

Living

living@thenews.com.mx

“Here, Where I Am Not”

Whimsical and enchanted by the world around her, artist Kimiko Yoshida revisits famous works to adapt and interpret them in a series of self-portraits

BY LYDIA CAREY
The News

Kimiko Yoshida's series of self-portraits titled “Here, Where I Am Not” are elaborate. They require hours of work. Four hours for makeup, Yoshida said, and up to 15 to arrange the accessories. But the intensity of Yoshida's portraits lies in more than just detail.

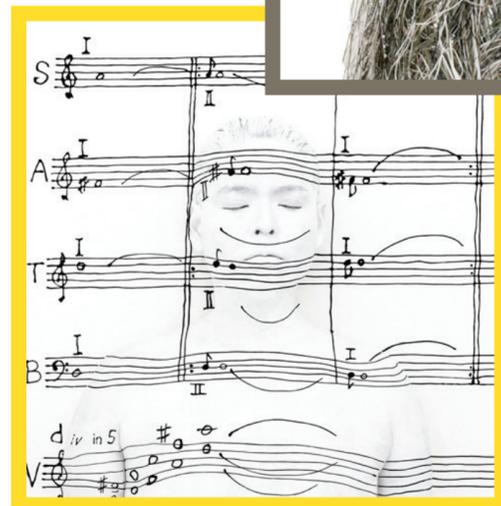
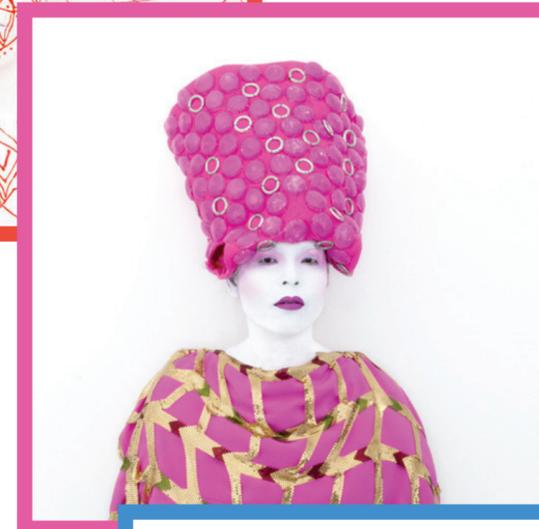
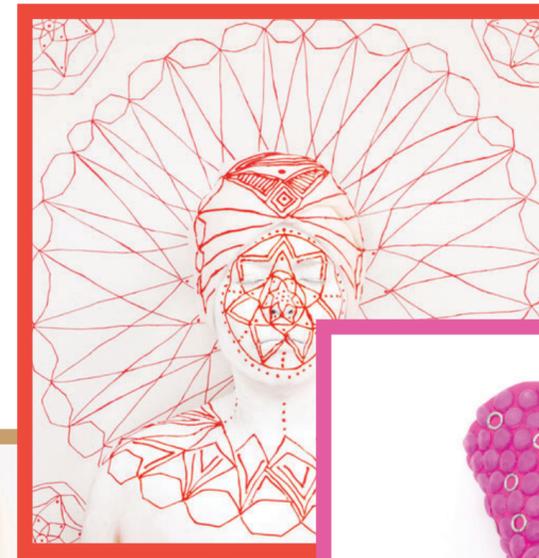
The artist staring from the five-foot canvas on which the photos are printed is thoughtful, determined and striking. In “Painting (Doña Isabel de Porcel by Goya),” Yoshida stares out from under the skirt of a blood-red sequined dress. Her skin is painted white to match the picture's background and her mouth and eyes are shades of pink. Though her subjects vary widely, starkness and contrasts are constant — and her in-person demeanor contrasts starkly with her photographic persona.

The photos are a lot of things, but one thing they are not is lighthearted. Yoshida, bright-eyed and bohemian, was not how I pictured her as she burst into laughter at her jokes made in broken English.

The woman behind the geisha makeup and ornate headdresses is whimsical, enchanted by the world around her. She finds figures she interprets in her pieces — Mona Lisa, Zapata, Don Quixote and Matisse — in books, in imaginings and in colors that catch her eye. She said she is “documenting herself through art,” and giggled.

When she was a young woman in Japan, Yoshida's father wanted her to study business. The family was very conservative and had traditional ideas about women. “I hope you never learn what freedom is,” he told her when she was growing up. Against his wishes, at 28 she moved to France. “I realized that I could do no other thing but art. It was the only decision in which I could continue my life,” she said in an interview with The News at the Festival Internacional de la Imagen (FINI) inauguration of her show.

So she started to take pictures. First of landscapes and objects, then of herself, costumed to represent famous works of art and artists. “Why do I use or seek after ancient works? Because contemporary art is not going to exist if we don't revisit them. That's what I want to do, revisit them



and adapt them.” All of Yoshida's self-portraits are in a square format, with the subject facing forward, under direct light. Yoshida's skin is always painted the same color as the background. She then adds objects, transforming them into accessories — a dress serves as a collar, shoes as a hat — making them nearly unrecognizable.

The “Here, Where I Am Not” exhibit features a short documentary of Yoshida painstakingly applying geisha makeup for one of her photos. She said that the makeup allows her to “disappear” within the pieces, a kind of freedom in itself. “Western makeup is made to make women more beautiful. The make-up of the geisha is meant to convert her into the aesthetic of the geisha,” she said.

In her self-portrait of the Mona Lisa, electric green and yellow eyes stare out from under a mesh of metal and glow-in-the-dark tubing. As Andy Warhol, she wears a fiber-optic wig

and aquamarine lipstick. But when I met her, she wore no makeup, her hair in a simple bun. At breakfast the day after the inauguration, she switched from French to English, trying out her handful of Spanish words on the waiter each time he came to the table. She didn't want to talk about art, instead telling stories about meeting Japanese chef Nobu Matsuhisa in Los Angeles and the old factory where she and her husband Jean-Michel Ribet-

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tes live in Paris.

It was Yoshida's first time in Mexico. She was invited to inaugurate an exhibit in India at the same time, but chose to visit Hidalgo as a special guest of the FINI. Organizers of the festival chose Japan as this year's featured country and hosted a dozen or so Japanese cultural events, but Yoshida is more interested in Mexicans. “One hand, I see that (Mexican culture) is very folklore and ethnic, on the other, the people are so polite, it's

like 18th century Europe,” she said. Fascinated by mescal and pulque, she giggled as she walked down a street in Mexico for the first time. She told reporters that the trip would enrich her work, and that she planned to visit museums and learn about the Maya people.

Yoshida began her self-portraits in 2001, thinking they would be the one thing that would “be successful.” Her success has proven her right. Her diverse themes — African and Arabian, male and female, and even mythical creatures — reflect the values that inform her work. “I don't believe that identity, origin or belonging are destiny. We can not obey gender or inherited stereotypes, (and must) reject voluntary servitude.” She said that when the camera clicks her mind is empty and only her body remains; she has “disappeared.”

She planned to travel Mexico for two weeks, looking for inspiration among the ruins of the Aztecs. Her exhibit “Here, Where I Am Not,” part of the Festival de la Imagen of the Autonomous University of Hidalgo State, is on display at the Casa Grande in Mineral de Monte, outside of Pachuca.

