

# ZADIE XA

by Olivia Sand

Beyond having a diverse practice involving painting, performance, textiles, sculpture and video, Zadie Xa (b 1983, Vancouver) has built an innovative approach to conceiving her multi-disciplinary exhibitions as immersive installations. Her work echoes aspects of her Korean heritage based on mythology, tales, fables, and a moral code from which our societies could learn. A keen observer of her surroundings, Zadie Xa relies on her practice to tell stories about the human condition, also highlighting the fate of the outcasts of society. In the following interview, she shares her journey towards becoming the artist that she is today.

**Asian Art Newspaper: You work in two areas – painting and textiles – and previously maintained two studios, one for each discipline. Is that still the case?**

**Zadie Xa:** Yes, I still do this, but now the two studios are in the same building and right across the hallway. So I basically only have one door in between, which is extremely convenient. It is good to keep the disciplines separate, if you do not have a large space for practical reasons. This way, I can



Zadie Xa, All images: courtesy Thaddaeus Ropac gallery, London · Paris · Salzburg · Seoul. Photo: Charles Duprat © Zadie Xa

compartmentalise and organise my way of working.

**AAN: The diversity of your practice is also reflected in your exhibitions. How do you connect these various disciplines of textiles, painting, sculpture, sound, and video?**

**ZX:** I studied conventional painting in my undergraduate years and my masters, but as soon as I graduated, I veered into working with textiles and performance, which then led me into working with video and sound, and then came installation. Therefore, performance was almost

like the gateway into expanding my practice as this kind of work encapsulates so many things. Through this experience, once I have been offered a physical exhibition, I would use this same methodology to conceive an installation or a live

Continued on page 4

## NEWS IN BRIEF

more than 200 thought-provoking programmes that continue to push the boundaries of creative writing, exploring intersections between literature and other disciplines, and promote multilingual and cross-generational exchange.

### FIRST BUKHARA BIENNIAL

The Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation (ACDF) has announced details of the Bukhara Biennial, a new immersive cultural gathering launching on 5 September 2025 in the UNESCO city of Bukhara. Curated by Artistic Director Diana Campbell, Recipes for Broken Hearts will mark the biennial's debut edition, a 10-week-long interdisciplinary experience spanning visual, culinary and performance art, textiles, crafts, music, dance and architecture. The event will serve as a platform to spotlight Uzbek artists and artisans, some of whom will collaborate with internationally recognised artists, including Laila Gohar (Egypt), Himali Singh Soin (India), Subodh Gupta (India), and Bekhbaatar Enkhtur (Mongolia).

The Bukhara Biennial will be the first event to take place in a renewed historic district in the city, which is undergoing a major conservation and revitalisation project led by architect Wael Al Awar of design studio Waiwai, who is also Creative Director of Architecture for the biennial's debut edition, with landscape design by VOGT Landscape Architects.

Waiwai's approach to the conservation of this district responds to Bukhara's continued reuse of old spaces and materials and how the architecture has evolved over time in relation to the landscape. He comments, 'The historic heart of Bukhara and its collection of architectural landmarks tell the story of a city that for centuries has embraced invention from around the world to create something new. In its revitalised form, which we will inaugurate with the biennial.' The new biennial will be one of the largest international initiatives in the field of contemporary art in Central Asia and a major transformative and evolving platform to engage with Uzbekistan's art and cultural heritage. Building on Bukhara's rich history as an important intellectual and economic centre for production on the Silk Roads and as a hub for cultural exchange between Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the 20th century, the event will showcase a multitude of disciplines with a strong focus on craft.

### NEW CURATOR, SEATTLE ART MUSEUM

The museum has announced that Aaron Rio is the new Tateuchi Foundation Curator of Japanese and Korean art. Since 2019, Dr Rio has served as Associate Curator in the Department of Asian Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In his new role, which he took up in August, he will oversee the artistic programme of

Japanese and Korean art.

### SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ASIAN ART

The Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art has announced that it is one of six recipients of the National Museum of Korea's Overseas Korean Galleries Support Programme. The award of \$1.4 million, the largest grant yet awarded, supports the National Museum of Asian Art's Korea programme for four years and will enable the museum to expand the programme, which aims to deepen audience interest in Korean art and culture. The funding supports a number of initiative to take place over the next four years, including the exhibiting and interpreting of key objects from the collection of former Samsung Corp. chairman Lee Kun-hee in association with the National Museum of Korea as part of a major Korean art loan exhibition that will be held at the National Museum of Asian Art 2025-2026. The museum will also reinstall its permanent collection of Korean art in a way that engages younger audiences and the community.

