
Artika
International
Hiroe, the Monk and Me
A feature documentary by Mika Nishimura

無心のかたち

The enlightened journey of a 92-year-old woman artist as she turns grief and ageing into creative renewal and cultural legacy.



MEET HIROE

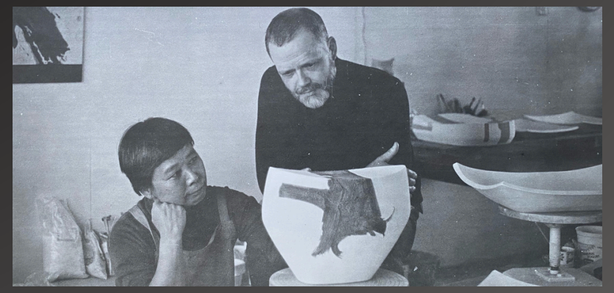
Small in stature but strong in spirit, Hiroe is known for her resilience, determination and wicked sense of humour.

Born in Kyoto in 1934 to a family of dyers and kimono merchants, Hiroe became one of the earliest women in post-war Japan to pursue ceramics as a profession, defying the gender barriers of her time.

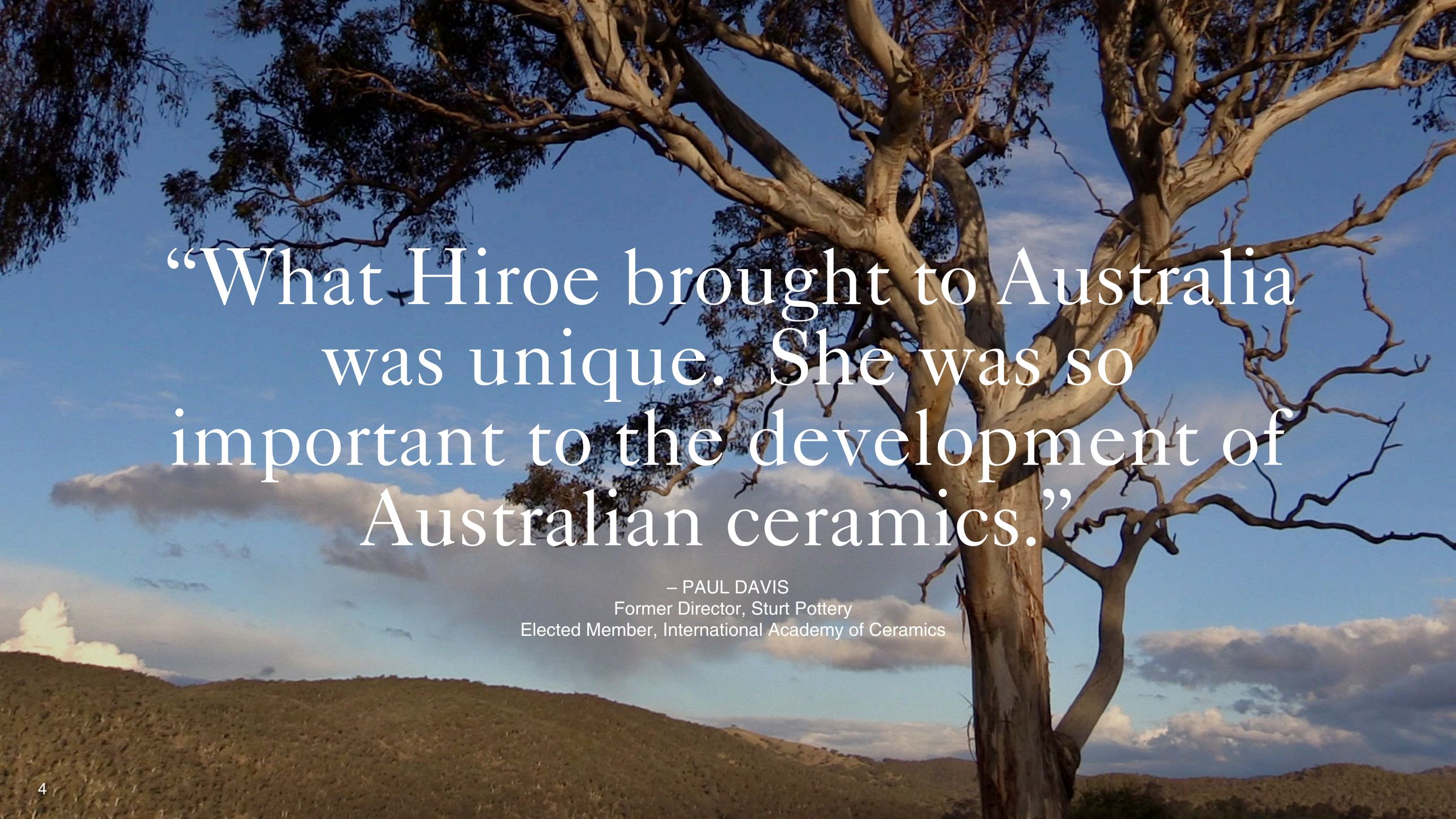
"Impossible. No!" was Hiroe's immediate response to Cornel Swen's proposal. Yet the Dutch-Australian graphic artist won her heart, and together they forged a lifelong creative partnership. Migrating to Australia in 1967, they built a life devoted to art on the outskirts of Canberra.

