

# Makiko Harris and Her Artistic Endeavor

ART & CULTURE

Makiko Harris is the result of the multiculturalism and her Feminism. Her work is reminiscent of her deep thoughts and her way to see the world. Known for her work in sculpture, film, and immersive installations, she has explored themes of feminism and the complex intersection of tradition and modernity. Her latest project, Needle Dance, is an evocative exploration of the symbolic power of domestic tools, bringing new life to the humble needle through monumental sculptures, dance, and film. In this conversation, we dive into her creative process, the conceptual underpinnings of Needle Dance, and how her work reflects the tension between self-determination and the cultural forces that shape us.

**CAROLINA BENJUMEA:** Your work is really influenced by feminism and the body. How do you see the relationship between these two subjects in your work?

**MAKIKO HARRIS:** I think when we think about feminism and the body, first of all, there are different ways we can have knowledge. Oftentimes in academia and contemporary art, it can be quite cerebral and logic-based. But from a feminist perspective, there's this idea of corporeal knowledge. So corporeal knowledge is body-based knowledge—what do we know through our bodies, how do our bodies remember? As an artist, especially working across many different materials, the materiality of the work and my body-based knowledge come together to create the work. It's something I wrote about in my dissertation at the RCA. That's the starting point, thinking about what type of knowledge is important to explore. The subject matter of my work is also about bodies and how we exist in the world.

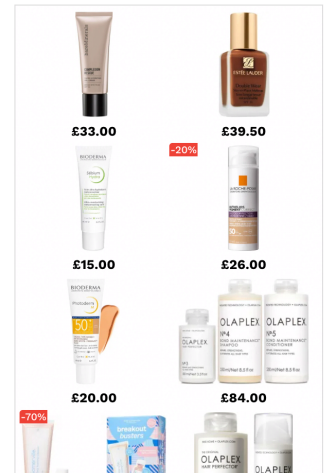
**C.B.:** Yeah, and how do you get the different ideas for your work?

**M.H.:** I think the inspiration for my work comes from so many places, and probably most artists will say the same, but ultimately it's based on my experiences as a woman in this world and growing up in the family I did. I'm half Japanese and half American. I spent some of my childhood living in Japan. All my Japanese family still live there, but I mostly grew up in California. That transnational and cross-cultural background is something I absolutely draw inspiration from, but also how that places me in terms of my subjectivity and how I'm perceived in broader culture—how is my body perceived in Western cultures or in Japan? All those different things. Different influences mesh together to provide inspiration.

**C.B.:** We could say that your art is political. Do you conceive your work with that intention, or what's your objective?

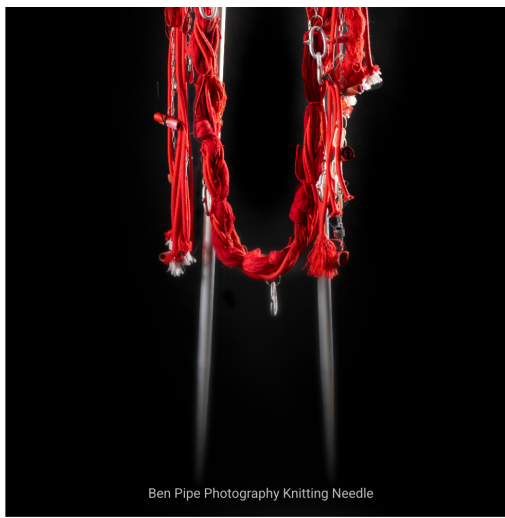
**M.H.:** No, the objective is not necessarily to be political, to be honest. I think it's a trap to make work with a specific objective for how you want the viewer to feel or what you want them to do. As artists, it's our job to tell stories and shed light on experiences, truths, whatever it may be. Ultimately, how the audience interprets that is not up to us, right? We might have an intention, but I don't think it works to say, "I'm going to set out to make political artwork." It might be perceived that way, but that's not my ultimate intention. My intention is simply to say, "This has been my experience," and maybe others can relate. It's about connecting through stories.

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**C.B.:** Who do you think connects the most with your work, considering what you just said? What kind of people are more likely to connect with your work?

**M.H.:** I'm aware that my audience is probably primarily other women and maybe gay men, but don't quote me on that (laughs). I also know there's a particular aesthetic to my work that might not feel accessible to the broadest audience. But, like I was saying about trying to be political or not, ultimately we have to make what feels authentic to us. It's not authentic to say, "I want to make something really universal." If you're trying to speak to everybody, you're going to speak to nobody. So, I stick to what feels authentic for me to express at this point in time. I also think that might change over time, and that's okay. I don't have the intention of saying, "I want this to be my audience, and I don't want that to ever change." But I'm aware of who my primary audience is now, and that might change in the future.

**C.B.:** You work with a lot of different mediums—painting, sculpture, installations, films, sound. Do you think these different mediums complement each other in your work, or do they each allow you to express yourself differently?