### 798 ART DISTRICT, BEIJING

The 798 Art District and 751 D-Park, two of Beijing's most iconic cultural industry parks, have announced their merger, a move set to enhance the city's cultural landscape. This merger will provide

larger venues for cultural events, enabling visitors to move seamlessly between the two parks without barriers. This initiative seeks to harness technological innovation to fuel cultural creativity and drive urban growth through cultural development. Over more than two decades, the 798 Art District has emerged as a hub for contemporary art in China, while 751 D-Park has set a benchmark in fashion design. Despite their shared industrial heritage, each park has developed distinct cultural characteristics. The newly merged parks will form the largest art and creative industry cluster in China, spanning over 500,000 square metres and hosting more than 600 entities. These include a diverse range of industries such as visual art, design, music, film, theatre, media, technology, fashion, automobiles, architecture, and culinary arts. Following the merger, the 798-751 complex will further enhance its infrastructure to enrich Beijing's public cultural activities.

### ASIA PACIFIC TRIENNIAL, AUSTRALIA

Over 70 artists, collectives, and projects that will participate in its 11th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT 11). Over 30 countries will be featured this year, including artists and artworks from Saudi Arabia, Timor-Leste, and Uzbekistan for the first time. The event runs from 20 November to 27 April, 2025.

CHRISTIE'S

## Art d'Asie

Paris | 11 December 2024

**PUBLIC VIEWING**  
6 – 11 December 2024  
9 Avenue Matignon, Paris 8<sup>e</sup>

**CONTACTS**  
Kate Hunt  
khunt@christies.com  
+44 (0) 77 4876 0043

Tiphaine Nicoul  
tnicoul@christies.com  
+33 (0)1 40 76 83 75



Property from an important European private collection  
A PARCEL-BLUE-GLAZED POTTERY FIGURE  
OF AN OFFICIAL  
China, Tang Dynasty (618-907)  
Estimate: €80,000-120,000

Photo: © Emilie Lebeuf

christies.com

Looking for something to read?



Explore our extensive archives at asianartnewspaper.com

performance, all very much in 3D. For me, performance is important in order to engage with the viewer, who is also taking an active position. I try to keep the audience engaged and not bored. I am someone who gets bored very easily and initially, when I was making performance art, I was very conscious of wanting to bedazzle the audience, which is not always a positive thing. It is very important for people to realise that sometimes less is more, which is not always my strength, but that is the foundation on which I construct the show.

In addition, when you have a smaller studio space, it is impossible to practise. Therefore, I have to rely very heavily on thinking about the exhibition and the space vis-à-vis 3D modelling. For every exhibition, I work very closely with my husband, Benito Mayor Vallejo, who is also an artist. He will often recreate the gallery space or the exhibition space in 3D. This is how I can start thinking about how things will work. The type of exhibition building and how each object or encounter will happen is very important to me. This is what I think about first, followed by the image or what each work will be like. I realise that if I had the physical space, and the privilege of being able to move things around, maybe I would be more willing to be experimental. However, because of my personality, I would never be able to do that during an installation period. It comes down to being practical and being shrewd about the logistics of making a show.

**AAN: As you plan your projects ahead, do you also complete any preparatory sketches for your paintings?**

**ZX:** I have never been very attached to the idea of sketching in the way you think of a drawing. In my case, I wonder if it also has to do with the way I absorb information, or if it is because I am part of the generation of artists that started working with digital formats or Photoshop, a programme I rely on as well. For me, the paintings function more like images or backdrops for theatre or film. In that sense, the images are a consequence of trying to create different worlds. From here, I then think about who populates these worlds, and where they need to be placed within the space.



Have you ever seen a cabbage smile under moonlight? (2024), oil on linen, 160 x 160 x 4 cm © Zadie Xa



Friendship and Birdsong (2024), oil on linen, 70 x 90 x 4 cm © Zadie Xa

**AAN: Your practice that deals with textiles is very elaborate. How did you start this discipline?**

**ZX:** I grew up Catholic, and as a child, I was not exposed to museums or art shows. Therefore, looking at Biblical illustrations as a child, seeing stained glass windows, and the Stations of the Cross in church were my first real understanding of how pictures or images could transmit information. Similarly, my use of assemblage or some of the textile works – particularly the garments and how they are used in performance – are manifestations of my interest in the idea of ‘power suits’, as essentially objects that elicit power. Papal robes and the robes of Catholic priests are very ornate; they contain so much symbolism and are used in elaborate rituals. I realised there is considerable synergy between all kind of spiritual practices, because when you have a storyteller who is up in the pulpit, or who is around the fire talking to their audience, they are usually wearing some type of clothing that signifies their position and their status.