"What is art? The key is your sensitivity and your sense of life." That same sensitivity also brought periods of depression. "I have sleepless nights with nightmares but I dream during the day!" After teaching ceramics at the Canberra School of Art for two decades, Hiroe continues to exhibit at 92. She has one message for the young: “If I can do it, you can, too!"









“What Hiroe brought to Australia was unique. She was so important to the development of Australian ceramics.”

– PAUL DAVIS
Former Director, Sturt Pottery
Elected Member, International Academy of Ceramics

THE STORY

92-year-old Japanese Australian ceramic artist Hiroe Swen has one wish: to keep making art until her final breath.

Filmmaker Mika Nishimura first met Hiroe 32 years ago and formed a bond that deepened through their shared Kyoto heritage and lives in Australia.

As Hiroe grapples with her husband's death and her own physical decline, Mika returns to Kyoto, where a Zen monk's teachings provide them both with profound insights and ways to move forward.

When Hiroe can no longer work with clay, she makes a bold decision. After 57 years in Australia, she will leave everything behind and begin again in Japan—transforming loss into artistic renewal .





MEET THE MONK

The Zen monk (89) of Daitoku-ji's Oubai-in Temple enters the film not as a religious authority, but as a quiet mirror held up to life itself. He appears when Mika, the filmmaker, seeks a piece of calligraphy - words of wisdom to offer Hiroe as she struggles after Cornel's death.

Over the years, Mika writes to the monk about Hiroe from Australia. Every six months she visits him in Kyoto, and each time he responds with a new calligraphy.

When the monk finally meets Hiroe after three years of waiting, he lifts her from despair and shares how, at the age of six, he lost both his parents and his little sister during the war. Two formidable spirits, each carrying their burdens alone, allow themselves to be seen. Looking at Hiroe, he quietly says, "You're my little sister," and offers his temple as the home for an exhibition of new works she creates in an ongoing conversation with her late husband - opening the door to a new beginning.







MEET THE FILMMAKER

I first filmed Hiroe for SBS Television thirty-two years ago. I was immediately captivated by her work and her spirit. Over the years, she's become like my second mother.

Like Hiroe, I grew up immersed in Kyoto's artistic traditions. While her family was involved in the kimono business, my grandfather was a Yuzen textile master with his own workshop. We share an understanding of Kyoto aesthetics - subtle and deeply rooted in tradition - which I translate into cinematic language. We are also both steeped in Australian culture and its creative community, giving me a unique perspective to reveal Hiroe's invisible histories with authenticity.

When Hiroe struggled mentally and physically after Cornel died, I sought guidance from the Zen monk I have known for twenty-five years at Daitokuji in Kyoto. His teachings on Mushin — a mind free from intention — became a path forward, for Hiroe as an artist and for me as a filmmaker. As I learned to "flow like water", one door opened to the next, and the film became richer, deeper, and unexpectedly magical.









