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Tsuruya Kōkei: Modern Kabuki Prints Revised & Revisited Opens in its Final American Venue at Asia Society Texas Center

Collection Showcases Artist's Seminal Works, Plus Centuries of Kabuki Art

HOUSTON, August 12, 2019 – Asia Society Texas Center (ASTC) features the prolific talents of one of Japan's leading contemporary print artists in the exhibition ***Tsuruya Kōkei: Modern Kabuki Prints Revised & Revisited***, opening September 14. The exhibition will present a remarkable 77 prints by Kōkei, including all his kabuki actor portraits from 1984 to 1993, plus a collection of his meticulously rendered self-portrait. Only the second U.S. museum to host the exhibition, ASTC will also serve as its final American venue.

Kabuki, a Japanese theatrical artform pioneered in the early 1600's by all-female troupes, was taken over by all-male troupes in the mid-1600's. The actors performed multiple roles (of both genders) throughout a show, and this exhibition utilizes those layered issues of identity to explore broader questions of self-definition and representation.

"Kabuki actor prints have been a beloved genre in Japanese woodblock printmaking for centuries," says **Bridget Bray**, ASTC's Nancy C. Allen Curator and Director of Exhibitions. "We are delighted to present such a comprehensive view into the ways that Kōkei both reveres and reinterprets these portraits."

Because the artist limited his editions to just a few dozen prints per design, such a complete collection is unprecedented and will represent a first in Texas. Though he is the son and grandson of painters, Kōkei was not trained as an artist and did not even attempt creating any art until the age of 32. However, once discovered by the head of the famous Kabuki-za Theater, Kōkei linked himself with the theater and began documenting the productions' actors via woodblock print, prodigiously turning out new prints of a different actor every month. His prints were zealously collected by theater fans, and to guarantee the prints' rarity, he destroyed his wood blocks after each show closed.

In addition to being self-taught, Kōkei diverged further from tradition by designing, carving, and printing his own work, foregoing studio assistants. He also used magnolia, which is much softer than customary wood block sources, and printed his work on extremely delicate *ganpi* paper.



Curated by **Dr. Kendall Brown** and marking the 30th anniversary of Tsuruya Kōkei's first



solo show in the United States, the current exhibition will also trace the history of kabuki artwork, starting with historic prints by the enigmatic kabuki master artist Sharaku, who dazzled the Japanese public for less than a year (1794-1795) before disappearing. And more than two dozen modern and pop-culture pieces will illustrate the lasting influence of traditional kabuki.

Fast Facts

- Exhibition dates: Saturday, September 14, 2019–Sunday, January 19, 2020
- Admission: Free for members and children ages 12 and under; \$5 for Students and Seniors with ID; \$8 for Nonmembers
- Hours: Tuesday–Friday, 11am–6pm; Saturday–Sunday, 10am–6pm
- Location: Asia Society Texas Center, 1370 Southmore Blvd, Houston, TX, 77004 (in the Museum District)

Related Programs

- Opening Reception featuring guest curator Dr. Kendall H. Brown: Thursday, September, 6 pm; free to the public; [RSVP](#) requested
- Curatorial Talk featuring guest curator Dr. Kendall H. Brown discussing Kōkei's work, with a focus on gender identity (+ complimentary gallery tour immediately afterwards): Saturday, September 21, 2 pm; free for members; \$8 for nonmembers (tickets [here](#) or at asiasociety.org/texas)
- Monthly docent-led tours on Saturdays, 3 pm: October 12, November 9, and December 14; free for members; \$8 for nonmembers (tickets [here](#) or at asiasociety.org/texas)

About the Artist

Although born into a family of painters, **Tsuruya Kōkei** (b. 1946) did not embrace art until age 32. He then named himself Tsuruya Kōkei, using the alternative reading, Tsu, of his given name Gen, and Kō from the given names of his grandfather Nakazawa Hiromitsu and father, Fujikawa Kōji. This act of transformative self-naming both distances and connects the artist from and to his artistic forebears. While Hiromitsu made elegant designs for woodblock prints of landscapes and beauties, Kōkei cuts and prints his own dynamic drawings of Kabuki actors, inspired by the mysterious 18th-century artist Sharaku. From 1978 to 2000, Kōkei worked as resident artist at the renowned Kabuki-za Theater, where actors also wrestle with living up to the family name and creating new identities. In 2000, Kokei began obsessively drawing self-portraits. In 2017, he returned to printmaking with a portrait series, paying homage to the inspirational masters of ukiyo-e (pictures of the floating world).

About Asia Society Texas Center

With 14 locations throughout the world, Asia Society is the leading educational organization promoting mutual understanding and strengthening partnerships among the peoples, leaders, and institutions of Asia and the rest of the world. Asia Society Texas Center executes the global mission with a local focus, enriching and engaging the vast diversity of Houston through innovative, relevant programs in arts and culture, business and policy, education, and community outreach.

This exhibition is organized by USC Pacific Asia Museum, in collaboration with Asia Society Texas Center. Exhibitions at Asia Society Texas Center are presented by Nancy C. Allen and Leslie and



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Image credits: Tsuruya Kōkei, (Page 1) Matsumoto Kōshirō IX as Kamakura Gongorō, in 'Shibaraku,' July 1991, 1998.66.2; (Page 2) Bandō Tamasaburō V as the fisher girl Matsukaze, in "Suma no Utsushi-e," May 1994, 1998.66.18, Japan, Ink and color on Ganpi Tori no Ko paper, USC Pacific Asia Museum Collection, Gift of Drs. Aziz and Deanna Khan.