Another reason why I wanted to make textiles was my interest in identity politics in relation to clothing. I am referring to all kinds of clothing, for example, how we project who we are depending on what day it is, what mood we are in, and how this affected me and probably all teenagers. This is a time in life when you are trying to figure out who you are. Growing up, I was very committed to snowboarding and skateboard culture, and people wore

**AAN: Do you feel that the textiles have a life of their own?**

**ZX:** I love the idea that my artwork could potentially have a life outside, not just being in a gallery. That was very exciting and it was also when I started thinking about working with sound. I wanted to work with sampled edits of clips from the internet and mix in my own recorded ‘DIY’ imagery. I try to stay away from trends, because as we are so visual, it is easy absorb things. I am not trying to focus on a formal elegance so it will look good in the gallery, or what could be market friendly.

**AAN: Aspects of your Korean heritage have increasingly become important in your work. You were born in Canada and kept a link to Korean culture through your family. How did your familyland up in Canada?**

**ZX:** My parents are divorced, so I grew up with my mother. I am an only child in a single-parent household. My mother emigrated to Canada in the late 1970s/early 1980s with some of her siblings. It seems that at that time, Canada was actively encouraging immigration. In the case of my family, it was not

necessarily fleeing from somewhere in order to find a better life, but rather it was a moment of alternative possibilities. I am assuming this, as I have not asked my mother directly, but through conversations we have had, I have made my own observations. Back then, a lot of Korean people were being recruited to work in North America as healthcare workers, for example. My mother did not go that route, this is something I learned from her subsequently.

**AAN: Would you say that culturally you grew up in a Korean household?**

**ZX:** Growing up with a single parent in 1990s Canada probably made my mother much less rigid about forcing me towards continuing a certain cultural legacy. At the same time, my mother spoke to me in a mix of Korean and English, which she still does, even though she has lived there for 40 years. During my childhood, it was very much a Korean immigrant home, rather than a Korean home. At the time, I was also gently encouraged to attend Korean school, which I hated. Looking back it was a different era, because learning another language – especially if you were perceived to be outside of the mainstream, which was white Canadian – it was very detrimental to your sense of identity growing up in the suburbs. Being aware of that, I was quite hesitant to embrace Korean culture or Asian culture in general. As a young teenager, it was a point of pride to say you did not speak Korean, that you were like everyone else and only spoke English. A lot of kids like me grew up discouraged from embracing things with which they were actually quite familiar. I believe things have now changed, as today, perceptions of racism have mutated. However, when I was young, I felt it was very palpable to ensure you did not stand out. It was almost a safety device.

**AAN: So was it a major step to decide to embrace your Korean heritage and include it in your work?**

**ZX:** It is there for very specific reasons: practical reasons and conceptual grounding. It is not a manifesto, but rather a rationale or belief system. In art school in Vancouver and even at the Royal College of Art, I studied painting, mainly European masters, particularly in the context of postcolonial discourse. It was more about examining the gaze in whatever place a European painter visited. Therefore, when I was younger, there was a desire to deconstruct this gaze. This is, of course, very juvenile and is something young artists do all the time – wanting to deconstruct the gaze and subvert this type of imagery. I was never successful with this project, and as a young artist I did not receive much encouragement from my tutors, which was quite frustrating. On a broader scale, even artists in London in the 1990s, who were exploring this kind of topic did not gain much attention. In Canada, for example, there was a strong postcolonial discourse around the history of the country while I was growing up, in relation to indigenous art and communities. I am on the adjacent side of that, trying to understand a postcolonial discourse from that perspective, but struggling to incorporate it into my work. The reason why I started referencing Korean culture in a direct way is because that I thought it was what I knew best and was the most



familiar to me. A lot of these stories and related imagery were entry points for me as a young person, to understand the culture of my family, my mother, and things that felt familiar. Giving myself the permission to do this was very liberating.

In my opinion, if you really want to be an artist that finds some modicum of success – I do not mean that in a professional way, but in a way in which you enrich yourself and your ideas – you need to shift gears a little. This Asianart888

approach becomes a pendulum where you can shift your centre point. So it is not that there is a rejection of European Modernism, or wherever my base point was; I was actually identifying ways in which I could start pulling in many different trails. This is again very much related to the idea of collage. Physically, I am taking disparate pieces of information and putting them together. It is the way music, video editing, or film making works, where different synergies come together. When creating a work, there has to be a functional relationship to an idea. I am interested in the voices of craftspeople working in a village, in a community setting where they make these large wrapping clothes that had very specific functions. Also, what was it like to be in these locations where people made things together? How can that relate to the idea of a performative act, where you are embodying that ontology in your body and subsequently incorporating it into your work? Basically, I was giving myself permission to shift focus. I found a completely new way of working, based on a different fountain of ideas that were all right for me to take. It did not feel as though I was taking something from somewhere else that was inappropriate.

