

ASIAN ART

Celebrating 25 Years

THE NEWSPAPER FOR COLLECTORS, DEALERS, MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES · SEPTEMBER 2022 · £5.00/US\$10/€10

US RETURNS MORE KHMER ANTIQUITIES TO CAMBODIA

Two US government departments in New York called a press conference in August to announce the return of 30 antiquities that had been taken out of Cambodia as part of an organized network and subsequently sold by the former antiquities dealer Douglas Latchford. Among the antiquities returned were two 10th-century sculptures: Skanda on a Peacock and a monumental sculpture of Ganesha (represented by a photograph as the figure was too large to move, weighing in at over four tons), both were looted from Koh Ker. Cambodian Ambassador to the United States, Keo Chhea, received the antiquities during a ceremony at the US Attorney's Office in Manhattan.

UNESCO describes Koh Ker (Chok Gargyar in Old Khmer inscriptions), as a 10th-century temple complex and former capital of the Khmer Empire, situated in northern Cambodia. The old name, Chok Gargyar, is in itself unique, as it is the only site known to be named in the Old Khmer language (Khmer ancient capitals are usually named in

Sanskrit). It refers to a natural feature, the tree now known as *koki*, or iron wood tree (*Hopea odorata*), which can reach up to 45 m and is valued for its dense wood quality. The heavily forested site comprises a total of 169 archaeological remains, including 76 temples, as well as civil structures, ponds, dykes, and ancient roads. Centrally located between three other Cambodian World Heritage Sites – Preah Vihear, Angkor, and Sambor Prei Kuk – and about 102 km to the northeast of Angkor Wat in Siem Reap.

Koh Ker was the capital of the Khmer empire for only a brief period, between 928-941, under its founder King Jayavarman IV. As yet, the only authentic, contemporary information about the political ideology of Angkor comes from the Koh Ker inscription which establishes a clear shift of Khmer political ideology from 'raja' or king, to 'rajya' or the kingdom and its people. In support of this new ideology, no war was waged by Jayavarman IV; his reign was the most peaceful phase of the Khmer



The tower at the 10th-century Koh Ker temple complex in Cambodia
Photo: Scott Sharick

empire, which enabled a cultural resurgence. This peace allowed Jayavarman IV to carry out projects of regional, social, economic, such as architectural development, town planning, and rural infrastructure, of which the ensemble of monuments at Koh Ker bear testimony. The art and architecture of Koh Ker was also developed to reflect and affirm the dominance and uniqueness of

Jayavarman IV's political identity, particularly with the use of a monumentality of scale in architecture, and dynamism in sculpture, both of which is unmatched in other Khmer legacies.

During the civil conflicts of the late 20th century, statues and other artefacts were stolen from Koh Ker and many other archaeological sites in Cambodia that then entered the

international art market through an organised network. Local teams of looters would first remove the statues from the original sites and the statues would be transported to the Cambodia-Thailand border, and then transferred to brokers, who would in turn transport them to dealers in Khmer artefacts located in Thailand, particularly Bangkok. These dealers would sell these artefacts to local or international customers, who would either retain the pieces or sell them on the international art market.

Latchford, the disgraced Bangkok-based antiquities dealer, sold stolen antiquities to individuals in the Western art market, including the works put on display that were previously in two private collections and in an American museum (returned to Cambodia in August).

In 2019, Latchford was charged by the US Attorney's Office with wire fraud conspiracy and other crimes related to selling looted Cambodian antiquities on the international art market. The indictment was dismissed due to his death in 2020.

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NEWS IN BRIEF

MUSEUM FOR FINE ARTS, BOSTON

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), has announced the appointment of Ai Fukunaga as the Ishibashi Foundation Assistant Curator for Japanese Art and Dr. Nadirah Mansour as the inaugural Assistant Curator of Islamic Art.

Since assuming her role in April 2022, Fukunaga has been working on a wide range of projects to contribute fresh and innovative perspectives on the Museum's renowned holdings of Japanese art, including planning for exhibitions in Boston and Japan, cataloguing the collection and researching acquisitions. She is the second assistant curator to hold the two-year position, which was established in 2018 through a \$1 million grant from the Tokyo-based Ishibashi Foundation.

