

**Laura Holmes-Brown**

IFFTI Report

Short Term Faculty Exchange to Bunka Gakuen University, Tokyo, Japan

Situated in the Shinjuku district of Tokyo Japan, Bunka Gakuen University is one of the world's leading fashion schools. Bunka established in 1923, offers a plethora of fashion and fashion related programs. Over the years Bunka has produced some of Japan's most successful designers including Takada Kenzo, Yamamoto Yoji and Junya Watanabe.

In December 2015, with the support of IFFTI and RMIT University I had the privileged of completing a Short Term Faculty Exchange at Bunka Gakuen University. The purpose of this visit was to observe classes, tour facilities and attend graduate events. The exchange also provided the opportunity to benchmark RMIT's fashion programs at an international level.

The following text documents my visit, observations and findings.

**Saturday, December 12, 2015**

**Meeting:** Professor Yoko Takagi and Mr Hajime Endo

On Saturday, December 12th I made my first visit to Bunka Gakuen University. I met with Professor Yoko Takagi, a professor who lectures in the English stream of the Masters program and Mr Hajime Endo, Chief Administrative Officer and Bunka Gakuen University Board Member.

During my meeting with Professor Yoko Takagi we discussed Japanese design aesthetics, the purpose of my visit and looked at ways our students could collaborate.

To help develop my understanding of Japanese aesthetics Professor Takagi suggested visiting the UNDERCOVER 25 Year Retrospective and the Takashi Murakami exhibition. See details of these exhibitions at the end of my report.

Professor Takagi also invited me to visit her Masters class so that I could observe a tutorial in English and discuss the design process with her students.

We identified language as a potential barrier for a collaborative project between undergraduate students. However, we agreed if we could set up the project so that participants responded only to visual stimuli, lack of spoken and written word need not be an issue. Indeed a project based purely on visual communication could lead to interesting and innovative outcomes.

**Saturday, December 12, 2015**

**Graduate Event:** Performance – 'Puss in Boots'

After our meeting and an introduction to Mr Endo, Professor Yoko accompanied me to one of the graduate events Bunka puts on each year to showcase student work. This event was a performance of 'Puss in Boots' and is an example of the breadth and depth of programs on offer at Bunka Gakuen University. In this case work from students in the Costume Design and Performing Arts Streams.

All aspects of the show were designed, produced and manufactured by students; from the advertising and marketing material, to the light, sound and music (including a full student orchestra), to the

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dancers, acrobats and actors, to the hair and makeup. The scale of the event was immense and it is difficult to imagine how much time and energy both staff and students must have put into the production. Each year in December Bunka does a similar production with six performances over the course of three days.

What interested me the most about the graduate event was not the show itself, the performances or the music, but the cross collaboration of disciplines and how these culminated in one spectacular event. I am not suggesting that RMIT stage a theatre production nor introduce a costume design program. However, I do think it would be interesting to explore opportunities to collaborate on projects outside our school.

Photograph 1: photograph of the program cover of 'Puss in Boots'

Photograph 2: costume details from the 'Puss in Boots' program



**Friday, December 18, 2015**

**Atelier Visit:** Third Year Students - Fashion Stream

On December 18<sup>th</sup> I visited the ateliers of third year students in the fashion stream. Miss Kamakura a teacher's assistant received me and took me to visit two classes. Each class consists of 30-40 students, one teacher and one or two teacher's assistants. The majority of students in both classes were local, with a small number of international students from China and Korea.

Initially I was surprised by the large class size. However, when taking into account the teacher and the 1 or 2 teacher's assistants the student to staff ratio is actually comparable to RMIT. What did prove surprising was the project the students were working on.

The final outcome of the project is a catwalk show to be held in June 2016. Unlike students at RMIT however who work individually in their third year Bunka students were working in a group. However, not small groups of 2, 3 or 4 students but as an entire class! I wondered how conflict was resolved. How design decisions were made and if the final collection would have a cohesive aesthetic? I sort answers from Miss Kamakura and later discussed the project with Professor Yoko Takagi.

From my observations the head teacher acts as a creative director. Students are broken up into sub groups based on academic performance and their area of strength. The sub groups included a design team, a fabric team and several other categories which were not immediately apparent. These other groups were conducting research on dying, fabric manipulations and working on the stand. My overall impression was that there was something of a hierarchy. The top students all seemed to be in the design team and guiding the direction of the project. Miss Kamakura confirmed this observation. Asked if there was ever conflict amongst the students she said yes there was but I left with the feeling that this was much less of an issue than we have in Australia with our students working in teams. I wondered if this this could be put down to cultural differences and I sort answers from Professor Takagi. Although she didn't specifically confirm this she did suggest that this was a '*very Japanese way of working*'. In conversations with other Japanese people during my trip a reoccurring theme was '*that Japanese people do not want to stand out*' and that '*the Japanese strive for balance and harmony in everything they do*'. Perhaps the highly successful teamwork of students at Bunka Gakuen University is a reflection of greater cultural influence.