**AAN: There seems to be a tremendously rich heritage from which to draw. When did you consciously start integrating these new elements that you felt could work in your practice?**

**ZX:** The first time I went to Korea, I was approximately 10 years old. Unfortunately, I was not a child prodigy and I was not thinking in intellectual terms about what I was experiencing. Coming from North America and growing up in an immigrant, yet still very Westernised household, I perhaps had a narrow-minded North American perspective. In addition, in the early 1990s, Korea was very different from how it is now. As a 10-year-old, I realised that there was a whole world on the other side of the planet where they did things similar to me, but yet it was very different. It was basically a culture shock and it made a very big impression on me. As for incorporating specific elements in my work, this came slowly.

When I started making the textile works, initially my main source of

inspiration was fashion, basically snowboard, skateboard, and street culture, things that I was wearing in high school. It was a youthful way of dressing. There was a lot of symbolism that I took on because I was interested in the duality of those symbols. For example, I used to be attracted to the *yin-yang* symbol. I did that on purpose because as a child, I recognised it as an authentic marker of culture, not only for me as a Korean person, but also for East Asian people in general. Then, growing up in the West, I saw that the symbol was affiliated with surfboard culture, it then became something else again, relating to Zen and now, it is connected with yoga communities, and wellness.

I like that there was a duality to this symbol that it had become devoid of meaning and had been completely commercialised by the West, but at the same time it retained its original meaning and continued to be, for people that are familiar with the symbol, something philosophical, sacred, or religious. It is something you do not think about so much if you are in Asia, because it just is. I created an internal dialogue about this and used it in my work because I liked that it initiated this friction – when Western audiences saw this work, they would read it as being very Asian, whereas Asian audiences would think this is a very strange take on what it is to be Asian by a Western person. That was the start of how I began integrating elements of Korean culture in to my work. It looked at traditional Korean regalia and then, slowly expanded to encompass the contemporary clothing that I would wear in high school. Later, it shifted to looking at things that maybe had more to do with Catholic robes and robes in general, perhaps a power suit or jacket, something that signals a supernatural ability.

**AAN: Beyond yin-yang, you started integrating various elements of Korea's cultural legacy into your work. How was this perceived in Korea?**

**ZX:** I had a lot of anxiety before showing in Korea, I felt very privileged that my first venture was



Passages via Moonlight and Non linear Time (2024), diptych, oil on linen, overall 180 x 360 x 4 cm © Zadie Xa

with the Korean Ropac Gallery. Based on my own perceptions, Koreans are very tough. In addition, I recognise that I am an outsider, and people can be territorial about national heritage, mostly because there is such a remix in how I use things. I am not trying to lift very specific imagery and just copy it. On the contrary, it needs to undergo a transformation; to me, this is not cultural appropriation. Surprisingly, the reception turned out to be very positive. However, I was still a little apprehensive about my most recent show in Seoul, because of the things I am interested in, Korean shamanism, for example, which culturally is socially frowned upon.

**AAN: Do you think that shamanism is more socially unacceptable in Korea than abroad?**

**ZX:** In Korea, there is a certain fear, specifically from an earlier generation, and perhaps there is also some social conditioning involved. However, my exhibition went very well, because I was fortunate enough to be working with a director from Andong. The village still adheres to certain shamanistic rituals, which are no longer common practice for people who live in big cities such as Seoul. Maybe there was some intention on his part to show the work, as he understands the work's spiritual and cultural perspective. I think it was also very important from an anthropological feminist perspective. The reception was overwhelmingly positive, also because Koreans travel a lot now and maybe they are excited to see aspects of Korean culture that are transformed and popular elsewhere, giving it a certain validity. I would imagine that there are folklorists or naysayers who consider it not quite right, or who are protective of this culture, which is understandable. I just feel very lucky because, initially, I was very apprehensive.

**AAN: What triggered your interest in Korean shamanism?**

**ZX:** I watched a film called *Island* (The Island) made in 1977. It is about an imaginary island, which seems to

Muscle Memory, Vision Quest (2024), oil on linen with sewn fabric, overall 180 x 400 x 4 cm © Zadie Xa

be based on Jeju island that is populated only by women and whenever men go there, they mysteriously die. It is a strange and dark drama. There are scenes prominently featuring a Korean shaman and it was the first time I had ever seen something like this in a fictional setting. She was sexually very vulgar and an unsavoury character. She was basically the village witch, and men only had disgust and disdain for her. To me, she felt like a stereotypical, sexually charged villain, and yet, I was very intrigued by this figure.

