2022). The introduction of *nihonga* to Okinawa thus formed part of a broader process of political incorporation. Yet this did not result in continuous institutional support comparable to that of mainland Japan. Although individual artists practiced Japanese-style painting in the prewar period, the genre did not consolidate into a sustained local lineage supported by academies, exhibition systems, or dense teacher–student networks. The devastation of 1945, followed by the period of U.S. administration, further disrupted artistic infrastructure. When the Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts established a *nihonga* program in 1986, it introduced an already codified academic discipline grounded in the study of traditional materials, techniques, and the copying of classical works while encouraging students to develop their own contemporary artistic practice.[1]

The Okinawan case offers a different perspective on how artistic tradition is historically constituted. In mainland contexts, art historical narratives have often constructed *nihonga*—however selectively—as a continuous lineage linking Edo-period painting to modern institutions. Even in institutions such as the Tokyo Fine Arts School, where instructors trained in Edo-period lineages—including the Kanō, Tosa, and Maruyama-Shijō schools—held key positions, these traditions were not simply transmitted but actively reconfigured within new pedagogical and institutional frameworks. Figures such as Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908) played a central role in redefining certain Edo-period painting traditions within modern institutional contexts, contributing to the formation of *nihonga* as a distinct category.[2]

In Okinawa, by contrast, *nihonga* developed through the interaction of an existing painting tradition with processes of introduction, interruption, and later institutionalization. These conditions do not indicate a lack of tradition; they reflect the specific historical circumstances that gave rise to the medium's distinctive historical trajectory (Kobayashi 2022). Within this context, contemporary Okinawan artists continue to engage with *nihonga* as a practice shaped by both material and historical constraints. Their works bring local materials, cosmologies, and historical experience into dialogue with established *nihonga* materials, techniques, and painting practices, inviting a reconsideration of how *nihonga* itself has been understood in Okinawa. Ryukyuan red clay, coral limestone, and handmade island papers enter the pictorial surface; in some cases, artists incorporate reclaimed soil directly into the work. The painted ground becomes a site where layered histories—annexation, war, occupation, and reversion—intersect.

This article, therefore, approaches *nihonga* in Okinawa not as a locally inherited tradition or simply as a postwar invention, but as a category introduced through imperial expansion, transmitted unevenly, and only later consolidated. The question, then, is less what *nihonga* is than how it has been formed, transmitted, and reconfigured. Focusing on the practices of Taira Yūki (b. 1989), Nizoe Marina (b. 1993), and Kyan Chie (b. 1969), the following sections examine how contemporary artists engage and transform the medium from within. Their works reposition *nihonga* within wider Okinawan and East Asian artistic histories, demonstrating that *nihonga* is not a fixed national tradition but a historically contingent artistic formation, continually reconfigured through artistic practice.

Historical conditions of *nihonga* in Okinawa

Any consideration of contemporary *nihonga* in Okinawa begins with the historical conditions under which the

[1] Since its establishment in 1986, the *nihonga* program at Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts has been staffed predominantly by graduates of the Tokyo University of the Arts, reflecting the close institutional relationship between the two programs. This observation is based on university records, interviews with faculty members conducted by the author during a research visit on May 8, 2026, and direct observation of *nihonga* classes.

[2] Ernest Fenollosa's elevation of Kanō painting as a model for modern Japanese art, and his support for artists such as Kanō Hōgai (1828–1888), whose works combined traditional subjects with experimental compositions (for example, *Niō sokki*), illustrate how premodern pictorial forms were reconfigured in response to new aesthetic and institutional conditions (Foxwell 2015: 9–98).

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category emerged and the routes through which it was introduced and later institutionalized. *Nihonga* was consolidated in the late nineteenth century through the institutional reforms of the Meiji period. The establishment of the Tokyo Fine Arts School in 1887 and the development of state-sponsored exhibition systems formalized the distinction between *nihonga* and *yōga*. This distinction did not merely describe stylistic difference; it organized artistic production within newly centralized educational and administrative frameworks, shaping *nihonga* as a modern academic genre.

Prior to this formation, painting practices in the Ryukyu Kingdom were neither unified under a single category nor organized within a national art system. As Nishimura Sadao, an Okinawan artist and scholar, notes, the term "Ryukyuan painting" is itself a retrospective designation, reflecting later efforts to classify Okinawan visual culture within modern art historical frameworks (2009). Painting in the Ryukyu Kingdom developed within courtly, administrative, and diplomatic structures. Painters were affiliated with institutions such as the Kaizuri Bugyōsho (Office of Lacquerware), a royal government office responsible for the production of lacquerware, dyed textiles, inscribed plaques, and architectural decoration.[3] Within this institutional framework, they produced works that fulfilled ceremonial and political functions, including bird-and-flower paintings, royal portraits (*ogoe*), and images used in court ritual and diplomatic exchange.

The formation of this visual culture must be understood in relation to Ryukyu's position within overlapping political orders. Following the Satsuma invasion of 1609, the Ryukyu Kingdom became subordinate to the Satsuma domain. After the establishment of formal diplomatic relations with Qing China in 1644, the kingdom maintained tributary relations with the Qing court. Within this political framework, painting functioned as a form of diplomacy, mediating between Chinese expectations of classical continuity and Japanese demands for exoticized or imported imagery.

The Ryukyuan court actively organized the transmission of artistic knowledge, dispatching painters to Fujian, where they studied with Chinese painters such as Sun Yi (ca. 1638–after 1712) and acquired techniques associated with bird-and-flower painting, including the use of mineral pigments and decorative compositional clarity. Documented cases include missions in 1683, when court painters were sent to study with multiple Fujian-based painters, as well as later examples of officially sponsored training in China.[4] These techniques were subsequently reworked within the Ryukyuan court and extended into craft production. Knowledge became embedded within court structures and circulated among officials, all without forming lineage-based schools comparable to those in Japan. Stylistically, this body of work encompassed landscapes, bird-and-flower painting, and figure painting, including royal portraiture. The latter, known as *ogoe*, incorporated not only Ming and Qing court attire but also iconographic elements aligned with Confucian models of rulership.[5] Such works were inseparable from the ideological and ritual frameworks of the court and cannot be understood as autonomous genres in the modern sense.

Ryukyuan court painting should not be understood simply as a direct precursor of *nihonga*. Instead, it constituted a distinct pictorial tradition that provides the historical context for understanding the later introduction of *nihonga* to Okinawa. This historical configuration challenges any attempt to align Ryukyuan painting with later categories such as *nihonga* along the same developmental trajectory as painting traditions in mainland Japan. Such a framework risks obscuring the distinct historical and cultural conditions under which Ryukyuan painting evolved. While certain material continuities—most notably the use of mineral pigments—can be identified, the epistemological and educational foundations of the two traditions differ fundamentally. Rather than emerging as a genre within a national art system, Ryukyuan painting functioned as a court-based and diplomatically inflected practice sustained through transregional exchange.

