

Art Exhibitions

Noritaka Tatehana:
Refashioning Beauty

Fall 2019



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EMBRACING A LEGACY

In his first-ever North American solo exhibition Portland Japanese Garden presented the art of Noritaka Tatehana. With works created especially for this exhibition, Tatehana enchants through his use of refined Japanese craftsmanship that epitomizes sophistication and beauty.

Born in 1985, Tatehana grew up in Kamakura, a medieval capital on Japan's Pacific coast. Surrounded by renowned temples and shrines, his childhood was filled with daily exposure to history and art. It is in this context that he first began designing clothing and shoes despite a lack of formal education in the field. Following his creative impulses and an appreciation for Japan's rich legacy of craftsmanship, he went on to attend Tokyo National University of the Arts, where he studied the declining craft of textile dyeing and weaving.

TIMELESS APPEAL OF CRAFTSMANSHIP

Japan's art history is long and distinguished with celebrated traditions of form, design, and craftsmanship. Most often, Japanese art centers around a deep understanding and reverence of nature and natural beauty in both subject and materiality. But along with the well-respected, admired, and studied artistic traditions of Japan can come overwhelming feelings of constraint and burden for a contemporary artist tied to its legacy. An artist may feel trapped by the weight of historical precedence.

As visual and cultural experience has become truly global, social and geographic distinctions have blurred, often losing significance and meaning. This environment allows artists to willfully break from the constraints of historical narratives that came before them. Rather than shun the seemingly





restrictive traditions of Japanese art and craft, Tatehana embraces them by sampling, altering, and repackaging cultural symbols to create dynamic works for the modern audience.

CONTEMPORARY REINTERPRETATIONS

Tatehana appropriates signs of elegance and refinement from their original historical context and amplifies their meaning in his art. He emphasizes the practice of *takumi* (匠), or “master craftsmanship,” grounding his work in the virtuosity of execution. In *Heel-less Shoes*, the raised platform sandals, which denote the highest-level of courtesans, are taken from the cobble pathways of the Yoshiwara entertainment district of Edo (present-day Tokyo) in the 18th and 19th centuries and reimagined to grace the feet of current society’s most fashion-forward celebrities like Daphne Guinness and Lady Gaga.

In *Hairpin Series*, the distinctively-shaped hairpins used in the coiffures of the most celebrated beauties of the period are recreated as monumental 3-dimensional lacquer forms that magnify the ultimate status and elegance. And in *Void Sculpture Series*, exquisite sword blades by a 15th generation metalsmith are adapted from the samurai's poetically violent potential to create sculptural works of the most captivating refinement and craftsmanship.

The success of Tatehana's work comes through recognition of these long-held symbols that epitomize celebration and craftsmanship, and their masterful refashioning for contemporary tastes.

I am concerned about the preservation of traditional Japanese craft and culture; the succession of critical skills and techniques that are handed down from generation to generation ... I believe artists can bring about a revolution in traditional Japanese culture through creative expressions if we embrace our current time while encompassing the context and flow of past, present, and future.

— NORITAKA TATEHANA



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Co-curated by the Garden's Curator of Art, Laura J. Mueller, PhD, and Christina Cacouris, a journalist and curator based in New York, this exhibition showcases Tatehana's sculptural and two-dimensional works, reimagining the timeless appeal of celebrated symbols for contemporary audiences.

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📷 Photos: Jonathan Ley

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