While researching shamanism, I found out that it was the indigenous ancestral religion of Korea. It was the predecessor of Buddhism and Confucianism. The nature of Confucianism, based on a patriarchal system, ended up pushing Korean shamanism to the margins. It was interesting to learn about its history, how all of the stories were told orally and how the traditions of being a

shaman were passed down either through inheriting it, or if you were possessed by a spirit illness having to convert. There is a whole ritual and practice that belongs to a person who is on the lowest rung of the societal ladder, who maintains a devotion to this ancestral practice. They possess a supernatural ability to speak with spirits, access to go into the underworld, and fall into a trance without the consumption of drugs or alcohol. There is this ritualistic aspect, too, in relation to dance, performance, and addressing an audience. And then there is the clothing. The performative aspect of this life spoke to me, as the framework of the storyteller is similar to an artist or a shaman. In Korea, shamanism is considered a very transgressive practice, something completely outside the margins of what is acceptable within modern Korean society. As a diasporic person, having access to your ancestors or ghosts of the past via this conduit interested me greatly. There were also other considerations, such as having a postcolonial look at Korea and how

old traditions are eroded because of modernisation, academia, or outside forces. In this respect, I was reflecting on a feminist methodology regarding how to carry on this tradition and its performative aspect, which yielding to a greater force or power, was very attractive to me.

**AAN: Speaking of shamanism in a broader sense, and how there are so many different worlds in your paintings, do you believe in reincarnation?**

**ZX:** I would not say I am fully agnostic, but because I was socially conditioned to be a Catholic, I suppose there are certain structures of how Catholicism or some Abrahamic religions function that probably still stay with me. Based on my interest in Korean shamanism and the access this affords to different deities and ancestors, in some ways, I do believe in spirits. Trying to think about these spirits scientifically, they are energies that do not disappear when someone dies; they do not just evaporate. I definitely feel there are supernatural beings, good and bad, that can have contact with us and

Continued on page 6

ANASTASIA VON SEIBOLD  
JAPANESE ART 日本美術

SHIN-HANGA: NEW PRINTS FOR A MODERN ERA  
Prints & Paintings from a Los Angeles Collection

29 October - 4 November 2024



Kawase-Hasui (1883-1957), Evening Moon at Itako, watercolour on paper, circa 1950, 47.8 x 36.2 cm. (18 7/8 x 14 1/4 in.)

Exhibition Location: Sotheby's  
34-35 New Bond Street  
London, W1A 2AA

anastasia@avsjapaneseart.com  
www.avsjapaneseart.com  
+44 (0) 7966 255250



4 the Women of Iodo (2022), machine-stitched fabric, photo-printed cotton, mother of pearl buttons, copper bells on hand-dyed linen, 126 x 136 x 37 cm © Zadie Xa

maybe we have access to them. I do not follow a Buddhist doctrine, so cannot understand the ideas of reincarnation in the same way. However, I do believe that certain things should be treated with deference and respect. In many ways, I feel my work functions this way on a personal level when I include specific imagery or stories, or when talking about the perseverance of the Korean shaman and some very specific Korean mythological figures who within their storylines may have lived a suppressed or subjugated life. As a feminist, my work is a way to carry on their stories. It is important that they remain in the present and that they are accessing other audiences, too. People living today should be able to speak about the legacy of individuals who have become sidelined in our histories.

**AAN: Is it important for you to highlight a female character such as Princess Bari?**

**ZX:** I feel a kinship towards this character, and as I get older I am like an observer. Even though I do not think of myself as being one with that character, I am definitely attracted to the fact that she undergoes such a stereotypical heroine's journey. I like that there is an origin story for the godmother of all modern-day Korean shamans in this lineage of ancestral Koreans from the beginning of time. Observing more closely certain Korean religious doctrines, there is a similarity in how you reference Greek mythology. Sometimes, there are interesting crossover patterns. Princess Bari is like a conduit, because she is the person that appears when someone is going to die. There has been so much art made by contemporary Korean artists surrounding her character, that she clearly is someone very compelling in the contemporary world.