ZEN PHILOSOPHY

The mysterious power of the natural mind

Like water, a mind that does not resist the flow will,
without intent, turn into its natural state.

“My philosophy in pottery is to have a complete rapport with nature and to eliminate all pretence…









...by speaking from the heart rather from the head.”

— Hiroe Swen



Tree shadows, 2000
by Hiroe Swen

Ageing

Resilience





BELONGING

“Whenever I see wattles, I feel I’ve come back home.”

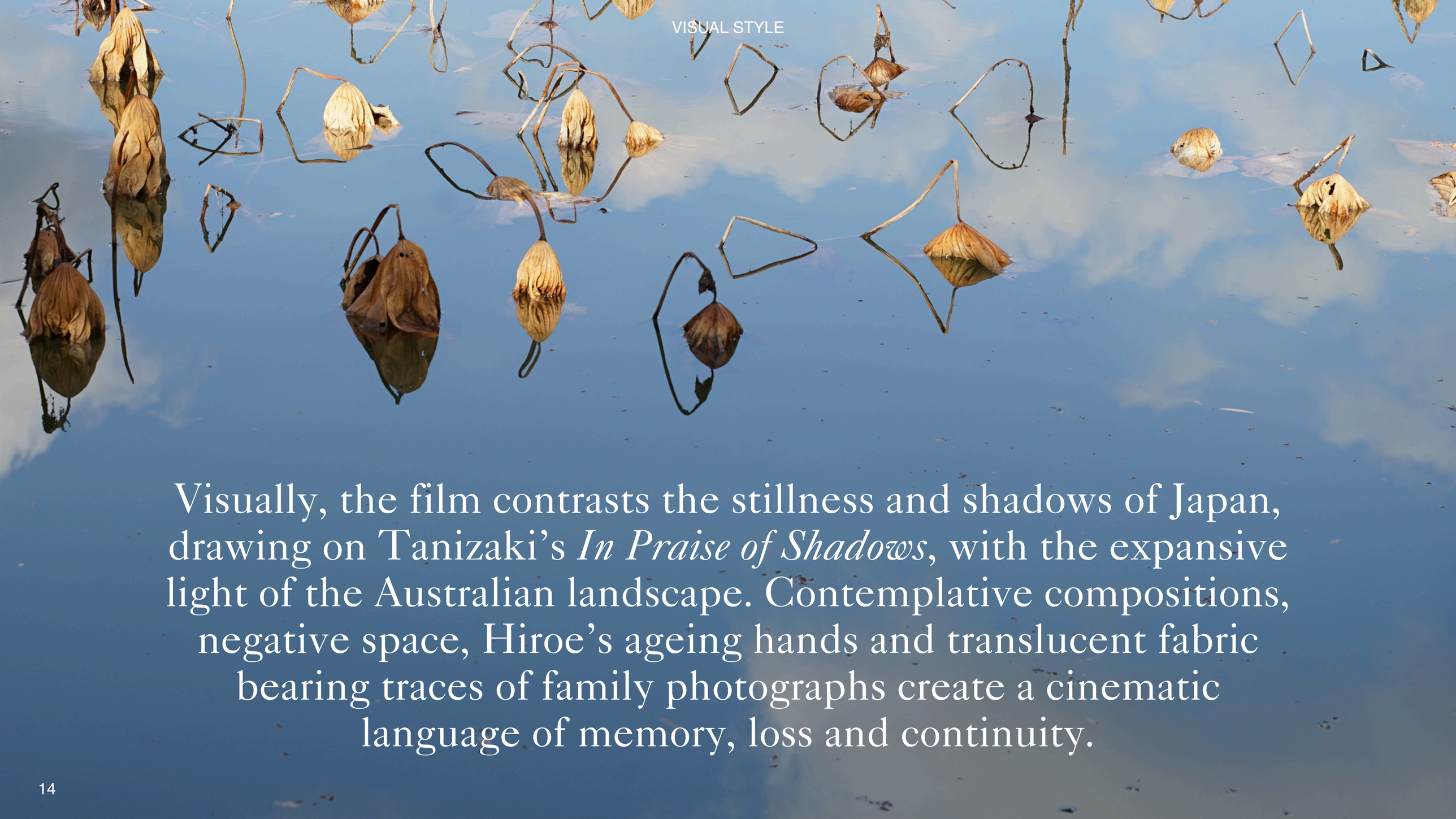
– HIROE SWEN

In Australia, flowering wattles evoke
Resilience, **Renewal**, and **Connection to Country**.

