

# NAILING IT

Makiko Harris's new work for the sculpture garden at Dulwich Picture Gallery is an oversized symbol of femininity inspired by the Gallery Collection

**What is the idea behind the work, *Mega Nail in Lady Alleyn Red*?**

I work with oversized painted fingernails in my practice, transforming a stereotypically feminine object into sculptures that resemble shields. These nails, re-contextualized as armour, become tools in the theatre of the self; tools of expression and liberation for the wearer.

The name "Lady Alleyn Red" comes from Joan Alleyn, whose portrait [British School, 1596] currently hangs in the Gallery. She is depicted in exquisite Elizabethan costume including a black hat, embroidered stomacher, lace collar and fine gloves; garments that signified the performance of femininity in her era.

**How well did you know the Collection at Dulwich Picture Gallery before this collaboration?**

I was familiar with Dulwich as one of London's oldest public galleries, but I only got to know the Collection and the wonderful team more closely through this project.

Spending time with the portrait of Joan Alleyn, I became fascinated by her self-presentation. It reminded me of how I use surface, ornament and performance as themes that resonate deeply with my own practice.





**Your recent exhibition *Lacquered Rebellion* combines the nails together with metal fishnet stockings, used over abstract paintings. These works all use stereotypical symbols of femininity...**

I'm interested in how stereotypes of femininity including fingernails and stockings function as tools in the theatre of the self. They're seductive and at times performative. However, I believe these tools can be used in a liberatory way. In *Lacquered Rebellion*, I scale them up, harden them in metal, and combine them with delicate paintings. By doing so, they stop being accessories and start to operate as objects of power – the power to choose your own selfhood.

In some ways, I see this in continuity with Joan Alleyn's portrait. Her embroidered costume was not just decoration; it was a surface through which wealth, status and femininity were displayed and also policed. My works update that logic for a contemporary audience, reclaiming so-called "superficial" symbols of femininity as sharp, political and impossible to ignore.

**You work in a variety of media, from painting to music. Is one the starting point or do you conceive works with a range in mind?**

Each piece begins with an idea, and the medium follows. I also think it's about embracing the way that my brain works. I've come to accept and see it as a strength that I like to experiment. I will likely never be an artist that sticks to one thing over and over again for my entire career. The physical process of making is also important to me. Sometimes what I need to do is paint, other times, what I need to do is record music. Responding to my body and mind's relationship to the making process sometimes directs the work.

**You have also created sculptures of oversized objects such as sewing and knitting needles – why those objects in particular, and what is the significance of making them at such a scale?**

A pivotal influence on my practice is the sewing kit I inherited from my Japanese grandmother, containing needles she used not only to create clothing, but also as a form of self-expression. The original small size of these needles, often associated with meticulous and delicate work, reflects how women are traditionally conditioned to think small and occupy limited spaces. This intimate connection to textile arts and their feminist history inspired me to reimagine these tools on a monumental

scale. The resulting sculptures, standing up to two metres tall and crafted in powder-coated steel and bronze, embody a duality, simultaneously fragile and powerful, elegant yet brutal. These pieces serve as both weapons and symbols in the ongoing struggle for reparation, creativity and feminist empowerment. The series functions as both a critique of patriarchal structures and a provocation, envisioning a world where traditionally feminine expression and sexuality are not only empowered but potentially even confrontational.

**These needles were central to your performance work *Needle Dance*. Did you always imagine them as part of a performance?**

From the beginning, I knew the needles needed to be activated through performance because their scale is apparent only in relation to the body. Through the choreography of *Needle Dance*, where the performers [using metres of red rope] metaphorically "sew" themselves together and apart in an underwater setting, we tell the story of the needles as a symbol of autonomy, connection and reparation.

**Do you have plans for a performance using the fingernails?**

Right before installing *Mega Nail in Lady Alleyn Red* at Dulwich Picture Gallery, I did a photoshoot in collaboration with photographer Philip Gay with the nail lying flat on the grass of the meadow, interacting with my own body. Again, the sense of scale comes alive in comparison with the body, as does the shield-like nature of the form of the nail.

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These sculptures join other works such as Harold Offeh's *Hail the New Prophets* and Amy Stephens's *Waking Matter* in our ever-evolving Sculpture Garden. Watch this space for new additions and developments.