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One to Watch: Makiko Harris on her industrial-pop art



Proficient with power tools as a child, artist Makiko Harris uses industrial might to transform the feminine

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“Having slight discomfort when you look at my work is good,” says Makiko Harris, the Japanese/American multidisciplinary artist who we’re claiming as a Londoner since she’s now based here and trained at the Royal College of Art. Plus, her work has a subcultural mix — pop art, kink, DIY punk — that feels very London. Think Vivienne Westwood meets Richard Hamilton meets heavy industry.

“A common theme is transforming something intimate with an industrial process,” she says. “Fragments of the body or symbols of a traditionally feminine perspective are transformed through industry and scale. At the Dulwich Picture Gallery I have this gigantic red fingernail in their sculpture garden that’s like a f*** you. I also do paintings of stockings where the fishnet is laser-cut stainless steel.”



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Harris is talking to the Standard at the South London Gallery, where her work Sentinel is part of the New Contemporaries exhibition. It is a collection of needlework items transformed into metal spears.



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“When my grandmother in Japan passed away, I inherited her sewing box,” she says. “The tools became in my mind a symbol of our connection. It was her way of expressing herself in a life that was quite, from my perspective, constrained. Enlarged, I feel like they’re symbols of agency, of liberation and power. It feels like a weapons rack, so I call it Sentinel. Like it’s waiting to be deployed.”

Harris grew up in northern California, “boring, rural wine country”, to architect parents. Her intense practice, all welding and hammering, was instilled in her by her craftsman father: “I was taught to be a doer, I was learning how to lay wood flooring and driving a tractor when I was a little girl. I had the agency to create — and use power tools.”



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MAKIKO HARRIS: SENTINEL - SHOWING AT NEW CONTEMPORARIES 2026
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She later moved to San Francisco, then worked around the world in fashion and digital — and as a violinist — before finally embracing her art calling at the RCA. Soon she'll be returning to the South London Gallery for the next stage: performance art.

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“Last year I completed a film with two performers underwater wearing red rope costumes and threading their bodies together using two needles. In Japanese folklore, there is a story about the Red Thread of Fate which is supposed to lead you to all the people you're meant to be connected to. The film is about that tension between predestined fate and agency. This will be a live version, and I'm going to be in the performances. It'll be beautiful.



MAKIKO HARRIS
BEN PIPE PHOTOGRAPHY

And I think it's essential to be taking risks in art, whether that be emotional risk or financial risk. Art making is risk taking. I hope that some of that, sensibility comes through for the viewer, where they're seeing not a fully resolved beautiful thing, but something that holds a little bit of tension.”



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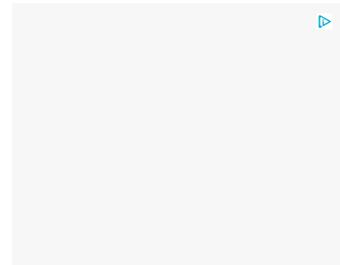
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She says this is a natural development for her interest in the physical: “I think it’s important for these things to take up space and for people to reflect: why do I find this object confrontational, and is it about women being loud? Is it about women taking up space? Is it about the feminine being powerful?”

Sentinel by Makiko Harris is part of New Contemporaries at South London Gallery until April 12; her live performance is on April 11
<https://www.makikoharris.com/exhibitions/>

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