Working in collaboration with Islamic communities in the Greater Boston area and beyond, Mansour will draw on the Museum's collection (among the most important holdings of Islamic art in the country) to create innovative exhibitions, publications and public programmes. This new curatorial position, the MFA's first focused solely on Islamic art, was established through a \$2.5 million grant from Lilly Endowment Inc through its Religion and Cultural Institutions Initiative, which was given to the museum in 2020. Mansour will begin her new role at the MFA on 1 September, 2022.

SINGAPORE BIENNALE

The 7th Singapore Biennale 2022, *Natasha*, has announced a line-up of over 50 artists and collaborators. This edition of the Singapore Biennale, organised by the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) and commissioned by the National Arts Council, Singapore (NAC), has been named by the Co-Artistic Directors, Binna Choi, Nida Ghouse,

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EDITOR/PUBLISHER
Sarah Callaghan
the Asian Art Newspaper
PO Box 22521,
London W8 4GT, UK
sarah.callaghan@
asianartnewspaper.com
tel +44 (0)20 7229 6040

ADVERTISING
Kelvin McManus
Commercial Manager
tel +44 (0)7877 866692
kelvin.mcmanus@cksmedia.co.uk

SEND ADVERTISING TO
Asian Art Newspaper
PO Box 22521
London W8 4GT
info@asianartnewspaper.com
tel +44 (0)20 7229 6040

ART DIRECTION
Gary Ottewill, Editorial Design
garyottewill.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS MANAGER
Heather Milligan
info.asianart@btinternet.com
tel +44 (0)20 7229 6040

SUBSCRIPTIONS
AND ADMINISTRATION
Asian Art Newspaper
PO Box 22521
London W8 4GT
United Kingdom
info.asianart@btinternet.com
tel +44 (0)20 7229 6040

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RADHIKA KHIMJI



Radhika Khimji. Photo : David Levene

by Olivia Sand

As could be seen at the Biennale in Venice this year (until 27 November, 2022), more Islamic-world contemporary art is making its first steps in the global art world. One of the artists that has made a serious contribution towards carrying this endeavour forward is Radhika Khimji (b 1979, Oman). With a body of work that defies categorisation, the artist explores issues of identity, embodiment, and displacement among other subjects. In addition to painting, drawing, collage, and photography, she is also eager to explore performative aspects in her larger 'Cut Outs' placed in situ around a specific site, referencing both her current and upcoming projects. In this interview, Radhika Khimji sheds light on her extremely diverse practice, opening the door to a realm of stories and interpretations.

ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER: This year, for the first time, there is an Oman Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Whose initiative was it?

Radhika Khimji: It was based on the initiative of our curator, Aisha Stoby, who is from Oman, together with the Ministry of Culture. Beyond being an art history graduate, Aisha has been friends with all of us for years, developing her own relationship with each and every one of us. I have known her for 20 years and this is what made the project so special – it was a celebration of her relationship with us and with three generations of artists (Anwar Sonya, Hassan Meer, Budoor Al Riyami, and the late Raiya Al Rawahi). In this way, I feel the pavilion is a great introduction to the Omani art scene.

AAN: Do you feel the pavilion is an initiative that will be ongoing in the future?

RK: We had a fantastic inauguration in the presence of our Minister of Culture, who is also our Crown Prince. Both the Crown Prince and the ministry are very happy with the event, leading to real hope for the future. Based on that, I think Oman will continue to be part of the Venice Biennale. As a result, there is also an incentive to cultivate artists and this is precisely what Aisha Stoby had in mind: to

encourage artists in Oman to have different venues to work towards.

AAN: The contemporary art scene in the Middle East has been changing and growing rapidly over the past few years. With such dynamic neighbouring countries, why has it taken until now for Oman to establish a presence at Venice?

RK: Perhaps it is based on the fact that we do not have the same needs or desires. So far, the priority was music, leading to an advanced music scene with even an opera house being built in Oman. We have a few art spaces in Oman, but they are not as developed yet. Also, as artists, we are doing it all ourselves, which is quite different to other neighbouring countries. So far, contemporary art has not been a priority, but now things are changing. In addition, there are three architects in the present Ministry of Culture, who are very familiar with the contemporary art world which is also a positive sign. So, I am very hopeful about the future.