IMPERMANENCE

In the delicate fall of cherry blossom petals, Hiroe sees the beauty of impermanence - a fleeting life made eternal.

In Japan, cherry blossoms evoke
Impermanence, the **Cycle of Life**, and **New Beginnings**.



Visually, the film contrasts the stillness and shadows of Japan, drawing on Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows*, with the expansive light of the Australian landscape. Contemplative compositions, negative space, Hiroe's ageing hands and translucent fabric bearing traces of family photographs create a cinematic language of memory, loss and continuity.



Visual Storytelling through Shadows and Fabric

Memories Woven in Fabric



UNIQUE ACCESS

Trusted relationship with Hiroe spanning 32 years, including four years of filming and development.

Full support from Hiroe's niece and sole living family member.

25-year relationship with the monk at Daitoku-ji Oubai-in Temple in Kyoto, providing rare access built on trust.

Deep roots in Kyoto open doors rarely accessible to outsiders.

Established relationships with the galleries and communities central to Hiroe’s life in Australia and Japan.

Access to rare archival footage through the World Crafts Council, Australia and the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA).

AUDIENCE

A deeply human story with universal appeal



Arts & Japanese culture

For audiences passionate about the arts, particularly ceramics, and those who appreciate Japanese culture, Zen philosophy and Kyoto's rich artistic heritage.



Inspiring women & Australian stories

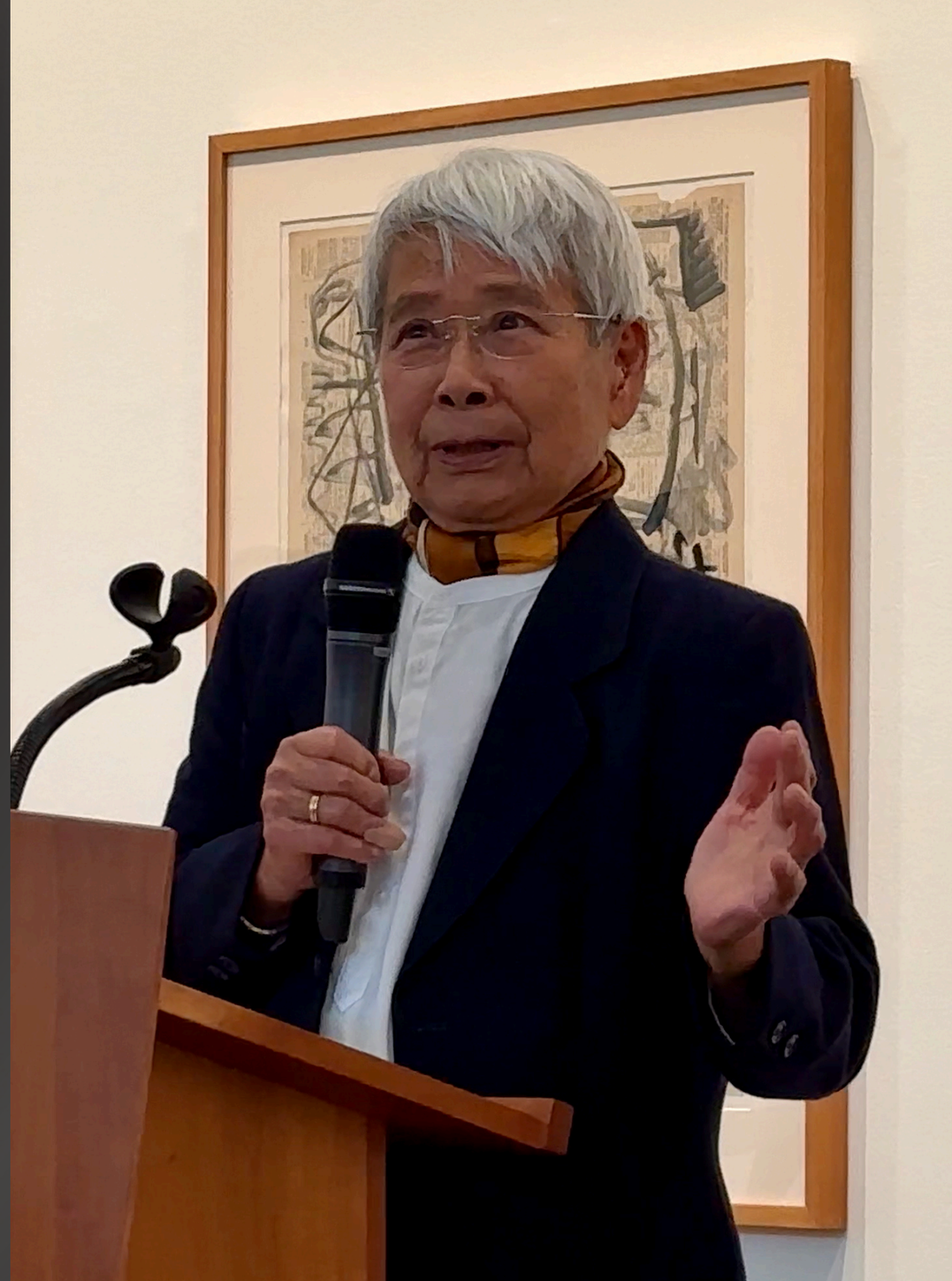
For those drawn to stories of pioneering women who break conventions, and audiences who love the Australian landscape, culture and diverse stories.



