

# Blurring the boundaries

New York-based artist Nancy Lorenz juxtaposes motifs from East Asia, specifically Japan, to produce transformative pieces gilded in gold, silver and mother-of-pearl



Nancy Lorenz, *Rock, Garden, Room*, 2004. Silver leaf, mother of pearl inlay, pigment, gesso, lacquer, on twelve wood panels

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American artist Nancy Lorenz was born in Texas but she spent her teenage years in Japan. She uses traditional eastern decorative techniques and materials to create contemporary abstract expressionist artworks. The New York-based artist's solo show in Dubai, *Silver Moon*, presents a retrospective of her luminous soulful artworks with a distinctly Japanese ethos.

Anahita Razmi, who was born in Hamburg is of Iranian origin. Her work focuses on issues of identity and gender, examining processes of cultural appropriation by recontextualising images, artefacts and identities. In her latest show in Dubai, *Take Me to Your Leader*, the Berlin-based artist has used well-known Western tropes to talk about Eastern cultures, politics and stereotypes. Her new work also has an interesting Japanese link.

Lorenz was 13 when her father's job took her family to Tokyo. Her exposure to Japanese decorative arts during the five years she lived in Tokyo led to her decision to be an artist. She studied painting and print making at the University of Michigan and did her master's in fine art at the Tyler School of Art. During this time, she spent a year in Italy at the school's Rome campus where she developed an appreciation of gold ground painting and the minimalist 1960s Italian *arte povera* movement. Later in New York, she trained as a conservator of antique East Asian lacquerware and began experimenting with traditional decorative techniques in her painting practice.

Her eclectic background is reflected in her work which blurs the boundaries between east and west, fine and decorative arts, traditional and contemporary, and natural forms



Nancy Lorenz, *Reclining Buddha with Flowers*, 2010. Gold leaf, gilt copper, pigment, on wood panel

and abstract expression. Lorenz uses traditional techniques such as mother-of-pearl inlay, lacquer and water gilding, but she has developed new ways of doing them by using modern materials such as shellac instead of Japanese lacquer and epoxy resins rather than gesso for gilding and gilded 'pours'. She uses precious materials such as gold and moon gold leaf to create her luminous artworks, but she has found ways to use gilding techniques on everyday materials such as wood, cardboard and jute.

"My fascination with lacquer techniques and mother-of-pearl inlay came from my

adolescence in Japan, while my interest in gold-leafing developed in Italy. I know how to do things in old fashioned ways, but I love to combine craft with an irreverent use of materials to create something new and innovative," Lorenz says.

Her show in Dubai features a selection of her luminous, meditative works from the last 15 years. The earliest work in the show is a stunning monumental 12-panel painting from 2004 titled *Rock Garden Room*. The abstract landscape with bamboo trees, flowing water, rocks, fluid lines and empty spaces is made with silver leaf, mother of pearl in-

lay, pigment, gesso and lacquer on wooden board.

In a small work from 2010 titled *Reclining Buddha with Flowers* Lorenz has surrounded the abstract blue figure with beautifully crafted three-dimensional golden flowers. In her screens she has used resin to create textures, mother of pearl inlays to form fluid lines and gilding to create gold and silver luminosity on different sides.

Her recent experiments include paintings from 2018 on corrugated cardboard and jute. With clay as a base for gilding, she has used simple gestural strokes and scratches on the cardboard to depict the sun's rays, the sky, the sea and rain in these abstracted landscapes. In her painting on jute, the netting of the fabric and bits of the reddish clay showing from underneath the palladium, white gold and moon gold leafing add a new dimension to the work.

Also included in the show is a series of abstract studies Lorenz made for a collaborative project with well-known architect Peter Marino in which she created artworks for the interiors of Chanel boutiques, including their boutique at the Mall of the Emirates, Dubai.

Razmi's work also blends east and west. The title of her show refers to the well-known meme of an alien landing on earth and demanding from the first thing it sees, be it a horse, a tree or a stone to be taken to their leader. She has played with the literal and socio-political connotations of this phrase and situation to explore the complexities of language and power structures in the context of Eastern cultures and politics.

"When you look at politics and leadership today, the alien's misunderstanding does not seem so absurd. I wanted to use it to explore semiotics, notions of representation, shifts in perspective and the impact of failed communication," Razmi says.

An example of a literal work is a set of lenticular prints where the word 'leader' changes to 'dealer' as viewers move around them, highlighting the relationship between politics and trade. Another work, *Parties*, is a video showing logos and banners of various Iranian political parties throughout history. But within those visuals is inserted a pair of hands performing the traditional Persian finger snap or 'beshkan', a gesture of joy done at parties in Iran. This juxtaposition of different types of parties is presented against the background noise of a well-known image of protesters during the Iranian revolution of 1979. The work is part of *The Future State*, an ongoing project that Razmi initiated during a residency in London this year, where she hosts a series of round table speculations about the future state of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In a multi-media installation from her ongoing project, *New EastEnders*, Razmi is presenting scripts, trailers and spoilers for her proposed new version of the cult British soap opera *EastEnders*. The work contemplates the ambiguous roles of the 'East' in contemporary popular culture by examining its representations in a 'Western' globalised present.

Her serial is set in the Middle or Far East, and the trailer introduces six lead characters, all played by Razmi that have been created by condensing different 'eastern' identities into stereotypical images. These include belly dancer 'The 1001 Night Shifts'; 'The Influencer', a bearded terrorist-like figure; and the kimono clad 'Xenocentric Eccentric'. The characters are displayed against a background



Anahita Razmi, *Reign Coat #2*, 2018 Carpet Jinbaori

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My 'reign coats' are new versions of jinbaoris made from Persian carpets as a modern interpretation of miscommunication and displacement.”

-Anahita Razmi, artist

featuring covers of *The Soap Opera Digest*. Her spoilers have the characters enacting clichéd, exaggerated scenes, and her script is a neon ticker endlessly displaying the words 'kismet and another kismet'.

"I took the title *EastEnders* quite literally, thinking about the East and its end. My characters are exaggerated, lighthearted stereotypes of nation and race, enacting emotionally charged scenes with no definite end. They question our perceptions and the soap-operafication of politics that we are seeing to-

day," Razmi says. The artist did a residency in Kyoto in 2015 and has since travelled often to Japan. Her work *Reign Coats* is inspired by a *jinbaori* she discovered in the Kodaiki Temple there.

"A *jinbaori* was a coat worn by samurais over their armour. In 16th century Japan, the textiles for this garment were sometimes imported from China or Europe. But in a rare case a Persian carpet made its way to Japan, perhaps via the silk route from Kashan. Since textiles are not placed on the floor in Japanese culture, the carpet was tailored into a *jinbaori* for a high-ranking samurai. This is an interesting example of a cultural misunderstanding, telling a history of multiple displacements. My 'reign coats' are new versions of *jinbaoris* made from Persian carpets as a modern interpretation of mis-communication and displacement in the context of current economics, global trade and questions regarding production and outsourcing," she says.

■ Jyoti Kalsi is an arts-enthusiast based in Dubai.

■ *Silver Moon* will run at Leila Heller Gallery until January 7, 2019.

■ *Take Me To Your Leader* will run at Carbon 12 until January 5, 2019.