AAN: The Omani Pavilion is located in the Arsenale. You are one of five artists on view there. How did you select the pieces to exhibit in this space that is not easy to take on?

RK: My project was based on the long-term research I have done on

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NEWS IN BRIEF

June Yap and Ala Younis. The act of naming encourages fellow artists, collaborators, and audiences to rediscover ways of seeing and relating to the world, as they embrace intimacy and spontaneity towards the transformative potentials in life and relationships within it – from self to others, from human to non-human, from living to non-living and vice versa, and beyond.

Natasha's fellow artists and collaborators are invited from Singapore and Southeast Asia, as well as Germany, India, Jordan, South Korea, the Netherlands, and other geographies of the world. These are places where the Co-Artistic Directors live, have lived, or have had significant journeys.

The invited works and interventions are presented in close conversations with a variety of environments across different places in Singapore. Among these sites is Tanjong Pagar Distripark (TPD) where SAM is located. TPD is situated in a historic port, where logistics and thousands of containers make the surrounding landscape. Natasha will present works, including many new commissions, on two levels in TPD, as well as at Sentosa Cove, before a ferry trip takes visitors to Lazarus Island and St John's Island where the journey with Natasha continues. Spaces such as Yan Kit Playfield, Regional Libraries, SAM Residences, are also taken as Biennale venues, and will allow for everyday engagement with the general/unintended public.

Benesse Holdings Inc are collaborating once again with Singapore Art Museum on the Benesse Prize at the Singapore Biennale. In its third edition with the Singapore Biennale, the winner of the Prize will be announced during the opening. The event runs from 16 October to 19 March, 2023.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ASIAN ART, WASHINGTON DC

The National Museum of Asian Art has established the position of the Nancy Chang Lee Curator of the Chinese Art, thanks to a gift from Nancy Lee, a member of the museum's board of trustees. Lee has been on the board of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art since 2017, with special interest in the Chinese department. The gift will fully fund a range of costs associated with the curatorial position, including research.

'This generous gift from Nancy Lee comes at a pivotal moment for our institution as we prepare for our centennial in 2023,' explained Chase F Robinson, the museum's Dame Jillian Sackler Director of the Arthur M Sackler Gallery and Freer Gallery of Art.

The position also builds on a commitment to provide stable funding for staff positions. In 2021, the Elizabeth Moynihan Curatorship for South and Southeast Asian Art was endowed with a gift from the Leon Levy Foundation.

ANCIENT FORTRESS FOUND IN IRAQ

The mountain fortress of Rabana-Merquly was a major regional centre of the Parthian period (first century BC) in the Zagros Mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan. The iconography of two rock-reliefs that show an unnamed ruler suggests an association with the vassal kingdom of Adiabene. The exceptional preservation of the fortress's stone walls, undamaged by later agriculture in this highland location, provides an almost complete example of a large, fortified site with two main intramural settlements. Through its ability to control the surrounding landscape, Rabana-Merquly highlights the role of client states on the peripheries of the Parthian and Roman Empires and illuminates the practicalities of territorial control by state authorities in hinterland regions.

During the late first millennium BC and early first millennium AD, the foothills and mountains of the north-central Zagros constituted an internal hinterland of the Parthian Empire. This region was marked by distinct cultural and political characteristics – in many respects determined by its geography – and bounded by the Mesopotamian Plain in the west and the Iranian Plateau to the east.

PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM, SALEM

The Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) has announced that it will receive a generous and inspiring gift of

Japanese *cloisonné* enamels from renowned scholar and collector, Fredric T Schneider. The collection, which Schneider began assembling in 1993, features approximately 900 works tracing four centuries of cloisonné enamel production.

In 2010, Schneider authored the most comprehensive book to date on the subject: *The Art of Japanese Cloisonné Enamel: History, Techniques and Artists, 1600 to the Present*. First practiced in Japan in the 17th century, the labour-intensive technique of decorating metal forms with coloured enamels reached a pinnacle of technical and artistic excellence during the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. Works in the Schneider Collection demonstrate the full range of techniques employed in cloisonné enamel on diverse forms including vases, boxes, bowls, plates, plaques and incense burners, as well as architectural elements, scholars' objects, medals and other items of personal adornment, sword fittings, and even a *sumo*-wrestling judge's signal fan.