Educational & cultural outreach

The universal themes of creativity, resilience and lifelong purpose position the film to connect and inspire across generations. Ideal for schools, universities, galleries, museums, arts organisations and older adult communities - sparking learning, conversation and intergenerational connection.

Connecting audiences across Australia, Japan and the world



COMPARATIVE FILMS

Audiences who embraced these acclaimed character-driven documentaries may also connect with *Hiroe, the Monk and Me*.



Jiro Dreams of Sushi



Grace - a Prayer for Peace



Ada: My Mother the Architect



Kusama - Infinity



WHY THIS STORY MATTERS

Celebrates migrant stories
at a time of increasing social division, fostering empathy, belonging and our shared humanity.

Promotes cross-cultural understanding
through universal themes of art, spirituality, impermanence and renewal.

Amplifies underrepresented voices
by centring an older Japanese Australian woman artist and exploring identity, belonging and cultural heritage through the lens of a Japanese Australian filmmaker - perspectives still rarely seen in the screen sector.

Reframes ageing and loss
revealing how creativity can transform grief into beauty, resilience and hope.

Offers a timely message
in an increasingly fragmented world, Hiroe's journey reminds us that belonging, compassion and beauty can emerge from life's greatest challenges.

“I believe that the film will be a stand-out in the festival circuit, will flourish with theatrical and community screenings, and in other media including streaming and the education market.”

– ANDREW PIKE, OAM
Managing Director, Ronin Films
Chevalier dans l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres

RONIN FILMS

Developed with the assistance of

Screen NSW
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Australian Government

Screen Australia

Approved for fiscal sponsorship by

DOCUMENTARY AUSTRALIA

MEET THE TEAM



Mika Nishimura

Director/Producer

Award-winning filmmaker illuminating diverse voices through compelling cross-cultural documentary storytelling.



Véronique Bernard

Producer

Award-winning producer bringing international vision, strategic leadership and creative excellence.



Orly Danon

Editor

Multi-award-winning editor bringing world-class storytelling expertise and creative excellence.



Justine Kerrigan

Director Of Photography

Award-winning cinematographer capturing authentic stories with visual artistry and sensibility.



Christine Olsen

Story Consultant

Acclaimed story consultant bringing decades of narrative expertise and creative insight.



Aya Richardson

Social Content Producer

Bilingual Japanese Australian social content producer creating global campaigns reaching vast audiences.



The great way has no gate.
Thousands of paths lead to it.

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