The annexation of the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1879 incorporated Okinawa into the Japanese state at a time when modern cultural categories were in the process of consolidation. Art education formed part of these broader processes of administrative integration. In the 1890s, instructors trained in mainland Japan were dispatched to Okinawa; among them, Yamaguchi Zuiu (1868–1933) is often identified as the first formally appointed teacher of *nihonga* to arrive from Tokyo (Kobayashi 2022: 36). Through such figures, Japanese-style painting was introduced into local educational contexts as a genre already structured within metropolitan institutions. Individual practitioners emerged within this framework, without the continuation of a sustained local lineage. Among them, Yamada Shinzan (1885–1977), a graduate of the Tokyo Fine Arts School, played a formative role in the early development of *nihonga* in Okinawa.

Born in Tsuboya, Naha, to a Shuri aristocratic family, Yamada's early life was marked by instability before he relocated to Tokyo. He entered the Tokyo Fine Arts School in 1906, where he initially trained in sculpture before turning to *nihonga*. There he studied under the history painter Kobori Tomoto (1864–1931), later becoming part of his household through marriage. Yamada's artistic formation unfolded primarily within the institutional structures of mainland Japanese art (Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Art Museum n.d.). His career—spanning craft practice, academic training, and movement between Okinawa and Tokyo—situates him within broader networks of artistic circulation. While originally from Okinawa, he developed his career within the academic frameworks of mainland Japanese art, eventually participating in its central exhibitionary and academic circles.

[3] Higa Chōken (1899–1945) provides a wealth of information about the painters who worked for the Kaizuri Bugyōsho (Higa Chōken, 1925a and 1925b).

[4] In 1683, Shō Shiken and Sa Heishin were sent to Fujian, where they studied with painters including Wang Diaoding, Xie Tianyou, and Sun Yi (Higa 1925a: 429–30). Another painter, Go Shiken, was dispatched in 1703 and trained under Sun Yi and others (Higa 1925a: 434). Such missions reflect Ryukyuan court patronage of Chinese-style painting and the high prestige accorded to Chinese-trained Ryukyuan painters in early modern Japan.

[5] For the most recent comprehensive study of royal portraits (*ogoe*) in the Ryukyu Kingdom, see Hirakawa (2024).

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Figure 2: Yamada Shinzan, *Establishment of the Ryukyu Clan* (*Ryūkyū han setchi*), No. 26 from the series *Mural Paintings in the Meiji Memorial Picture Gallery* (*Meiji Jingū Gaien Seitoku Kinen Kaigakan Hekiga*), 1928. Color on paper, 300 × 270 cm. Meiji Memorial Picture Gallery, Meiji Jingu Gaien, Tokyo. Donated by the City of Shuri.

Yamada Shinzan's *Establishment of the Ryukyu Clan* (Figure 2), depicting the transformation of the Ryukyu Kingdom into the Ryukyu Domain in 1872, seven years before its formal annexation as Okinawa Prefecture, was produced for the Meiji Memorial Picture Gallery (Seitoku Kinen Kaigakan). The work presents a carefully constructed historical tableau organized along a stabilizing horizontal axis. The harbor, vessels, and gathered crowd extend laterally across the picture plane, while vertical elements such as masts and banners introduce a measured rhythm. Spatial depth is constructed through layered planes rather than strict linear perspective, and the figures are arranged in balanced groupings that minimize visual tension. The use of mineral pigments contributes to the painting's bright, luminous coloration, while the carefully controlled surface creates an atmosphere approaching celebration, evoking the mood of a festive occasion. From an Okinawan perspective, however, this visual brightness appears strikingly incongruous with the historical reality it depicts.

These formal decisions regulate movement, minimize tension, and render the historical scene stable and intelligible. Yet the subject itself carries a distinct political charge. The establishment of the Ryukyu domain marks not merely an administrative transition but the dissolution of the Ryukyu Kingdom and its incorporation into the Japanese nation-state. In Yamada's painting, this transformation does not appear as a rupture or conflict but as an ordered and ceremonial event. The work thus reconfigures history visually, presenting annexation as ordered and continuous. What becomes visible is not the violence of political transformation but its integration into a coherent historical sequence. *Nihonga* here functions not only as an artistic medium but as a representational framework through which political change is aestheticized and made governable. Yamada did not train a formal cohort of students, and no sustained pedagogical lineage developed from his practice. His influence appears to have been more indirect. Kinjō Yasutarō (1911–1999), for example, is understood to have studied Yamada's work independently rather than as his formal pupil.[6]

The Okinawa Art Exhibition (Okiten), established in 1949, became one of the few regional institutions through which *nihonga* remained publicly visible in the postwar period, even in the absence of formal educational structures. Although the exhibition provided an important venue for artists working in *nihonga* from its inaugural exhibition onward, it did not generate an institutional density comparable to that of mainland Japan (Okinawa Times 1949–1966). The continuity of *nihonga* in Okinawa, therefore, depended largely on individual artists rather than stable institutional structures. Alongside Kinjō, painters such as Yanagi Kōkan (1909–1992), who became widely known for his Ryukyuan *bijinga*, continued to produce and exhibit *nihonga* after the war.[7] Together, these individual practices and regional exhibition networks sustained the medium despite the absence of continuous academies or teacher–student lineages.

This fragility became more pronounced in the postwar period. By the early Showa era (1926–1989), the generation of painters associated with the Ryukyuan court had already disappeared, and no comparable succession had emerged. The Battle of Okinawa and the subsequent period of U.S. administration further disrupted cultural infrastructure, producing a discontinuity in artistic transmission. While practices such as lacquerware and textile production remained tied to locally embedded forms of knowledge, modern artistic fields were reorganized under new institutional conditions (Kobayashi 2022: 41).

Even before Okinawa's reversion to Japan in 1972, art education was re-established at the University of the Ryukyus under U.S. administration. Artists such as Adaniya Masayoshi (1921–1969), Ashimine Kanemasa (1916–1993), and Tamanaha Seikichi (1918–1984) played central roles in shaping postwar artistic practice (Tomizawa-Kay 2019: 110). However, this framework also reveals a significant absence: *nihonga* was not institutionally represented within the university. Instruction centered primarily on *yōga* and sculpture, reflecting both the training of faculty and the broader cultural conditions of the period. As a result, the conditions necessary for the sustained development of *nihonga*—including specialized training and continuous academic support—were absent.

A decisive shift occurred with the establishment of the Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts in 1986. For the first time, *nihonga* was incorporated into a public higher education system in Okinawa as a formalized discipline. This marked

[6] Kinjō Yasutarō is said to have entered the studio of Yamada Shinzan in 1930, where he trained in both *nihonga* and sculpture (Gushiken 2001: 48, 53).

[7] On Yanagi Kōkan, see his obituary by Uehara Seuiyū (1992).