FINE ART ASIA, HONG KONG

This international fine art fair returns to the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre from 5 to 8 October 2022, with a VIP preview on 4 October. Due to ongoing Covid-19 travel requirements, the focus is once again on Hong Kong's art and antiques galleries, as well as its museums and art institutions.

Golden Age of Ningyō

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Safe landings 1 (2010), parachute 3, canvas, rope, thread and metal discs, diam. 10 metres



Cross legged 3 (2010), oil on Plexiglass, plywood and glue, 201 cm x 121.9 cm

the blind fish (*Garra barreimiae*) that is only found in the Al Hoota cave in Oman. I thought they were a great metaphor for any society, but particularly so in the context of growing up, learning to communicate, and expressing oneself.

In addition, I make architectural interventions in various spaces: I go and have to respond to that particular environment. For Venice, it was very impulsive and intuitive. The first impulse was to have a curved interlocking tiled floor together with a circle of interlocking tiles next to it – both in conversation with each other and with a wooden wall. I knew very quickly that I wanted these three elements. At first, I moved the circle to embrace the pillar, because I was not so sure. I saw the Arsenal as a difficult space. Also, you cannot touch anything as there are all these issues with the building. Therefore, I was trying to fight with the pillar initially, thinking I would put it away, but then I decided that I would just take it on, as I did not see what else I could do! Consequently, they cut around the pillar and now this roundabout exists. These are practical issues involving the space that you end up deciding very quickly and intuitively.

Also, my family ran a construction business: so there are always construction elements in my practice. For example, the wooden wall is a reference to a construction site and the barrier is a reference between the space where the construction happens in the outside world. These are some of the references I use and they become like a dwelling for all the artwork.

AAN: You just mentioned construction. You also rely on photographs of construction sites, which represent an important element in your practice. While on a site, what are you receptive to and what catches your eye?
RK: I relate to the fact that

something is in progress, mainly because the process of working is so important to me, be this going to the site, taking photographs, developing the work, printing it out and walking around it. When it is finished, I actually always feel a little like a contractor: I hand over the artwork and I no longer know who I am, in relation to that work. It is always this strange bridging moment, which for the Biennale was very quick, as we had our site visit in December and the work was made within a month and a half. Finishing the work, getting to Venice, and then talking to you about the work is something that has left me a little confused, because I have not had time to really digest it all. I have this feeling that I am handing it over with the work being no longer mine, and in a way, with the impression I offered it. I am fascinated by construction sites, but also with the process of building. It is a kind of inner world where there is this process of seeing



“

I take a lot from the working process in my Notebooks

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that in a painting you have made? It is a totally different thought process. You make the artwork in the studio, because of the space and the logistics – you cannot carry it around. In my opinion, the kind of accessibility and openness of a Notebook contributes to why it is a totally different way of working.

AAN: The Notebooks are also striking for their bold colour palette. Would you consider showing them in conjunction with the rest of your work?
RK: One of the things that I always try to bring into my work, even in Venice, is to walk around things; you have to turn and to participate to view it. And when the piece is working, it takes on a charge and a momentum from all the works that are there. Like a Notebook, you turn pages, but they are part of one object. I think if a Notebook was there, you would get this idea of continuation of the journey even more by the physical process of looking. A few years ago, I had a residency and the first thing I did was to build a long wall, which felt like a timeline. As you walked along it, there was this process and a progression. Looking back, I realise that I take a lot from the working process of my Notebook.

AAN: Another key aspect of your practice, providing you with a lot of flexibility in your installations, are the Shifters (or the Cut Outs). How did they make their way into your practice?
RK: Actually, the Shifters even came before the Notebooks, as I was making them when I was still at school. I was studying at The Slade School of Fine Art in London and I started reading about postcolonial theory, identity, and hybridity. I think I tortured myself a little bit, because I started to wonder what I could make? I had taken a miniature painting course around the same time. I felt quite paralysed with the

AAN: From your perspective, how would you describe that different approach?
RK: I use these pens that go through the page in the Notebooks and, as a result, there is real density and volume. Also, there is the time factor – the amount of time I have spent working on a small object for three years. How can you replicate

thought that if I started using these miniature elements, would that mean that I was just making this work for a very Western audience?