**AAN: It must be very challenging to paint about intangible things, the mystery of death, fear, the underworlds, etc. In terms of influences, beyond Bosch, are there artists you admire, as they share your interest in bridging different worlds?**

**ZX:** I love surrealist painters such as Dorothy Tanning (1910-2012), Max Ernst (1891-1976), with Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) being the one I probably like most. But I also enjoy the work of Leonor Fini (1907-1996), because of her relationship with her household pets. My own pets are also often featured in my work, not only because I have affection for them, but because I feel they do populate a certain type of personhood in my life. When talking about something to do with a supernatural spirit, like the figure of Princess Bari, I am intrigued by this idea of transmutation, that the spirit can also transfer their image into a

different animal and you are never quite sure who that is. There is this malleability with identity, and in my work, I use the fox a lot based on a three-pronged reasoning. One is that there are many foxes in London, the city where I live, and they are probably similar to the way all city animals live – basically, we have been encroaching on their habitat. The British press always vilifies them because they are seen as aggressive, attacking children and eating our garbage. However, looking at the behaviour of a fox, they are very smart animals. That was one point of interest. In addition, I felt such a kinship and empathy for them because their behaviour, this duplicitous nature has been socialised and become part of their biology, as they need to survive in close proximity to us. I suppose in many ways, foxes that live close to urban centres are like all city animals; they now depend on us being close to survive. So we both have to straddle this dangerous relationship and I was fascinated by that.

I also like the connection to European folk tales: there is Reynard the fox, who is this very duplicitous trickster figure, basically a wayward character. They are considered to be the outcasts of society, as being somewhat dangerous or malevolent. However, sometimes their personalities may change. I wanted to see how this was also related to a Korean, Japanese, or Chinese nine-tailed fox spirit. There are very similar characteristics of being duplicitous, as it can shape-shift, and change its form. Within the East Asian context, the nine-tailed fox often manifests itself as a beautiful young woman. This is another trope of this idea of femininity, stereotypical femininity, or 'womanness' being conflated with this notion of evil and malevolence.

For the nine-tailed fox, depending on what genealogy you are looking at and what country, it is mostly doing this because it needs to eat the livers of its victims in order to sustain itself. Each liver it consumes works towards the possibility of becoming either immortal, or gaining the ability to live 1,000 years, and if it achieves this, it can become human. Ultimately, the goal of this creature is to become human, and that means there is an innate desire to become close to us. This is my reading, based on the fact that I am used to seeing it all the time.

**AAN: Since there is so much happening in your paintings in terms of**



Installation view of the exhibition Rough Hands Weave a Knife, April to May 2024, at Galerie Thaddeus Ropac, Paris © Zadie Xa



Tricksters, Mongrels, Beasts (2023), oil on canvas, triptych 240 x 600 cm, each 240 x 200 cm © Zadie Xa

**narrative, how do you go about the composition?**

**ZX:** Regardless of the discipline or the imagery, I do gravitate and understand a maximalist approach. In many ways, I feel it is natural and it is who I am. In order to start a composition, I use a lot of references from my archives on Pinterest, on my iPad, or on my phone. I use these images to inspire me. Then, they become either very heavily manipulated and changed, so the original reference points maybe so embedded that you cannot see them. This is how I usually start a work. I am an artist that is very concerned about where I fit within the lineage of global art history. I am always trying to locate myself in and amongst people that have come before me and/or that I admire, or with work that my work could be in dialogue. Maybe, that is why there is this mirroring effect where I need to speak to different artists. On another note, I may, for example, decide I want to work with the fox.

I want it to almost look like a human portrait, not the same, but I may reference royal portraiture in Spain. In portraiture, it is often about persons of importance, but in my work, I use animals instead. Sometimes, very simple things get me excited. It is also looking at films and popular culture that have nothing to do with what I am looking for or thinking about, but they will trigger visual cues for where I want to go. Since I use a drawing software on my iPad, there is the ability to have a lot of collaging and different layers, so I can try things out.

**AAN: What do you want to achieve with the titles of your works?**

**ZX:** Since I am someone who includes a lot of references within my work,

they are very important to me. I understand that if some audiences are not familiar with these references, the work may feel more obtuse. I am very much inspired by music, especially hip-hop groups from the 1990s. The poetry and the lyricism of the songs, as well as the things they might be referring to whether moments in history or pop cultural moments are important, even if they seem superfluous or frivolous. When you read a title, you read into the story. With my interest in storytelling or perhaps a slight obsession with control, I have this desire to guide the audience, but not in a way that is hand-fed. For me, words are very powerful. They are like magic.