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not the revival of an interrupted tradition but its initial institutionalization within the region (Kobayashi 2022: 41). Faculty trained in mainland *nihonga* programs introduced established materials, techniques, and compositional approaches, situating students within a framework whose standards had been defined elsewhere. The program was founded on the conventional curriculum of mainland academic *nihonga* and centered on traditional materials, copying practices, and technical training—a structure that continues to underpin the curriculum today.[8] More recently, teaching and research have expanded to engage with Ryukyuan materials, pigments, and painting traditions while remaining within the framework of academic *nihonga*.[9] From the late twentieth century onward, shifts in Okinawa's social and political context—including ongoing tensions surrounding U.S. military bases—prompted some artists to reflect critically on the implications of working in a medium associated with Japanese cultural identity (Ibid.). Ryukyuan painting traditions, particularly those informed by artistic exchanges with China, are explored in the following section. By the early twenty-first century, *nihonga* in Okinawa had come to occupy a position marked by multiple historical layers: annexation and initial transmission, limited prewar practice, wartime rupture, postwar reorganization, and eventual institutionalization. Rather than being sustained through stable institutional lineages, its continued development depended on the efforts of individual artists; regional exhibition networks; and, eventually, formal academic training. In this context, *nihonga* occupies a different historical and institutional position in Okinawa from that in mainland Japan. Its formation has depended on institutional structures—including education, exhibition systems, and art-historical narratives—that developed differently from those in mainland Japan. The issue, therefore, is not simply whether *nihonga* exists in Okinawa, but how it has been historically constituted there and how its meanings and authority have been negotiated under these particular historical conditions.

Tradition, invention, and the problem of transmission

The historical conditions outlined above raise a broader question: how is "tradition" constituted and understood in relation to *nihonga* in Okinawa? The term "tradition" appears frequently in discussions of *nihonga*, yet its meaning is often assumed rather than critically examined. In mainland Japanese art history, *nihonga* has been framed as the preservation—or modern reformulation—of an indigenous pictorial lineage.[10] Even where its modern institutional formation is acknowledged, this framework tends to be reconciled with narratives of continuity. Recent scholarship has instead shifted attention to how such notions of "tradition" were historically articulated, institutionalized, and maintained (Conant 1995; Sato 2011; Foxwell 2015).

As Eric Hobsbawm defines it, "invented tradition" refers to practices that establish continuity with a suitable historic past through repetition and institutional reinforcement (Hobsbawm, 2000: 1). Drawing on Hobsbawm's concept of invented tradition, Kitazawa Noriaki argues that *nihonga* should not be understood as the direct continuation of a single indigenous painting tradition (Kitazawa 2010: 254). Rather, it emerged through the historical reorganization of diverse premodern painting schools—including the Kanō, Tosa, and Maruyama-Shijō traditions—within the broader project of constructing modern Japanese art and the nation-state. In this sense, *nihonga* is better understood as a historically constructed category than as the natural continuation of a premodern artistic tradition (Ibid.). Such traditions are not simply fabricated; they are stabilized through educational systems, exhibition frameworks, and historiographic narratives. The institutional formation of modern *nihonga* in mainland Japan may be understood as broadly corresponding to this model, as diverse pictorial practices were reorganized into a coherent genre capable of representing "Japanese tradition" within modern institutional contexts. The Okinawan case, however, requires a different account. This distinction is not merely terminological but affects how artistic practice, pedagogy, and historical interpretations are understood in Okinawa. While mainland *nihonga* was shaped through processes of selective continuity, in Okinawa, it was introduced as an already codified discipline following annexation, and only later was it consolidated within academic institutions.

In Okinawa, however, the question of tradition takes a different form. *Nihonga* did not develop through the reorganization of local painting lineages. It was introduced following annexation as an already codified discipline and became formally established only later through higher education. Although individual painters such as Yamada Shinzan practiced *nihonga* in the prewar period, no sustained pedagogical or institutional lineage developed locally. This developmental trajectory continues to shape contemporary artistic practice in Okinawa. *Nihonga* is, therefore, encountered less as a locally inherited tradition than as a discipline transmitted through modern institutions and reinterpreted within Okinawa's own social and cultural context. Its materials and techniques carry established art-historical associations, yet these cannot be separated from the circumstances of their introduction and institutionalization. Tradition, therefore, operates not as inherited continuity but

[8] The undergraduate and postgraduate *nihonga* programs at Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts emphasize the study of traditional materials and techniques, copying of classical works, and the development of contemporary artistic practice. The program's approach is detailed on the Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts website at https://www.okigei.ac.jp/details/arts/painting.html (accessed July 5, 2026).

[9] This assessment is based on interviews with Associate Professor Kita Yoshihiro that were conducted during the author's research visit to Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts on May 8, 2026, together with observation of *nihonga* classes and discussions concerning Ryukyuan pigments, Ryukyuan painting traditions, and related research activities that took place at that time.

[10] Modern *nihonga* came to be articulated as a form of national painting. From the late 1870s onward, it was positioned as a "Japanese painting" that would stand alongside—and in opposition to—Western-style painting, thereby emerging as a newly constituted tradition. This development was led by Ernest Fenollosa and Okakura Kakuzō (1863–1913), with painters such as Kanō Hōgai and Hashimoto Gahō (1835–1908) playing central roles (Satō 2011: 196, 302, 315–16).

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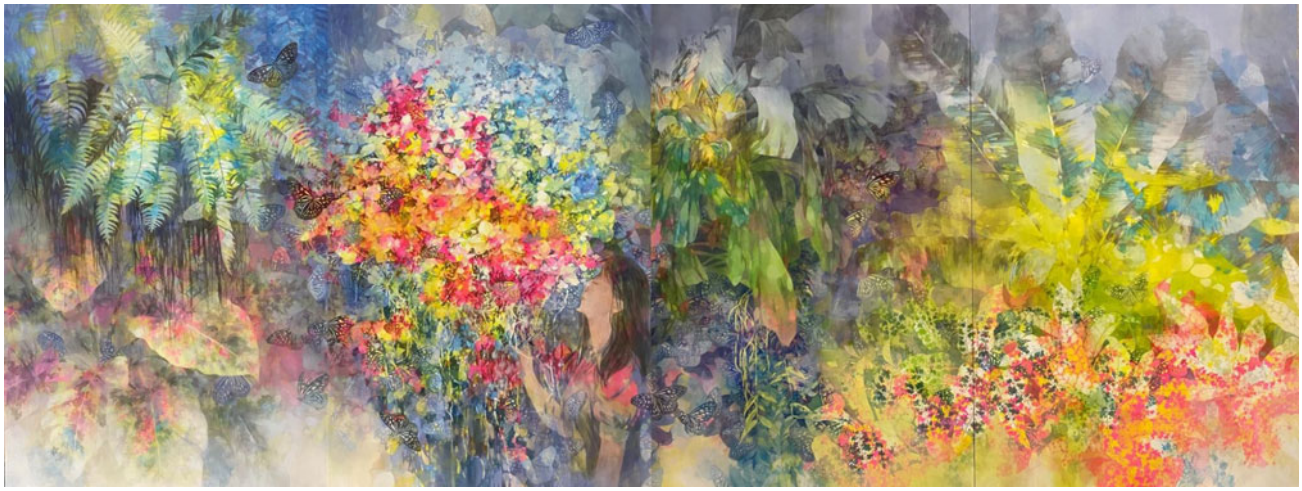


Figure 3: Taira Yūki, *Poetry of Miniature Garden*, 2020. Color and *kanreisha* on paper, 194 × 521.2 cm. Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Art Museum.

as a set of conventions continually renegotiated through contemporary painting.