As a result, I started to censor myself a lot, especially when it came to East India Company School Paintings where their figures are often standing without a background with their light shading and their combination of different perspectives. I started looking at them and realised I did not want to do that, because studying in London, I was bringing these Eastern elements into my practice while also having to show my work in London. This did not sit well with me. So, I started censoring the bodies so they could never be completely caught in their identification in paintings, sculptures, or drawings. Looking back, I was not consciously trying to do that, but it came out of the puzzle of how to make something with which I could resonate and yet feel I was not buying into a system already in place. It was a quite torturous process to come to this personal decision.

As for the Shifters, I love it when they are placed differently. For example, if you put them on the floor, one on top and one down, or both standing. It is similar to human relationships, powerful exchanges can happen, say just by leaning on each other; they are interdependent, they cannot stand by themselves, they always need a support.

AAN: Addressing controversial issues can prove tricky at times. Have you had to face criticism, censorship, or misinterpretation?
RK: Certainly. At the end of the day, a lot of my work is about sexuality, relationships, and about finding a way to communicate these ideas in a very subtle way. Young girls for example, always seem amused by the work, giggling because they find it funny. For me, I find it sad and funny at the same time, because what is the future for these young girls? They are laughing now, but at what point will this change and no longer be entertaining or shameful? Censorship is not something I have had to deal with so much because in the end, the works have these double meanings or plays. If you see a penis, a phallus or breasts, you are the pervert because you saw that. Basically, what is one to censor? A painting of wood with a certain shape?

AAN: How did you handle the time of the pandemic with regards to your work?
RK: I found that I was really happy working by myself for two years. It was very fruitful without all these eternal desires and pressures. I realised that sometimes being by yourself was absolutely all right. During the pandemic, I just kept working and, actually, I worked a lot. There was no running away from myself. Also, the relationship with Experimenter, my gallery that I met in 2019, took off as we talked a lot on the phone and they were very active.

AAN: How do you find the titles for your works?
RK: Actually, I have a hobby, which is not at all a career. I have always written songs and sing. I am not a great singer, but during the pandemic, I started taking singing lessons. I always had lyrics that I had written. A lot of the art titles are part of my lyrics. For Venice, for example, I did not have any titles

ready, but I had to write them down for the consignments, so I just very basically wrote 'Cave Wall with White Dots', or 'Cave Wall with Red Dots', 'Purple Rock', or 'Feathers with Dots'.

Ultimately, the titles ended up being just fine. They are very direct and very descriptive, which I like. For example, for one work about the body, instead of describing what somebody looks like it is about what something feels like. It is not a depiction of nudity, but a description. I think it is the same with the titles, they just describe, adding another layer of metaphor.

AAN: Based on the fact that you are writing songs and singing, would you consider adding sound or music, your own sound and music, to your pieces or installations?
RK: I do not know how good my music is, if it were to be featured, but I could imagine that happening. I had a strange experience when I was playing with a friend's child, doing some of the exercises from voice class, like circles where you go up and down for hours. As I sang the higher notes, the child started to cry. I told my singing teacher about it and she explained that sound can be extremely emotional at certain levels. Basically, the way the voice communicates emotion is very impactful and precise. Therefore, to answer your question, I have not developed it yet, but I can imagine sound coming into my work or coming into a performance in the future.

AAN: Have you ever considered completing stage sets for a performance be this in visual art, music, or dance?
RK: It came up with a curator friend,

and we started thinking about perhaps doing it, but there is nothing planned as yet. I would love that. In my singing classes, during the time I was painting the Venice pieces I was learning Gluck's *Orpheus and Eurydice* and at the height of emotion, it almost felt as if I had completed a work for this opera. I would love to work with dancers, I am always jealous of dancers, and the Shifters also came from Yvonne Rainer – a mind is a muscle – as she talks about gestures and found objects. Always, when you see real people with the Shifters, you can see the differences and similarities between both, and something happens in that interaction. I really hope I can make that happen as it would be wonderful to collaborate.