**AAN: Regarding your sculptures, you have completed a piece in bronze, a medium that is new to your practice. Is this an avenue you would like to develop further?**

**ZX:** Yes, this is something completely new. I am all about context and reason. It is definitely something I would like to explore, because it brought something new and interesting to my work. I like sculpture that does not necessarily look like the type of traditional sculpture, and I am interested in objects or things filling up space. Therefore, once one works with bronze and maybe even aluminium, you think about scaling up because the pieces can weather environments and landscapes that are not necessarily a gallery. This is my primary interest. However, I feel it is also something that needs to be closely considered because a lot of large bronzes can negatively affect one's practice. There is lots of bad public sculpture and therefore, I want to make sure that it is well-thought-out first.

**AAN: One of the first contemporary artists from Korea to exhibit outside Korea in the 1990s was Lee Bul. I understand you are fond of her work. In your opinion, what makes her work so appealing, even to the younger generation of artists?**

**ZX:** I am indeed a huge fan of her work and I deeply admire her. She has been very generous, welcoming and friendly to me. I was fortunate to learn more about her work through an exhibition in London called *Rehearsals from the Korean Avant-Garde Performance Archive* at the Korean Cultural Centre. The exhibition was looking at the history of avant-garde performance in Korea from the 1960s onwards. There were many interesting artists to whom I had not been exposed. It was also the first time I saw a lot of Lee Bul's very transgressive feminist performances, where she had been suspended in the air. There are different periods in her career that I find immensely inspirational. She has been working with the body and

costuming in a kind of sci-fi at a time where those performances were incredibly risky in Korea. Also, looking at those cyborg sculptures made in the 1990s, I cannot help thinking how ahead of time she was with her work.

**AAN: Is keeping a studio in Korea an option you are considering, especially now that so many European and American galleries are opening a space there?**

**ZX:** I would love to do that. I find being in Korea very refreshing and restorative. I was in Seoul a few times last year, and one can truly feel the energy. Koreans themselves are very hardworking and competitive. Therefore, when Korean people take something on, they do it full-on. While I was there, I felt the artists, the people, even gallery-goers, were very enthusiastic and there is a good energy that does not feel bitter and jaded the way you may see in other larger Western cities. Even from a practical perspective, it seems Korea is the place that I should be for research: it is more direct, and I can physically go to spaces instead of reading. In addition, there are basic things in terms of production like materials, textiles, and threads, that can be cumbersome and expensive in London. That would facilitate so many more ideas. I have thought about it, and I need to go over the logistics in terms of visa, also because I have two dogs.

**AAN: Based on what you mentioned earlier as to where you fit in compared to other artists, past and present, what would you like to contribute to contemporary art?**

**ZX:** Through my practice, I want to encourage younger artists, artists of colour, or those outside of what the normal London scene is, to feel that the heritage of their family is something that would be an interesting source to use, parallel to other things we were taught in European art history. That is my goal. Without sounding narcissistic, I have this example of a young artist who had a portfolio of all these different Nigerian Yoruba traditional garments and performances and was thinking about how to translate that with her own work. Originally, the reference point was my work, which was very rewarding. It is encouraging that my work is somehow getting external attention and there is some type of validation, as it does not look like what is traditionally seen as successful. In London, it has been very positive to open up this perspective and widen the scope of different types of contemporary art. It is not just me, as I now see lots of different artists that are my contemporaries functioning in a similar way. With a generation of artists doing that, you set a precedent. Ultimately, that is the thing that I am most excited about trying to encourage and present.

An exhibition exploring the diverse representation of women during a unique era of Japanese printmaking is currently on show in Cambridge. Under the Kansei Reforms, (Kansei era, 1789-1801), in the late 1790s during the Edo period, the government became concerned about what they saw as excess, indulgence, and debauchery, and issued new rules for publishing, including prints. Poor harvests in the mid- to late 1780s had led to rising food prices and subsequent riots. The 1790s reform may have been prompted, in part, by the publishing of cheaply printed illustrated books that were thinly disguised lampoons of the government and their policies during this period of unrest. Ellis Tinois writes in the book *Japanese Prints: Ukiyo-e in Edo* (2016), 'In the late 1790, all commercially issued prints were required henceforth to carry a small official seal that read 'approved' (*kitavame*). The presence of this seal indicated that the print design had been approved for publication by a censor appointed by the publishers' professional association from among its members. The seal was impressed on the block-ready drawing and cut into the keyblock so that it appeared on every impression of the print. From 1791-1824 all commercially issued prints carried this seal'.

These strict reforms therefore encouraged print designers to change their design and they began to depict ordinary women doing 'respectable' tasks – working, playing music, and looking after children. A world away from the life of Edo's pleasure districts. However, these pictures did not show real individuals – artists continued to depict idealised fashionable beauties, but now in wholesome situations and scenes that may have been closer to viewers' own lives. To explore this period in Japanese prints, the exhibition has been divided into six sections: The Female Gaze, Working Women, Women in the Public Eye, Children, and Out and About and Socialising.