Contemporary *nihonga* in Okinawa

The historical conditions outlined above provide the context for understanding contemporary *nihonga* in Okinawa. The following case studies examine how Taira Yūki, Nizoe Marina, and Kyan Chie engage the medium in different ways, each offering a distinct response to its materials, histories, and institutional legacy.

Taira Yūki: layered vision and the question of confinement

Taira Yūki has often been asked why she works in *nihonga* in Okinawa. She speaks about *nihonga* above all in terms of its material qualities—the luminosity of mineral pigments, the transparency of layered color, and the tactile qualities of the medium—rather than as a tradition to be preserved (personal communication, July 4, 2026). This question encapsulates one of the central tensions addressed by her work. While working within the material discipline of *nihonga*—mineral pigments, *nikawa* (glue), silk, and paper—she employs the medium to investigate how vision is structured, mediated, and experienced. Unlike oil paint, which permits immediate coverage, *nihonga* requires the gradual accumulation of translucent layers, and Taira's work demonstrates how these material qualities become integral to her exploration of vision and perception.

In *Poetry of Miniature Garden* (2020) (Figure 3), produced during the COVID-19 lockdown, Taira depicts a compact subtropical garden filled with croton leaves and *ōgomadara* butterflies. At first glance, the scene appears lush and immersive. Closer viewing, however, reveals a crucial intervention: a layer of *kanreisha*, a thin open-weave cotton cloth, adhered to the paper surface. By diffusing light and softening contours, this translucent layer produces an atmosphere in which forms never fully stabilize. Through these techniques, the work operates as a layered field of looking, foregrounding the overlapping processes through which the image is constructed. Its panoramic horizontal format encourages lateral scanning instead of a centered perspective, aligning the act of viewing with slow, distributed attention. Chromatic intensity concentrates around a dense croton mass, where high-chroma mineral pigments—pinks, yellows, greens, and blues—accumulate and dissolve at their edges, reinforcing the instability of perception produced through layering. Leaves oscillate between description and dispersal, at times sharply articulated, at others fragmenting into various colors.

The use of *kanreisha* is central to this instability, not only as a material device but also as a way of shaping perception through layers of visual mediation. It creates a secondary optical layer across the surface, so that butterflies and leaves appear at different degrees of clarity and opacity, as if suspended at varying depths. Some forms register sharply, while others recede into haze. A human figure appears near the center of the composition yet remains partially obscured within the layered field. Rather than functioning as a stable focal point, the figure is absorbed into the surrounding vegetation, its contours softened and at times dissolved into the chromatic atmosphere of the work. Figure and vegetation thus occupy the same pictorial space, resisting a clear separation between subject and environment. The "miniature garden" emerges less as a self-contained scene than as a porous visual field in which perception remains unsettled.

This condition of mediated vision becomes more explicit in *Biotope* (2023) (Figure 4), where a white diamond lattice overlays the pictorial field, turning vision into a series of repeated passages through a sequence of frames. Unlike the atmospheric mediation of *Miniature Garden*, the frame here is structural and unavoidable. The grid sits optically in front of the image, articulating the surface while the vegetation recedes behind it, producing a tension between depth and flatness. Vision no longer proceeds in a continuous manner but unfolds through segmentation across the surface.

Behind the lattice, dense foliage, chromatic clusters, and dispersed butterflies form a layered ecology. Attention is distributed across compartments, encouraging lateral

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Figure 4: Taira Yūki, *Biotope*, 2023. Color and *kanreisha* on paper, 162 × 376.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

movement instead of a fixed focus. Pale ripple motifs—resembling *hamon*—circulate across the lower register. For Taira, such ripples are not merely decorative. They suggest memory, events, and their aftereffects: traces of what has occurred, registered as lingering disturbances across the surface (Taira 2023: 61). The vivid motifs that appear in the present may thus be understood as emerging from accumulated layers of memory—fragments that surface, fade, and reappear.

Within this structure, the act of seeing is inseparable from framing. The lattice evokes a window or screen through which the landscape is encountered but also points to the conditions that organize such viewing. As Taira has noted, these framing devices—diagonal lattices and greenhouse-like windows—function metaphorically, suggesting both the constructed image of "Okinawa" and its boundaries, which are defined by the presence of U.S. military bases. Vision here is not simply filtered but conditioned by overlapping historical and spatial forces. Taira's work does not stabilize a view of Okinawa but makes visible the processes through which such a view is produced (personal communication, April 12, 2026). Materially, *Biotope* retains the use of mineral pigments and *kanreisha*, but mediation shifts from atmospheric filtering to architectural framing. The work does not offer a unified viewpoint. Vision unfolds through a series of segmented passages across the surface, requiring the viewer to move continuously without arriving at a single, stable image.

If *Biotope* distributes vision through a continuous grid, *Garden* (2025) (Figure 5) restructures it through vertical segmentation. Composed as a sequence of narrow panels, this work presents the landscape as adjacent yet discontinuous views. Vegetation spills across panel boundaries, producing tension between division and continuity. A gradual chromatic modulation—from dense greens to lighter, more diffused tones—guides perception across the segmented field. This shift produces a rhythm of compression and release, rather than describing a literal transition. Depth is suggested through overlapping planes, yet segmentation prevents full immersion. The garden is encountered through intervals.

Across these works, Taira develops a consistent pictorial strategy. Layering, mesh, framing, and chromatic modulation reshape the perception of Okinawan nature in *nihonga*. The characteristic luminosity of the medium is retained, yet the painted surface becomes a site where acts of looking are slowed, interrupted, and redirected. Taira prefers not to describe her practice in terms of the transmission of *nihonga* tradition. She instead characterizes it as a process of *kangen* (還元: "return" or "restoration"), drawing on techniques encountered through her study of Ryukyuan painters such as Yamaguchi Sōki (Goshiken, 1672–1743) and Sadoyama Anken (Mō Chōki, 1806–1865) and incorporating them into her own artistic practice. For Taira, *kangen* refers not to a return to tradition but to the creative reworking of earlier pictorial techniques within new historical and material contexts. Her paintings, therefore, do not seek to reproduce an inherited lineage; they bring earlier techniques into dialogue with contemporary Okinawa through new forms of painting (personal communication, July 4, 2026).

Nizoe Marina: cosmology, lineage, and genealogical redirection

Unlike Taira, who explains her practice primarily through the material qualities of *nihonga*, Nizoe Marina situates her work within the broader East Asian tradition of animal glue-based painting, referring to this shared material tradition as *nikawa-e* (膠絵). Although she trained in the *nihonga* program at Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts, she regards the medium not as exclusively Japanese but as one regional expression of a wider East Asian pictorial culture. As she notes, in contemporary Japan such practices are generally taught within the institutional framework of *nihonga* (personal communication, July 4, 2026). Her position resonates with Amano Kazuo's observation that glue-based painting constitutes a material tradition shared across East Asia, even though it has developed into different artistic forms in Japan, China, Korea, and Taiwan (Amano 2020: 161).

