

Pairing the Art of the Impaired

Artists with special needs enjoy a wider audience in the corporate world and beyond.

by **Ian Martin**



Space art graphic & design: andand+
Contributing Artist: Ohashi Enoki-en_Ichiro Ishikawa
Space design, design supervision: KOKUYO
Client: Mitsui & Co., Mitsui Fudosan

In this office cafeteria, translucent graphic art textiles divide the space, overlaying the background scenery and creating a sense of interactivity.

When you walk into a room, how do your surroundings make you feel? Maybe there is something in the richness of a texture, or the depth of a color palette, or the energy of brush strokes in a repeated pattern on the walls that somehow brightens your mood, that somehow revitalizes you. Who is the artist behind these adornments? What story do they tell?

For Asakawa Hiroki and his company, and and plus Corp. (andand+), questions like these guide his work, and have helped him carve a unique space in Tokyo's design world by acting as a bridge between commercial design and the creativity of artists with impairments.

Asakawa originally worked in product design with experience designing spaces for business enterprises, and had long been an admirer of art by people with impairments. Upon being given the opportunity to visit a special needs support facility for the impaired, he was shown boxes brimming with artwork made by some of the users, with the older works at the bottom of the piles being disposed of as the boxes filled up. "A big reason for starting this business was how impressed I was by the quality of the work of these artists. I was thinking, 'I could never do anything as good as this!'"

Andand+ is connected with a team of curators who are mainly involved in support activities for art produced in special needs support facilities. The company has the team visit such facilities and recommend works produced there. It has cultivated relationships with five or six such facilities and other individual artists. The focus of



Sometimes an impaired artist's postcard-sized original work can be the starting point for the large printed textiles and floor graphics created by andand+.

the company is to pair these artists' works with discerning clients, translating their paintings into design motifs in various working environments. A sizeable share of the income from these commercial pairings goes to the artists and the special needs support facilities that care for them, allowing the artists to further their creativity.

"The meaning of the name andand+ describes the concept of promoting impaired artists and, with the help of the designer's expertise, redefining their work and bringing their artistry and individuality to a wider audience in an easily understandable format," explains Asakawa. In order to do this, andand+ places no pressure on the artists themselves, but rather lets them build up their portfolio at their own pace. The company then digitizes select pieces and works to connect them with suitable clients. Asakawa likens his role to that of a storyteller, finding narratives that marry the work of the artists to the ethos of the client, creating a unique synergy.

Andand+'s work typically falls into one of three categories, the first of which is "space design." Here, the digitized art is incorporated into environments such as office spaces or cafeterias, a postcard-sized image sometimes being blown up to fill an entire floor, or the pattern of a vibrant painting becoming wall art or curtains.

Corporate branding is the second area andand+ explores. Artwork by affiliated artists is chosen as an abstract representation of a company's business philosophy and incorporated into its company logos and signage. This branding can act as a catalyst for employees to explain their company philosophy to clients, gaining a deeper understanding of their own company in the process.

The third outlet for andand+'s work is use in various types of products. While clothing is a relatively small part of his company's catalog, Asakawa feels it is an area with growth potential, mainly due to the vibrancy of the patterns produced by the artists he works with.

Asakawa is philosophical regarding the very concept of impairment. "We all have areas of expertise in our lives, and also areas where we may fall short. We all have talents that may be the envy of others. Rather than simply giving special treatment to people with impairments, I want to give the creative output of these people the spotlight it deserves. By turning art by people with impairments into commercial products and giving their work the exposure it deserves, andand+ can help support them financially, as well as bring their work into a wider social context. This can only be to the benefit of society as a whole."