At the same time, poetry groups and others commissioned luxury prints – *surimono* – with a limited circulation. As these were privately printed and for private consumption and not seen as commercial goods, *surimono* print designers were able to avoid the government censors. This allowed for more glamour and eroticism to be on display, as well as the use of lavish materials and techniques like metallic pigments and blind embossing. Works by artists such as Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) and Kitagawa Utamaro (circa 1756-1806) show how print designers sought new ways of creating images of beautiful women at a time when the government was concerned with public morality.

In Edo Japan, there was a separation of rank and gender, which influenced the roles women could play in Japanese society and the responsibilities they had within their communities. The cultivation of leisure was a key to raising social status as a woman. Courtesans, who worked in the pleasure quarters, were influential in setting standards in dress, hairstyles, and personal cultivation in regards to literature and the performing arts. The sophisticated art of hairdressing reached its peak during the Edo period and the elaborate styles changed so rapidly that there were eventually hundreds of different ways for women to dress their hair, which, in turn, brought an enthusiasm for hair ornaments. Like makeup, hairstyles were indicators of



Woman seen through a window gazing at a book of actors by Harukawa Goshichi, circa 1820-1830, *surimono*, colour print from woodblocks, with metallic pigment and blind embossing. All images © The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge



The Music Lesson by Utagawa Kunisada, 1825, *surimono*, colour print from woodblocks, with metallic pigment and blind embossing

# WOMEN IN JAPANESE PRINTS



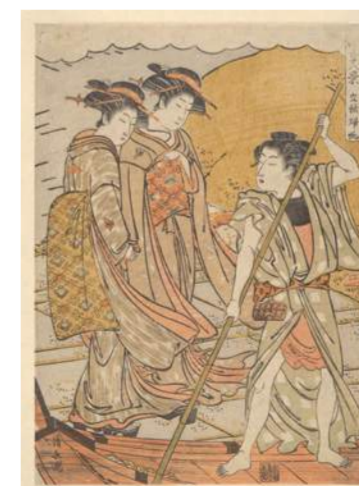
A Bad Dream by Kitagawa Utamaro, circa 1800-1801, colour print from woodblocks



The Bamboo Screen Makers by Kitagawa Utamaro, circa 1793-1798, colour print from woodblocks



Dressing the Toddler by Suzuki Harunobu, circa 1768, colour print from woodblocks with blind embossing



Returning Sails at the Beginning of Autumn by Torii Kiyonaga, 1779, colour print from woodblocks

“  
*Female consumers of prints were drawn to scenes of everyday life*  
”

age, social class, marital status, or even profession. In the hierarchical class-conscious society of the Edo era, women could not freely choose their makeup or hairstyle.

Fashion may have influenced some levels of society, but there were still general strict rules in place for makeup, hairstyle, and dress in a population that was divided into distinct social classes. This distinction allowed a visitor to learn to distinguish a married woman from a young girl, a nobleman from a middle-class woman, or a high-ranking courtesan. Edo-period societies, based entirely on a hierarchical system of classes and various rules, were highly influenced by social rank, age, profession, and stages of life, so that women had to be careful in choosing their makeup or hairstyle. Fashion was not just for the Floating World of entertainment that encouraged competition in style; it also had a general social branding function that helped distinguish an individual's status in society. But, as strict as the law was, the system did not stop the attraction of beauty, or the spirit and inventiveness with which women showed in their goal of reconciling social rules and elegance.

In this time of social upheaval, women were also encouraged to be the moral foundation of the country. The traditional notion of the

Confucian family – father to son, senior to junior, husband to wife – was promoted by the government. This system gave the woman a responsibility in producing more children for an enriched family life, and then to nourish and supervise the moral well-being of the children, adding to the vision of an idealised mother.

Although it was mostly men making these alluring prints, women also bought and enjoyed them. Female consumers were drawn to scenes of everyday life where the beauty of ordinary women was celebrated. These intimate, tender and often funny scenes would have been recognisable to women then and remain familiar to us today. They also remind us that women also worked to support themselves and their families.

From promenading courtesans to women artisans at work, this collection of prints reveals a narrative of women from all walks of life in Edo Japan and encourages the visitor to not only explore this female gaze, but also to glimpse into these women's lives who are portrayed doing 'ordinary' things – tasks that still feel recognisable today.

● Until 17 November, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, [fitzwilliam.cam.ac.uk](http://fitzwilliam.cam.ac.uk)