

「Die Young, Stay Pretty」

Huma Bhabha / Sayre Gomez / Candida Höfer / Takuro Kuwata / Joel Mesler /
Marilyn Minter / Erwin Wurm / Carlos Rolón / Tomokazu Matsuyama



KOTARO NUKAGA Roppongi is pleased to present 'Die Young, Stay Pretty' from March 10 to April 28, 2023. The exhibition is co-curated by Chicago-based Puerto Rican American artist Carlos Rolón, whose practice explores themes of belonging and cultural identity, and New York-based Japanese artist Tomokazu Matsuyama, whose vibrant contemporary visual language functions as a representation of the reality of our times.

Rolón and Matsuyama's practices are united by their shared examination of ideas of "beauty" that have emerged in post-colonial, non-Western aesthetic contexts—a theme that has carried significant weight in the larger art world as well, particularly since the exhibition 'Magiciens de la Terre' at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1989. The current exhibition is a result of a series of dialogues between Rolón and Matsuyama regarding the concept of beauty and its multifaceted, non-universal nature, a topic that has remained a central point of discourse throughout the history of art.

This exhibition features nine diverse international artists. Marilyn Minter brings critical perspectives to ideas of beauty that have arisen through the commodification and consumption of sex and the body in the fashion industry.

Born in Pakistan, artist Huma Bhabha explores the peculiar strangeness of the modern-day human figure through eclectic objects and drawings that are based on a wide range of art historical references. Candida Höfer, a prominent pioneer of both German photography of the 1990s and the leading Becher School of contemporary photography, forms another central part of the exhibition; as do Sayre Gomez, Erwin Wurm, Joel Mesler, Takuro Kuwata, and the artists who doubled as the curators of this exhibition, Carlos Rolón and Tomokazu Matsuyama. Through their works, these artists throw a wrench into the discourse on “aesthetics” that has been defined by “art history.”

Aesthetics is a philosophy that explores beauty largely through nature and art. The word aesthetics is derived from the Latin *aesthetica*, a term coined by A.G. Baumgarten (1714-1762) of the Leipzig – Wolffian school, who further derived *aesthetica* from the Greek *aisthetikos*, meaning “sensibility.” The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) refers to aesthetics in his book “Critique of Judgment,” where he defines aesthetics as the study of the critique of beauty, rather than the study of beauty itself. In the latter half of the 19th century, following the lectures of Schelling’s “Philosophy of Art” and Hegel’s “Aesthetics,” German art historian Konrad Fiedler (1841-1895) developed a theory of art that separated art from beauty—two ideas which, up until that point, had been considered as one and the same. The etymology of the word aesthetics—*aisthetikos*—refers to the understanding that arises when we feel our bodies coming into contact with one another; in the same vein, aesthetic judgments are located not in the world of concepts, but in the world of objects. Aesthetic meaning cannot be “read” or “deduced” in an abstract, symbolic, or metaphorical sense, but must be the result of a physical experience. In other words, aesthetics does not create meaning as language does, but rather comes about as a result of physical experiences. An object does not contain meaning in itself; instead, the actions and behaviors it provokes (that is, its aesthetic effect) becomes its primary form of communication. In other words, since the body and its cultural context structurally influence what shall be determined as beautiful, beauty is subjective, and reflects the physical perceptions of the time. Such a thing as universal beauty does not exist. Beauty is constantly changing.

Kenko Yoshida (1283?-1352?), a well-known poet from the medieval period, wrote about the beauty of life in “Adashino no tsuyu,” the seventh section of “Essays in Idleness,” a work regarded as one of Japan’s top three most famous essays.

“To die, at the latest, before one reaches forty, is the least unattractive.”

A modern translation of its meaning would be: “If we never died, neither would the deep emotions of life ever be born within us. Indeed, it is far better for human life to be fleeting.” Yoshida expresses the beauty of life through its relativity to death. Beauty does not exist in and of itself, but appears through its relativity to something else, or by encapsulating such a relative element. This passage has been interpreted as a warning against the increasing shame that comes as ugliness overtakes age.

However, considering that the average life expectancy at the time was around thirty years old, it can be said that the phrase “before one reaches forty” was not referring to the length of life per se, but the loss of spiritual (and not physical) youthfulness. The essence of this passage lies not in its ideas about age, but in its contemplative and critical perspective on the beauty of life. This is an attitude that has remained a continuous underlying thread throughout Japanese aesthetics of subsequent eras, and it is in this sense that Matsuyama chose this passage as the title of this exhibition.

There is no such thing as a universal idea of beauty. On the other hand, the human activity of pondering what “beauty” is has been carried out across all eras, both in the east and west, so in a sense, it is a universal activity. This exhibition functions as an examination of beauty through a critical dialogue between these nine artists. The history of art has been viewed from the perspective of Western aesthetics and organized into what we call, in capital letters, Art History. If we consider this history to be the warp of a loom, this exhibition, which creates a lower-case art history through critical dialogue on beauty, is an attempt to weave a weft across it. It is precisely through such critical examination and refinement of ideas through multifaceted aesthetics that our understanding of “beauty” can be expanded.

CURATOR'S STATEMENT

The English title of the exhibition was inspired by a song of the same name created by Blondie, the American rock band co-founded by singer Debbie Harry and guitarist Chris Stein. The commentary of the song is still relevant in today's culture about the pressure, expectations, and value placed on beauty as being such a commodity. As described by the singer, “the only way to be eternally young was to die young and stay in people's minds. It's just the weirdness of human nature.” **Carlos Rolón**

ARTISTS

Huma Bhabha

Sayre Gomez

Candida Höfer

Takuro Kuwata

Joel Mesler

Marilyn Minter

Erwin Wurm

Carlos Rolón

Tomokazu Matsuyama

EXHIBITION DETAILS

Group Exhibition 'Die Young, Stay Pretty'

March 10 (Fri) – 28 April (Fri)

11:00 - 18:00 (Tue - Sat) *Closed on Sun, Mon, and Public Holidays

VENUE

KOTARO NUKAGA, Roppongi

Piramide Bldg. 2F, 6-6-9 Roppongi, Minato-ku, Tokyo 106-0032 Japan

3 minutes walk from Tokyo Metro Hibiya Line and the Toei Subway Oedo Line Exit 1 or 3 of Roppongi station