AAN: When I first saw photos of a parachute in your work, it reminded me of Rauschenberg skating with a parachute on his back when he was collaborating with Merce Cunningham's Company. Do you agree that collaborations can be extremely fruitful?
RK: I hope the collaboration works out. When I was working on the curved wall, I spent a lot of time standing on it, and it was such a satisfactory object to stand on because of the curve, you are going to have one leg up. There is something very related to the body that I didn't even expect. It is interesting, because I also do a lot of bodywork, Pilates, so it must subconsciously have come into the work.

AAN: As the material is light, you can go with any type of pose and in terms of installation, it opens a lot of doors.

Beyond paper or plywood, are you contemplating any of the latest materials used in architecture, or do you prefer to remain with something more tactile that brings you back to the feel of a construction site?

RK: I do not know. For Venice, it was the first time that I printed the photographs directly onto fabric and I really liked the new lightness in the work. That happened because I did not have time to follow the process I usually do. I do not know about the latest new materials available, but I like more tactile materials. I do not think I could ever just print something out with a 3D scanner. I cannot imagine doing that, as I believe my work still needs some physical touch.

AAN: Your work is quite labour intensive, although these days technology seems to be getting more important in the visual arts.
RK: With the whole technology issue, do you not feel we are just at the beginning? I had the same reaction about VR and holograms, and it is my impression that these kind of materials are not made well enough to transport the viewer fully. Maybe we will like them as technology develops further in the future?

AAN: The medium of installation can sometimes prove challenging, especially if shown in a different context than the one intended, like at art fairs.

RK: Indeed, it is difficult at fairs, because these pieces do feel a little alone on a wall in a booth. Also, sometimes they are misunderstood when seen alone at a fair, as they are not singular objects, but belong in an environment. Also, they do not

photograph very well and they are primarily experiential. However, if taken to your home, or somewhere else, they somehow fit again.

AAN: We are in an interesting time in art as on one hand there is a trend towards something more immersive like installation, but on the other it is towards something more technical or digital, for example NFT and VR.

RK: Perhaps we always have to be on opposite sides for progress to happen? We always have extremes until something can transform into something else. We are in a moment where everything is divided. We should take off the filter for all these preconceived ideas of what art should be, or has to be. Things are changing all the time and one should just do what one has to do.

AAN: Do you rely on Instagram to share your world?

RK: I enjoy sharing a lot of my process since there is a large part of the work that people do not see once the piece is finished. I post a lot of stories on Instagram of me working with the dots, for example, as it feels like something important to share. On Instagram, we are looking at small squares and the work is so much reduced to not even its essential, but to its facade. I find it very difficult to navigate this, especially in regard to the materiality and the process of the piece, as it is not easy to get across.

AAN: You are spending the summer in Vienna for a residency, leading to a show in the city with your gallery (Galerie Krinzinger). What is your angle for this show?

RK: I also did a residency in Vienna in 2017, producing a lot of works.

However, I find that some of them are not finished, so I may add some more components to them. That earlier show was called *Becoming Landscape* and the title of the new one held over the summer is *Adjusted Becoming* (ended 27 August). It is a great moment to work on things that were never finished. As for the summer, I am very happy to take it slow, all the more so as I am a little saturated and do not know how to start a new project. I have a few thoughts about this performance project that I would like to develop and I need to think how I can make this happen. The studio is completely empty in London, therefore, I have to start working. It is nice to have a moment to reflect, as the past year has been very busy.

AAN: If you had to summarise what your work is about, what would you say?
RK: It is a lot about the gaze and being seen, but also about the development of myself, how we construct our identities and how we build ourselves. That is where the construction elements come into it. Therefore, it has to do with exterior/interior, being seen, being possessed, and the threat of the gaze. To word it in a more formal way, I would say that by utilising metaphors and deconstructing images, I make work that displaces an object out of its context. I do this formally, on the surface of an image to breakdown, limit, and question the sexual objectification of a body in place. The power of the possessive gaze's ability to make conquests and categories out of bodies and things, has driven me to create an abstract language that is perpetually in motion, so that a body or place cannot be exactly fixed in time and place.

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Signed: *Utamaro hitsu*
Series: *An Array of Modern Dancing Girls (Tōsei odoriko-zoroe)*
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