Photograph 1: students discuss the collection direction with the head teacher.

Photograph 2: Students experimenting with fibre optics on the stand.



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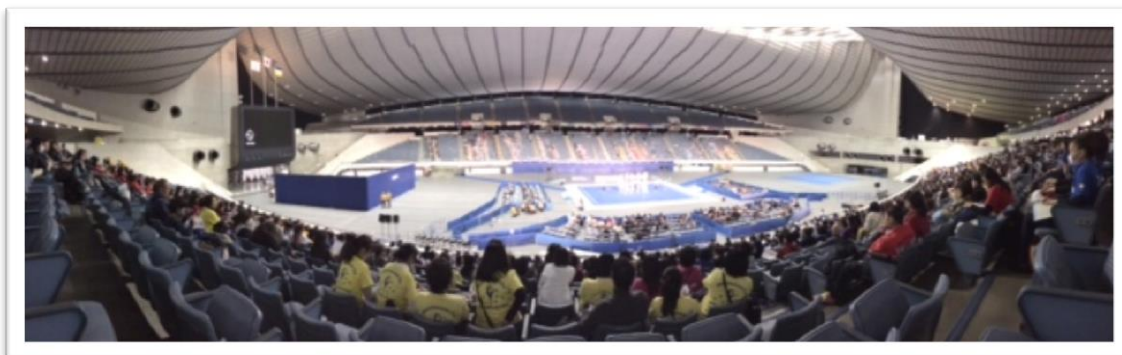
**Saturday, December 19, 2015**

**Graduate Event:** Gymnastic Display

On the evening of December 19<sup>th</sup> I attended a second graduate event. This performance, a gymnastics display took place at Yoyogi Stadium. Yoyogi Stadium was built for the 1964 Summer Olympics and is of architectural interest due to its suspended roof design. It should also be noted that Mr Hajime Endo (Chief Administrative Officer and Bunka Gakuen University Board Member) was involved in the engineering that realised the stadium's unique roof design.

Once again this graduate event highlighted the breadth and depth of programs on offer at Bunka Gakuen University. More than just a fashion school Bunka offers programs across many areas including: gymnastics, performance and dance.

Photograph 1: panorama of Yoyogi Stadium and students participating in gymnastic display.



**Monday, December 21, 2015**

**Tutorial Visit:** Masters Students – English Stream

During the course of my visit Professor Takagi invited me to visit her Masters class and then sit in on a tutorial given by Daphne Mohajer-Va-Pesaran.

The English stream of the Masters course is a new addition to the suite of fashion programs at Bunka. Six students from countries included Germany, China, America and The Netherlands are enrolled in the program. The students come from a variety of disciplines, although the majority had trained in and/or worked in fashion. When I visited the students were toileing garments and the visit gave me the opportunity to discuss their design process.

Both the students from Germany and America were draping on the stand and recording their progress photographically. Like our students at RMIT the remaining students were developing ideas in a journal and then creating them through flat patternmaking. The German student explained that she liked the immediacy of draping and being able to work with the fabric. For her, working on the stand

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allowed her ideas to evolve organically. She was much more interested in the process and enjoyed the fact that the final outcome was dictated by her choice of fabric. The Canadian student preferred to explore his ideas on paper. For him draping was too organic and lacked the control he needed to piece together his collection. He preferred to meticulously research his ideas and techniques before drafting a pattern. It was interesting to see 2 designers creating garments in 2 very different ways. This concludes the official visits I had scheduled for my visit to Bunka Gakuen University.

The following is a list of other fashion related events and exhibitions I attended:

**Exhibition:** Takashi Murakami, Mori Art Museum

This exhibition showcased the recent work of Japanese artist Takashi Murakami. The exhibition focused on Murakami's artwork 'The 500 Arhats' created in response to the 2011 earthquakes in Japan.

**Photograph 1:** detail from 'The 500 Arhats'

**Photograph 2:** interior of Mori Art Museum with Murakami sculpture.



Exhibition: **Amulet, Bunka Gakuen Costume Museum**

**This exhibition featured traditional dress from across the globe. The focus of the exhibition was embellishment and garments**

Photograph 1: exterior Bunka Gakuen Costume Museum



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Exhibition: **UNDERCOVER 25 Year Retrospective, Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery**

This exhibition was a 25 Year Retrospective of the work of Japanese designer Jun Takahashi and his UNDERCOVER label.

**Photograph 1-3: garments from the 'Melting Pot' collection Autumn Winter 2000-01**

