

**BEAUTY AND DESIRE
IN Edo Period Japan**

&

**Read My Lips
Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman**

Exhibitions Opening

by

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**National Gallery of Australia
Canberra
Friday June 6, 1998**

**Brian Kennedy
Barbara Kruger and other Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen**

I am very happy to have been invited here this evening to take up the considerable challenge of opening these two very special and unique exhibitions.

I call it a challenge because at first sight the two exhibitions seem so different that one wonders how they might be talked about together.

After all, what can we say that might link the artistic output of 17th century Tokyo with the work of three women working in late 20th century Manhattan, working individually, and using mostly contemporary media, who seek to comment on and criticise some of the most powerful images of our time?

Is there any complementarity between them, or should they be regarded as parallel experiences?

It will be up to those who visit the exhibitions to draw their own conclusions but let me say this:

I did not expect to find more than parallels, especially when I realised that the Japanese exhibit was not entirely focused on women (after all, I do not believe I am here this evening because of my expertise in art!)

Yet on closer examination, I came to see that there are comparisons that can be drawn which make seeing the two sets of images together even more enthralling than might otherwise be the case.

I was tempted initially to call my remarks tonight “three girls and some geishas” as a means of drawing the two exhibitions together, of finding common points.

The three New York women (who I am calling “girls” for alliterative purposes) select the images of women they wish to comment on, but the geishas - by definition - are themselves selected, for the purpose of pleasuring the men who can afford to pay for them.

As Gary Hickey’s catalogue notes make clear, many if not most of the courtesans of the Yoshiwara, the gated quarter that housed the bordellos and was roughly equivalent to what today we would call a “red light district”, were exploited.

Many were themselves the daughters of prostitutes or had been sold into sexual slavery by destitute parents.

The gorgeous costumes and elaborate seduction rituals so beautifully depicted in this exhibition mask a misery that would be only too familiar to Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman and Jenny Holzer who each seeks in her own way to strip away the layers of disguise and deceit of the contemporary manifestations of female exploitation.

But in the end I decided that that description was a bit glib, and rather too passive. It did not capture the narrative element involved in both exhibitions, nor the implicit and explicit movement of ideas that makes each a powerful commentary on the society it seeks to depict.

The Japanese works tell a story through several dimensions.

That story moves in time through more than 200 years, from 1600 to 1868;

it moves through various art forms - from woodblock prints, engravings and paintings to screens and costumes, including an alluring array of kimonos;

and finally it moves through the various metaphors for depicting women, from the men acting as women in *Kabuki* theatre through to the highly stylised top-ranking courtesans of the later 18th century whose duty it was to train their replacements at the same time as they worked to please the men who paid for their services.

By the age of 27 they were on the scrap-heap, replaced by the young girls they had trained and forced themselves onto the street unless they could negotiate their way into concubinage or, for the fortunate few, marriage.

Hickey comments that by the mid 18th century “the costume and make-up of the courtesan of high rank had become so ostentatious that she was unrecognisable as a real woman”, a fact that was lamented by contemporary writers who pined for the good old days when prostitutes were unadorned and, at least in that respect, resembled ordinary women.

The exhibition encompasses, in far more detail than I have time to recount here, a narrative of the evolution of the courtesan of the Edo period to the geisha - the elegant and refined hostess who was not expected to dispense sexual favours - of the 19th century.

Similarly, “Read my Lips” - that wonderful George Bush quote from the hustings in 1988 and penned for him by speech-writer Peggy Noonan - is an instructive narrative.

Although necessarily of a very different kind. Here we see the work of three separate artists who while they have much in common - starting with the city where they work and live for at least part of each year - are not collaborators.

The city of New York and especially the island of Manhattan does provide some of the essentials of each artist's works. Some of these may well be unique.

In how many cities could one buy human bones, hundreds of them, that Jenny Holzer needed for Lustmorg, her testament to the suffering of the raped women of Bosnia.

In how many cities is there a Times Square with its unique Spectacolor Board that Barbara Kruger used in 1983 for her text on consumerism that the city administration objected to and removed because it countered the Christmas spirit of undisciplined spending.

And for that matter how many cities have the kind of magazine publishing empire like Conde Nast where Barbara got her early graphics and design training and learned - so I understand - to loathe fashion (another essential element of New York)

Maybe Cindy Sherman could buy her plastic dolls in other cities but I bet it's easier in New York where no one could give a damn that some crazy lady wanted several hundred dolls, and make sure they've got genitals!

So New York unites them, as does their preoccupation with women's place in and treatment at the hands of post modern, post industrial, post technological society.

Cindy Sherman uses herself as well as her dolls among the detritus of a modern civilisation; she is both subject and object.

Jenny Holzer confronts us with images of women defiled by the wars at home (domestic violence) as well as those abroad (ethnic cleansing).

Barbara Kruger reminds us of the cultural imperatives that still define and differentiate women: women as consumers ("I shop therefore I am" - we are still gathering after all these centuries!) and also women whose bodies are still not their own because of laws on abortion.

I was still living in the US in 1989 when the controversy erupted over the use of National Endowment for the Arts funding for works that were seen as overtly sexual. It was perhaps no coincidence that the controversy started over the work of a woman, a performance artist by the name of Karen Finlay whose work involved the use of yams and her own genitalia.

Which was all a bit much for the (“read my lips”) Bush Administration who certainly did not want to read hers, and did not want anyone else to do so either!

Similarly the work of Robert Mapplethorpe (lots of lips there too!) was soon also caught up in the same controversy.

The work of the three Manhattan artists reminds us that activist art - a term I believe they all prefer to “political” or “feminist” art - is always at the cutting edge if it is effective.

And I think we can safely say that each of them has been effective. Putting them together in “Read My Lips” underscores their power, and is also a useful reminder of some of the issues and themes of the past three decades.

These themes have included women emerging from domesticity and from imprisoning stereotypes; the power of advertising and the politicisation of the personal.

Finally, both exhibitions incorporate images that have powerful iconic status.

The black and white photos used by Barbara Kruger are immediately recognisable - even if their subjects sometimes are not - as images of modernity. She then superimposes commentary, giving these familiar images either a different meaning or an enhanced one.

The Japanese images are also very familiar. We all know these images even if we were not necessarily aware that they depicted courtesans or Kabuki actors.

But they had the status of icons of traditional Japan just as the black and white photo with its implication of news is a present day icon of today's urgent information obsessed society.

What both exhibitions do is to take us behind these icons to explore levels of reality that are not immediately apparent to the superficial gaze. They give content and meaning to images that have wide social recognition but perhaps not much comprehension.

The two exhibitions depict two societies, each of which has reached the zenith of its current economic, social and political power, so that these images, and these icons, are also historical documents, powerful reminders of eras that have peaked and are now in decline.

For this reason, and because the two exhibitions are ultimately about women, and images of women, I decided I would call these remarks "Twin Peaks".