Nizoe identifies herself as a *Ryūkyū gaka* ("Ryukyuan painter") rather than a "*nihonga* painter." This self-

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Figure 5: Taira Yūki, *Garden*, 2025. Color and *kanreisha* on paper, 50 × 445 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

designation is significant. Rather than rejecting *nihonga*, it relocates her artistic genealogy away from a nationally bounded category and toward the historical painting traditions of the Ryukyu Kingdom and their wider East Asian connections. Silk, mineral pigments, and animal glue do not function in her work solely as the canonical materials of *nihonga*. They also evoke the painting practices of the Ryukyu Kingdom, the circulation of pigments through Fuzhou, and the maritime networks that once linked Okinawa to China and Southeast Asia. Material continuity remains, but the line of reference changes.

Color plays a decisive role in this repositioning. Nizoe's surfaces are marked by chromatic density: deep reds produced with *enji*, a traditional crimson pigment derived from lac insects that may also have been used in the Ryukyu Kingdom; indigo associated with Ryukyuan dye traditions; and mineral greens that absorb and diffuse subtropical light.[11] Through these materials, she seeks to reconstruct, as far as possible, the material conditions of earlier Ryukyuan painting practices. Rather than creating illusionistic depth, layered mineral pigments generate a luminous, atmospheric surface in which color itself becomes a primary means of structuring pictorial space. This chromatic and genealogical logic is fully visible in *Mermaid Tomb* (2018) (Figure 1). Painted on silk with mineral pigments, the work constructs a symmetrical tableau centered on a dugong. Peacocks flank the animal on either side, lotus blossoms rise across the middle register, and butterflies and a tortoise animate the surrounding field. The frontal clarity recalls East Asian screen painting, while the constellation of motifs reflects Nizoe's reconfiguration of Ryukyuan cosmology and visual culture.

The dugong, historically revered in the Aragusuku Islands and ritually associated with *utaki* sites, occupies the compositional center without fully dominating the field.[12] The peacocks, placed symmetrically at the margins, frame the central figure while anchoring the chromatic structure with deep blues and greens. The plumage of the peacocks is built from layered mineral pigment, producing a tactile density that contrasts with the softer, more diffuse rendering of the dugong form. Behind these motifs unfolds a patterned ground that flattens spatial depth and integrates the color logic of the Ryukyuan court into a structured field of relationships. The pattern embeds each element within a continuous visual fabric, rather than separating motifs from the background. Butterflies traverse the surface diagonally, interrupting strict symmetry while introducing subtle movement without destabilizing the composition.

Mermaid Tomb does not pursue naturalistic description. Instead, it assembles a field in which land, sea, animal, and spirit coexist through patterned relationships. The viewer is not positioned outside this order but drawn into its structure. What thus emerges is less a narrative image than a ritual field of relationships. This structural logic expands vertically in *Ryūkyū Hakuga* (2024) (Figure 6), a painting whose composition is organized into three registers. The work draws on the format of early Chinese silk funerary banners while reconfiguring it through a Ryukyuan cosmology of three realms—heaven, the human world, and the sea, or *Ryūgū*. At the top, a skull-like form appears against a saturated blue ground. Combining the elements of a crocodile skull and deer antlers, this composite image does not represent a specific animal but evokes the imagined bones of a dragon, reflecting oral traditions in which such remains gave rise to mythical interpretation.[13]

The composite form is rendered in mineral pigment, with fine brushwork producing a subtle uneven texture. Set against an intricate decorative ground, it anchors the upper register as a site of symbolic condensation rather than naturalistic depiction. The image operates as a relic-like presence, connecting the composition to ritual memory and

[11] According to Nizoe, the *enji* pigment used in this work was prepared from lac insects (*Kerria lacca*) using methods learned from pigment specialist Kutsuna Hiromi. Similar pigments may also have been used historically in the Ryukyu Kingdom and have been employed in the reconstruction of Ryukyuan *bingata* textiles. Nizoe further notes that she incorporates other locally significant materials, including Ryukyuan indigo and *bengara* (red iron oxide), the latter associated with materials used in the restoration of Shuri Castle (personal communication, July 1, 2026.

[12] The Aragusuku Islands (Panari), located in the Yaeyama archipelago of Okinawa, are known for their strong association with ritual practices, sacred sites (*utaki*), and local beliefs connected to the sea, including those involving the dugong. *Utaki*, sites held sacred in Okinawan belief, are associated with ritual practice and communication with deities and ancestral spirits.

[13] This description of the work is based on materials and statements provided by the artist to the author through personal correspondence.

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Figure 6: Nizoe Marina, *Ryūkyū Hakuga*, 2024. Color on silk, 185 × 130 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

belief. The central register shifts into a vivid vermilion field through which a Ryukyuan tribute ship moves laterally across the picture plane. While historically associated with diplomatic subordination within East Asian tributary systems, the ship here assumes a different role. It becomes a vessel capable of traversing the three realms, guided—according to the artist's narrative—by a messenger from Nirai Kanai—the realm beyond the sea from which all life originates and to which spirits return. Surrounding motifs, including animals drawn from regional folklore, are arranged within medallion-like forms, integrating historical and mythic elements within a shared pictorial field.

Below, marine forms animate the lower register. Serpentine bodies, fish, shells, and wave patterns accumulate across a densely patterned seabed. These elements draw on both Okinawan visual traditions and broader maritime iconographies, producing a lower zone that is neither recessive nor subordinate but materially present. The realm of the sea does not recede into darkness but is fully articulated, completing a vertical structure that links sky, land, and ocean.

Throughout the painting, color functions structurally. Turquoise and ultramarine dominate the upper register, vermilion concentrates at the center, and earth-toned marine hues ground the base. These chromatic zones are juxtaposed rather than blended, reinforcing the segmented yet interconnected organization of the composition. Silk absorbs and diffuses light, maintaining luminosity while softening the overall surface.

A different register emerges in *Airakuen* (2025) (Figure 7a). At first glance, the painting presents a luxuriant subtropical landscape populated by white egrets, butterflies, hibiscus, and dense pandanus foliage. Saturated mineral pigments spread across the silk surface, retaining the chromatic density characteristic of Nizoe's earlier works. Yet glass vessels containing fetal forms appear throughout the composition (Figure 7b), with some suspended from the branches of the pandanus trees and another carried in the beak of an egret. These elements invoke the history of *Okinawa Airakuen*, the national sanatorium associated with the segregation and discrimination of people affected by Hansen's disease in Okinawa. Their presence interrupts the otherwise lush surface, introducing a visual language of confinement and preservation into the subtropical landscape.

The vertical composition draws the eye upward, moving from dense vegetation below toward a fractured pale moon above, yet the suspended vessels interrupt any straightforward sense of release or transcendence. The fetal forms remain enclosed within transparent glass, visible yet inaccessible. Mineral pigment renders petals, leaves, feathers, and butterflies with remarkable delicacy, while the glass introduces a contrasting visual language of containment. Rather than presenting historical violence directly, the painting sustains a tension between beauty and confinement across the pictorial field.

