



above:
Tōshūsai Sharaku, *Edobei*, 1794, reprinted by Adachi, 1940
Woodblock print
Courtesy of USC Pacific Asia Museum

cover:
Bidou Yamaguchi, *Zō-onna (Middle-Age Woman)*, 1998
Japanese cypress, seashell, natural pigment, Japanese lacquer
Courtesy of Kelly Sutherland McLeod and Steve McLeod Collection
© Bidou Yamaguchi

Traditions Transfigured: The Noh Masks of Bidou Yamaguchi was organized by the University Art Museum at California State University Long Beach in conjunction with Dr. Kendall H. Brown. Major support has been provided by the McLeod Family Foundation and a grant from Instructional Related Activities at CSULB.

The exhibition at Asia Society Texas Center was made possible through major support from Mary Lawrence Porter, the City of Houston through Houston Arts Alliance, Nancy C. Allen, Nancy and Robert J. Carney, and The Clayton Fund. Lead funding also provided by Chinhui Juhn and Eddie Allen, Anne and Albert Chao, The Favrot Fund, Kathy and Glen Gondo, Vivian L. Smith Foundation, and Dorothy Carsey Sumner. Additional support given by Nanako and Dale Tingleaf, and The Japan Foundation.

Funding is also provided through contributions by Friends of Exhibitions at Asia Society Texas Center.



Exhibition-Related Programs

Exhibition Opening and Night Market

Friday, October 24, 6–9 pm

Join us for a first look at the exhibition, and enjoy the family-friendly night of culture, food and activities.

Members Brunch with Bidou Yamaguchi and Dr. Kendall Brown, Guest Curator

Saturday, October 25, 11 am

Meet the artist and guest curator in an intimate gathering over brunch, along with a Q and A.

Artist Talk by Bidou Yamaguchi with Dr. Kendall Brown, Guest Curator

Saturday, October 25, 3 pm

The artist will offer an inside look at how he approaches the forms, techniques, and transformative spirit of Noh masks.

Murakami Music

Saturday, October 25, 7:30 pm

This genre-defying performance pushes boundaries as music and drama combine to tell the stories of Haruki Murakami's characters.

Noh Unmasked

Wednesday, December 10, 7 pm

Musicologist Kevin Salfen reveals the subtle mysteries of Noh and the refined aesthetics of this Japanese theater tradition.

Creation Station

Saturday, December 6, 1–3 pm

Start your holiday season with mask creations inspired by Noh musical drama and *nengajo*, traditional New Year's greeting cards.

Sake and Sumi-e

Wednesday, January 28, 6–8 pm

A Japanese artist will guide participants in traditional ink painting while sampling some of the country's finest sake.

Heike Monogatari with Akiko Sakurai

Saturday, January 31, 7:30 pm

Master *biwa* artist Akiko Sakurai performs a concert of narrative songs from Japan's medieval period.

Please visit <http://asiasociety.org/texas/bidou> for updated details and tickets.

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TRADITIONS *Transfigured*

THE NOH MASKS OF
BIDOU YAMAGUCHI



The human face and its expressive potential have inspired artists around the world for millennia. Arguably, Japan's Noh theater provides an unparalleled domain for exploring emotion and representing the human countenance. Today, Noh continues to inspire a dynamic dialogue between artists from Asia and the west. Expanding on this rich vein, *Traditions Transfigured* features contemporary works by Bidou Yamaguchi (b. 1970, Fukuoka, Japan). These masks apply the forms, techniques, transformative spirit, and mysterious elegance of Noh masks to iconic female portraits from the European art historical canon, and to Kabuki actor prints by Sharaku, Japan's enigmatic 18th century portrait master.

Like a human face, the work of Bidou Yamaguchi opens itself to many angles of interpretation. The product of a Noh mask carver who also creates modern sculpture

in the form of masks, Bidou's art speaks to issues such as cultural identity, gender, portraiture, performance, representation, and appropriation, as well as the roles of beauty and craft in contemporary art.

Our fundamental premise is that Bidou's art is informed by the world of Noh, and, in turn, offers insight into this diversely creative realm of theater and image making. We stress the productive links between Bidou's roles as a "traditional" artisan who works to reproduce old masks and a contemporary artist who makes new objects. We treat these fresh creations as "masks," although they were not commissioned for use in Noh plays. In fact, the oblique orientation of the eyes in most of these portraits differentiates them from Noh masks. Despite these differences, our approach imagines these works as potential characters in future dramas.



In the world of Noh, Bidou's work challenges the conventions of Noh masks and, by extension, might stimulate new types of Noh plays. More expansively, Bidou's art suggests ways of deploying the aesthetic strategies and ontological assumptions of Noh. This is not simply another strategy for "modernizing within tradition" in Japan, or a new manifestation of Japanese cultural uniqueness with universal application. Bidou's work is not aimed at any totalizing theory about contemporary art practice, and certainly the artist has produced no manifesto to such an end.

Instead, his art seems focused on a particular task. Bidou's masks are a kind of intercession on behalf of half-human, half-artistic spirits. His works are transfigurations that bring about reincarnations into a transformed body (*keshin*) that is the true body (*hontai*) for figures like Lisa Gherardini who have become so well known as images (the *Mona Lisa*) that they all but cease to exist as humans. This act is analogous to the procedure of intercession or recuperation in the texts of Noh plays. However, unlike Noh plays, where this literary

rebirth recuperates the socially unacceptable acts and desires of women and other marginalized figures, Bidou gives a new body—literally, a face with the potential of speaking—to persons who have been turned into "ghosts" by mechanical reproduction, popular appropriation, and, perhaps, a deeper unwillingness to comprehend the humanity of people removed from us in time and place.

Bidou's art constructs a three-dimensional face for these rhetorical ghosts, and thus brings about an altered understanding of these persons who have become so familiar as images they are almost invisible as the vestiges of souls. Although his art is rooted in a Buddhist worldview, it resonates with the Christian idea of transfiguration as a change in form or appearance that parallels a spiritual change, and it signals the exultant moment when the human meets the divine so that the temporal becomes the eternal.

By transfiguring both European and Japanese artistic traditions, Bidou Yamaguchi's work merges past and present. More importantly, it allows contemporary audiences to uncover deeper dimensions of their own humanity. By imagining ourselves wearing different faces, we can forge deeper spiritual connections with each other.

Kendall H. Brown, PhD
Guest Curator

left:
Bidou Yamaguchi, *Edobei*, 2011
Japanese cypress, seashell,
natural pigment, Japanese lacquer
Courtesy of Sebastian Izzard, LLC
© Bidou Yamaguchi

center:
Bidou Yamaguchi
Courtesy of the artist

right:
Bidou Yamaguchi, *Mona Lisa*, 2007
Japanese cypress, seashell,
natural pigment, Japanese lacquer
Courtesy of Kelly Sutherland McLeod
and Steve McLeod Collection
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