In contrast to the more clearly structured cosmological order of *Ryūkyū Hakuga*, the upper register of *Airakuen* becomes increasingly muted and unstable as it ascends. The sense of coherence established in the lower half gradually disperses, leaving the image suspended between fragility, memory, and loss. Nizoe's engagement with Ryukyuan imagery does not seek a simple recovery of the past. While her work gestures toward possible futures for Okinawa, she also recognizes that the ideals associated with the Ryukyu Kingdom cannot simply be reproduced in the present. As she suggests, what might be understood as "Ryukyuan-ness" or "Okinawan-ness" lies not in a fixed or essentialized identity, but in a sustained openness to diversity (Nizoe 2023: 73).

Across these works, Nizoe's identification as a *Ryūkyū gaka* becomes legible not only as a statement of identity but as a method. Materials, motifs, and compositional structures are reoriented toward a different genealogy—one grounded in maritime exchange and regional memory (Nizoe 2023: 73). Her work reconfigures *nihonga* as a site where multiple histories intersect rather than as the extension of a singular national tradition. Silk recalls maritime exchange, while

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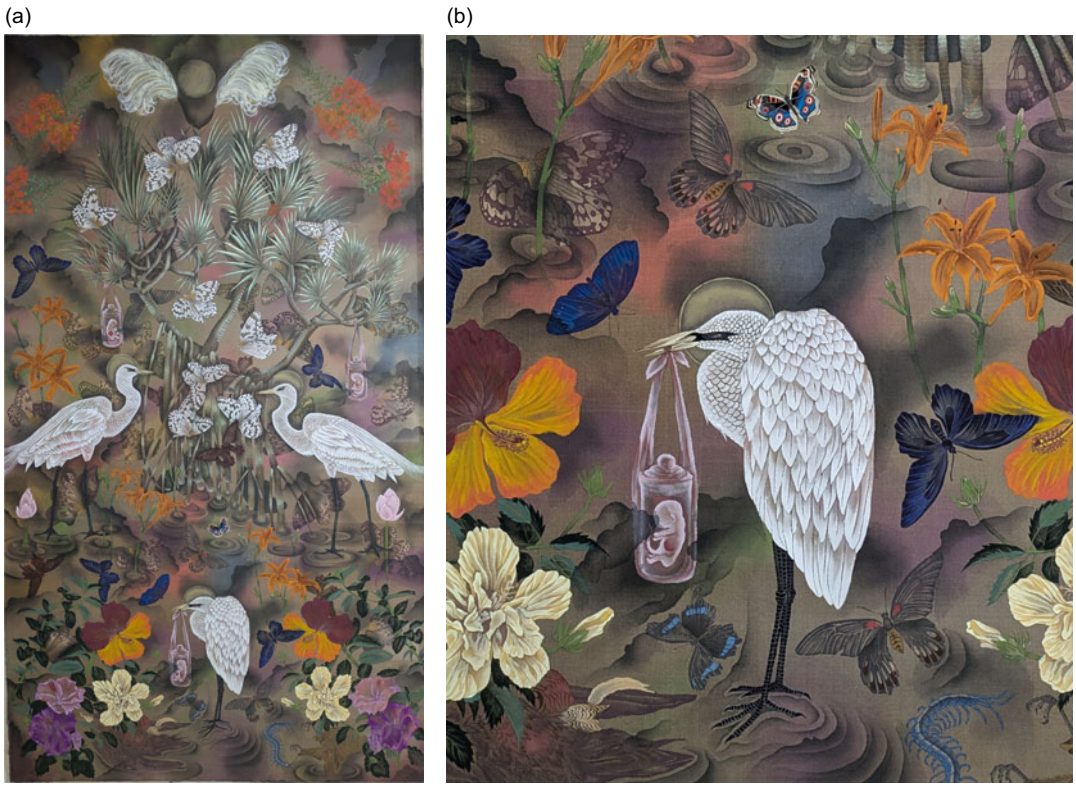


Figure 7: (a) Nizoe Marina, *Airakuen*, 2025. Color on silk, 192 × 110 cm. Courtesy of the artist. (b) Detail of Nizoe Marina, *Airakuen*.

symmetrical composition and chromatic organization evoke pictorial lineages that extend beyond modern Japan to wider artistic traditions across East Asia, particularly those of China. In this sense, *nihonga* emerges not as a fixed national lineage but as a historically contingent and relational practice, shaped through ongoing processes of exchange, selection, and reinterpretation. Nizoe's work also resonates with recent scholarship that has reconsidered *nihonga* within a broader East Asian pictorial tradition rather than as an exclusively national genre (Kitazawa 2020; Amano 2020).

Kyan Chie: Ground, adhesion, and postcolonial materiality

If Taira Yūki unsettles perception and Nizoe Marina reconfigures lineage, Kyan Chie redirects attention to the material basis of painting itself. Her practice does not primarily engage questions of framing or genealogy; rather, it foregrounds the conditions through which painting is physically constituted. Like Nizoe, Kyan questions the national framing of *nihonga*. Unlike Nizoe, however, she explicitly adopts the term *nikawa-e* to describe her own artistic practice, thereby foregrounding the material basis of painting over its national designation.[14] This shift reflects a fundamental rethinking of the medium itself. Whereas *nihonga* situates painting within a national category, *nikawa-e* foregrounds the material processes through which painting is made. This terminological shift also invites comparison with the postwar Taiwanese category of *jiaocaihua*, which emerged as a new designation for the earlier practice of *dongyanghua* established during the Japanese colonial period.[15] The two terms arose in distinct historical, political, and institutional contexts and should not be equated. Nevertheless, both demonstrate how *nihonga* can be rearticulated through vocabularies that privilege material practice over national identity.

In Kyan's case, *nikawa-e* draws attention above all to glue itself: not simply as a binding agent, but as a material that connects pigment to surface and, more broadly, matter to memory and lived experience. For Kyan, materials are not neutral substances but carry a latent vitality. As she writes, "I have focused on Okinawan materials such as clay, Ryukyuan indigo, and natural pigments under the themes of motherhood, prayer, and requiem. Okinawa's red clay and Ryukyuan limestone are not mere materials, but are infused with the lives and memories of those who have lived here" (2021: 51). She works primarily with natural media—pigments derived from earth and stone and the animal-based *nikawa* that is used to bind them to the surface. These elements, drawn respectively from the ground and from living bodies, introduce a material logic in which the act of binding becomes more than a functional necessity: it suggests a process through which matter retains and transmits traces of life.

[14] During correspondence with the author (July 2, 2026), Kyan explained that although she was trained in *nihonga*, she understands her practice primarily through *nikawa*, the animal glue that binds pigments and support. She regards glue not merely as a technical material but as a medium connecting life, memory, prayer, and requiem.

[15] Chen Celin, *The Origins of Toyoga in Taiwan* (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2000); Agiluf Chen, ed., *Too Loud a Solitude: A Century of Pathfinding for Eastern Gouache Painting in Taiwan* (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2025).

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Figure 8: Kyan Chie, *Mother's Poetry (Haha no Uta)*, 2012. Color on paper, 162 × 162 cm. Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Art Museum.

This emphasis on materiality is evident in *Mother's Poetry* (2012) (Figure 8). In this work, Kyan incorporates red clay collected from Yomitan, land first appropriated for an Imperial Japanese military airfield in 1944, later occupied by the U.S. military after the Battle of Okinawa, and finally returned to local ownership in 2006 following decades of protest. The soil is not represented but instead physically embedded in the pictorial surface. Mixed with mineral pigment and glue, it alters both texture and density, as visible particles interrupt the smooth finish historically associated with academic *nihonga*. The surface reads less as pictorial space than as accumulated matter. Layers of pigment, clay, and limestone—derived from coral sediment—remain visibly present. Geological time enters the work alongside historical memory: the coral limestone and red clay that constitute Okinawa's landscape embody geological formations extending far beyond human history. The painting compresses multiple temporalities onto a single plane rather than constructing illusionistic depth.

The central maternal figure emerges from a field saturated in earthen red. Her hands bear *hajichi* tattoos—markings suppressed under modern assimilation policies. Sotetsu fronds, their seeds historically associated with protection and subsistence during periods of famine, radiate behind her. The figure does not stand upon the land; she appears to emerge from it. Soil and body share both chromatic and material continuity. Here, gender is not introduced as a thematic element but embedded within the structure of the work. The maternal body does not symbolize land; it is materially continuous with it. The reappearance of *hajichi* within a medium historically codified as "Japanese painting" registers a reactivation of suppressed female lineage. Adhesion, in this context, extends beyond technique, marking a form of continuity across interruption. This emphasis on fiber, rupture, and assembly deepens in the *Haberu* series (Figure 9a). Constructed from vividly colored drawings on washi that are torn into triangular fragments using the *nihonga* technique of *kuizaki*—which exposes the fibrous edges of the paper—the works are further layered with collaged elements of *bashōfu* banana-fiber textiles, producing a dense and tactile surface (Figure 9b). The term *haberu*, meaning "butterfly" in the Ryukyuan language, carries cosmological significance: in premodern belief, butterflies were understood as manifestations of spiritual power and as beings capable of traversing the boundary between the living and the dead (Kyan, personal communication, May 31, 2023).

The series draws in particular on ritual attire associated with female priestesses (*noro*) of the Ryukyu Kingdom, including the *tama-haberu* worn in ceremonial contexts and garments such as the *habirahagigin* (Figure 10). Through these references, the works do not merely allude to cultural motifs but reconfigure them materially. The torn fibers and layered textiles evoke both fragility and persistence, while the act of assembling disparate fragments suggests a process of binding and repair. As such, the series articulates themes of

(a) (b)

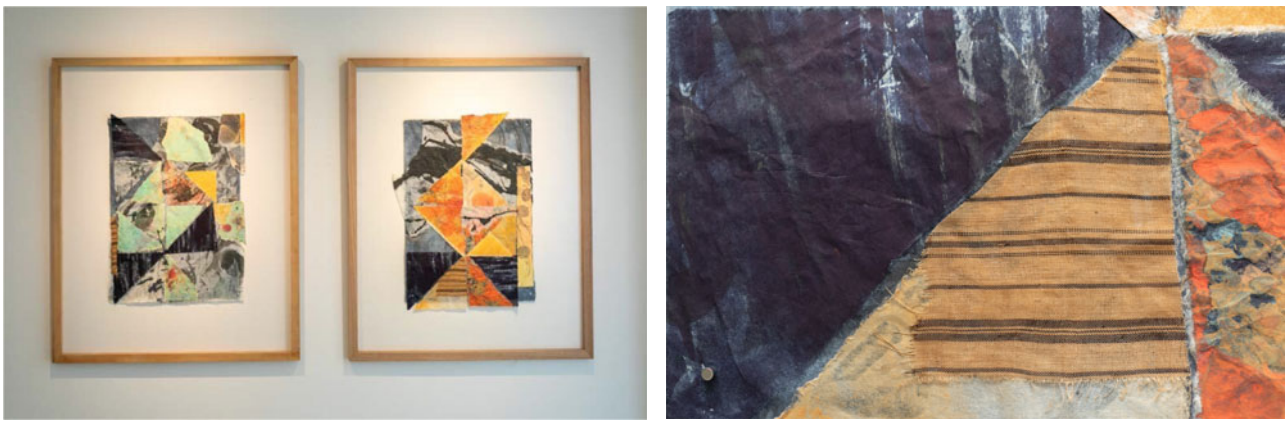


Figure 9: (a) Kyan Chie, *Haberu No. 1* and *Haberu No. 2*, 2022. Natural pigments, ink, *nikawa*, thin Mino paper, *gettō-shi*, *bashōfu*, and piña cloth; 68.0 × 48.0 cm each. (b) Detail of Kyan Chie, *Haberu No. 2*.

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Figure 10: *Habira Hagigin*, 19th century, Second Shō Dynasty. Silk patchwork robe. Tokyo National Museum. Image: TNM Image Archives.

mourning, remembrance, and prayer, situating material practice itself as a site of spiritual mediation (Ibid.).

Kyan incorporates torn *washi*, *bashōfu*, and *gettō-shi* (paper made from the fibers of the shell ginger plant), leaving fibers and fractured edges deliberately exposed. Rather than presenting a seamless pictorial surface, the works remain visibly assembled and reworked. Butterfly forms, associated with Ryukyuan beliefs concerning ancestral passage, appear suspended within these layered textiles, suggesting continuity across rupture. This material strategy is rooted in the gendered history of textile production in Okinawa. *Bashōfu* weaving and plant-fiber production were sustained largely by Okinawan women. By exposing threads and ruptured edges, Kyan transforms textile practice from decorative reference into structural principle. Painting no longer simply depicts textiles; it begins to operate through textile logics of weaving, repair, and interconnection. If Nizoe reconstructs lineage through material and historical redirection, Kyan emphasizes how continuity is negotiated through acts of material binding. Her work situates *nihonga* not as a stable tradition but as a material field shaped by rupture, repair, and ongoing reconstruction.

Kyan's award-winning *Resonance and Sublimation* (2023) (Figure 11) further develops this material logic. Red clay, volcanic pumice, gold leaf, and indigo circulate across the surface without stabilizing into a single horizon line. Swirling arcs evoke tide and breath, as well as cycles of generation and transformation. The work unfolds as a dynamic field in which energies expand, dissolve, and re-form. The ground no longer functions as a fixed support but becomes a site of movement and continual reconfiguration (Kyan 2023). The work moves beyond depiction, embedding Okinawa's geology within its material surface and engaging broader questions of life, memory, and spiritual resonance. Organic motifs such as circular and spiral forms suggest processes of growth and proliferation. The recurring image of the sago palm—whose vermilion seeds the artist associates with maternal care—introduces a notion of motherhood that extends beyond gender, linking body and land. Volcanic fragments and sedimented clay blur the distinction between representation and terrain. The painting no longer functions as a window onto a landscape but as a site where land, memory, and prayer intersect.

In these works, Kyan's redefinition of *nikawa-e* points to the historical contingency of *nihonga* as a national category. By shifting attention from "Japanese painting" to the material processes that bind pigment, fiber, and soil, she redefines *nihonga* from within, demonstrating that the medium is historically constructed rather than culturally



Figure 11: Kyan Chie, *Resonance and Sublimation*, 2023. Diptych, color on paper, 162 × 162 cm each. Private collection.

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fixed. Her intervention differs from that of Taira and Nizoe: whereas Taira unsettles perception and Nizoe reorients lineage, Kyan focuses on the material conditions through which painting—and the histories it carries—takes shape. In doing so, she transforms *nihonga* from an emblem of national tradition into a layered site of relation. Glue binds pigment, but it also connects memory, land, gendered labor, and postcolonial history. The ground no longer serves as a neutral support; it becomes a point where material, historical, and affective dimensions meet. Seen from Okinawa, painting thus appears not as the expression of a fixed national tradition but as a relational practice constituted through land, memory, and place.

Reception and the politics of recognition

The preceding analyses have shown how Taira Yūki, Nizoe Marina, and Kyan Chie intervene within *nihonga* at distinct yet interconnected levels: perception, genealogy, and material ground. Their practices do not reject the medium; rather, they expose its historical and institutional contingency from within. These reconfigurations, however, do not occur outside the structures that stabilize the genre. They circulate within national exhibition systems, juried competitions, art universities, and museum networks that continue to define the boundaries of *nihonga* in Japan. The question, therefore, is not only how these works reshape understandings of *nihonga*, but also how such interventions are positioned within the cultural field that confers legitimacy.

Okinawan artists are now visibly present within central exhibition circuits, demonstrating that practices once regarded as peripheral have become increasingly legible within contemporary *nihonga*.[16] Subtropical chromatic density, Ryukyuan cosmology, reclaimed soil, and textile fiber are no longer automatically treated as deviations from orthodoxy. Yet inclusion within these institutions does not necessarily entail structural transformation. The authority to define legitimate *nihonga*—its standards of finish, compositional discipline, and claims of continuity—continues to be negotiated largely through metropolitan institutions, particularly those centered on Tokyo. Artists from outside these networks may gain recognition, but the criteria of evaluation are rarely displaced. This asymmetry becomes especially visible in the language of reception. Okinawan works tend to be interpreted through markers of regional specificity—light, climate, maritime mythology, and distinctive materials. While such readings acknowledge difference, they also risk containing it. While such descriptions acknowledge difference, they also risk containing it. Difference is rendered atmospheric rather than structural, enriching the expressive range of *nihonga* without challenging its genealogical center.

Within this pattern of reception, Okinawa functions less as a challenge to *nihonga*'s underlying assumptions than as a source of aesthetic variation. The historical conditions that shape its encounter with *nihonga*—annexation, fragmented transmission, and delayed institutionalization—recede from view. The works are absorbed into an expanded conception of *nihonga* without fundamentally altering its institutional definition.[17] Recognition often operates through selective incorporation: innovation is accommodated, while the underlying institutional order remains intact. Inclusion signals flexibility but not necessarily reconfiguration.

A comparable dynamic can be observed in recent curatorial frameworks such as the exhibition *Nihonga Avant-Garde* (*Nihonga avangyarudo-ten*), which traces postwar experimental movements in Kyoto as an alternative lineage within *nihonga* (Kyoto City KYOCERA Museum of Art 2026). Practices that once challenged the conventions of the genre are retrospectively incorporated into its historical narrative. The reception of Okinawan practices, however, differs from this process of retrospective incorporation. Whereas the Kyoto avant-garde developed as an experimental current within postwar *nihonga* and has since been incorporated as an alternative lineage, *Nihonga* in Okinawa reflects a distinct history of transmission that complicates such assimilation. The distinction is not merely stylistic but structural: the former can be accommodated within the existing conception of *nihonga*, whereas the latter exposes the limits of its established historical narrative. If *nihonga* in Okinawa is received primarily as regional variation, *nihonga*'s apparent flexibility is affirmed. If, however, these works are understood as exposing the historical contingency of *nihonga*—its formation through imperial expansion, uneven transmission, and institutional consolidation—they challenge the category through which *nihonga* has been historically defined. The question, then, is not only one of visibility but also of authority: who defines tradition, who narrates continuity, and from what institutional positions is the history of *nihonga* written?

Nihonga in Okinawa tests the limits of what the genre can accommodate and, in doing so, reveals the historical and institutional conditions that delimit its boundaries. The works of Taira, Nizoe, and Kyan extend beyond aesthetic innovation. They make visible the politics of recognition through which *nihonga*'s boundaries and authority are maintained. Whether they are absorbed as regional enrichment or understood as structural intervention depends on the interpretive contexts through which they are encountered. Reception thus becomes the site on which the future of *nihonga* is negotiated.

Conclusion: rethinking *nihonga* from Okinawa

In Okinawa, *nihonga* did not develop through uninterrupted local continuity. It was introduced during annexation, sustained through limited prewar practice, disrupted by war and occupation, and formally institutionalized only in the late twentieth century within a nationally standardized academic system. From this perspective, *nihonga* appears less

[16] Taira Yūki has regularly exhibited with the Sōgakai; for example, she received the Spring Exhibition Prize (Shunkiten Shō) of the Sōgakai. Kyan Chie was selected for the Nikkei *Nihonga* Grand Prize in 2024. Nizoe Marina was selected for the VOCA Exhibition 2021, a major platform for emerging artists in Japan. All three artists have also expanded their scope beyond Japan, engaging with broader East Asian contexts, including Taiwan, South Korea, and China.

[17] For a discussion of postwar Japanese avant-garde practices as historically situated within specific institutional, discursive, and exhibitionary contexts, and of their subsequent incorporation into art-historical narratives, see Tomii (2016).

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as an organic inheritance than as a tradition transmitted under particular historical conditions. This difference does not position Okinawa outside Japanese art history. It instead clarifies the processes through which that history has been structured.

Viewed from Okinawa, *nihonga* appears not as a stable or self-evident tradition, but as one shaped by particular historical and institutional conditions. The region's history—marked by tributary exchange, annexation, war, occupation, and re-institutionalization—reveals how painting traditions travel, become institutionalized, and acquire authority within shifting political and cultural contexts. This perspective, in turn, encourages a reconsideration of how Japanese art history has been narrated and how *nihonga* itself has been historically delimited. Okinawa thus functions not as a peripheral supplement but as a productive case through which Japanese art history itself can be re-examined. By foregrounding uneven transmission and layered trajectories, the Okinawan example opens space for comparative inquiry into painting traditions that exceed the boundaries of the nation-state. Approaching *nihonga* from Okinawa, therefore, suggests the possibility of situating it within broader East Asian artistic networks, where circulation, translation, and institutionalization shaped multiple, intersecting trajectories.

The aim is not to reject the category of *nihonga*, nor to absorb Okinawan practice into a national narrative. Rather, it is to make visible the historical processes through which that category was constituted and those narratives were formed, and to reconsider *nihonga* from a transregional perspective. From this standpoint, Okinawa offers a productive vantage point from which to reconsider *nihonga* not as a fixed national tradition but as a historically constituted category whose meanings continue to be reshaped across different regional and institutional contexts.

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