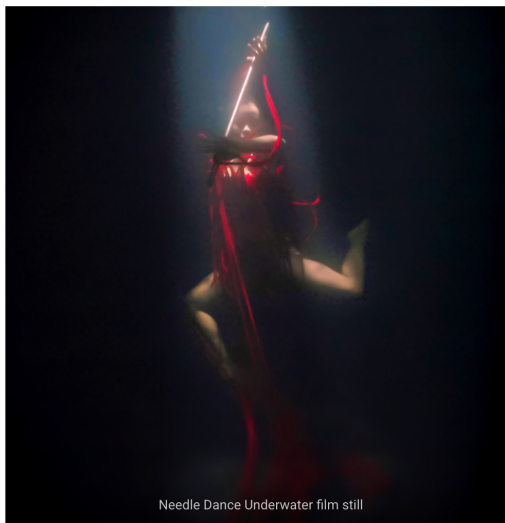
**M.H.:** I don't really see those two things as opposing facets. Yes, I hope they all complement each other, and they do allow me to express myself differently. I think it's both. I've selected my media quite intentionally based on my sensibility as an artist—how I like to work and what materials I respond best to. For example, I find painting and metal quite similar because both are malleable. With metal, you use heat and force, but both materials are malleable to touch, and there's an intuitive, body-based sense of knowledge when you're actively making something. As opposed to something like printmaking, which is a more linear process where you need to know from the start what's going to happen at each step, which I don't do as much. With film and sound, there's also a nonlinear creative process. I'm really excited to be moving more into moving image and film because it's a beautiful way to express and show how my work relates to the body more literally. I'm working with dancers on a movement piece with needle sculptures in relation to their bodies. I'm excited to explore time-based media in that sense. I hope that both the audio and film create a sense of an entire atmosphere, like a whole world.

**C.B.:** When we talk about art, we usually also talk about a specific aesthetic, something that can please or not please others. Art is very visual. How important is the visual aspect for you to portray the right message?

**M.H.:** This is such an interesting conversation for me because, in my experience in academia and in critical conversations around contemporary art, there's often a suspicion of the aesthetic or of things that are beautiful or meant to be visually appreciated. To be honest, I think that comes from a patriarchal perspective that doubts beauty and only values logic, primarily. In contemporary art, we're often put in a position where everything has to have a very clear explanation. It can't just be about the aesthetic—it has to be 100% about the concept. I'm not saying my work doesn't have a concept. It absolutely does. But I think the aesthetic is very important because, to me, it's part of world-building. It's about creating an entire atmosphere and mood. Visual communication is crucial for me to connect with others and effectively tell these stories. Image-making is an important part of my practice and how I aim to communicate with my audience.



Credit Carlos Basilio Makiko Harris Needle Dance



Needle Dance Underwater film still

**C.B.:** I want to talk to you about *Needle Dance*, your more recent work. Could you take me through the conception of the work? How did you come up with the idea? What was the process of creating it like?

M.H.: Yeah, absolutely. It starts with the needles themselves, which are metal sculptures. They're enlarged replicas of my grandmother's knitting and sewing needles that I inherited after she passed away a few years ago. I've been making this series of sculptures for about three years now. They've been quite successful in connecting with audiences. When people see these domestic tools on a monumental scale, they suddenly take on a different meaning. To me, the needles are a symbol of feminist agency and voice, recognizing that this type of "women's work" was often relegated to being quite small—whether it was needle stitch embroidery or something similar. But also, it was a way that women expressed their voice. There's a long history of textile arts in resistance movements as well.

Fast forward to creating these at a monumental scale, and they become quite weapon-like. We are reimagining the scale that voice could take on. Like all good projects, I was making these needles, and I had a chat with a friend who came around my studio. We were talking about how difficult it is to tell the scale of the needles when they're not in comparison to the body. If you're just looking at a still image, it's hard to get a sense of their size. I said, "Ideally, the whole point of them is for them to be wielded by somebody, almost like an arrow or a spear." And we thought, wouldn't it be amazing if I could create a work where that was more evident, where the scale and their purpose were more apparent? So originally, we thought about doing a performance art piece, where I'd work with dancers and we'd have some sort of performance event. So my friend Carlos, who's been my music collaborator for several years, he was the one I initially had this conversation about the performance piece with. Then his friend Deborah Milner, who's actually his neighbor, is this incredible costume designer. So we started speaking with her about perhaps doing costumes that would be part of this concept of the dancers wielding the needles, and perhaps they are sewing themselves together and apart. That's where we started thinking about creating the costumes out of rope or out of what would be the thread.

Deborah had previously worked with Peter many times. They're good friends, and he's a long-time image maker, always on photo shoots and film shoots. So he came on as my directing partner, and we decided to move forward with a film. Moving image artwork. Then we decided—this was Peter's idea—to put it underwater, partially because we wanted the rope costumes to look like all of that tangle was floating in midair, versus if we were doing it on land, all of that would have just flopped to the ground with gravity. As we continued talking about the concept and I started bringing in more collaborators, we co-developed what this was going to turn into altogether until we ultimately created this incredible underwater scene with choreography, the costumes, the needles, and the dancers all together.



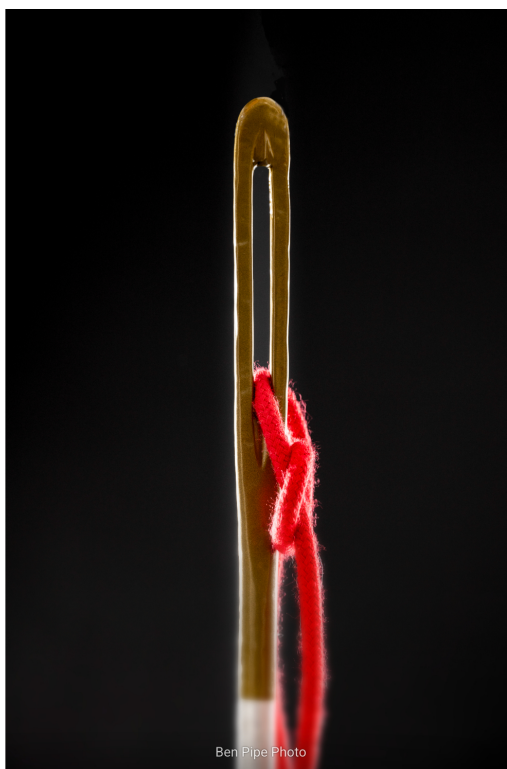
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C.B.: This work was inspired by the Japanese legend of the red thread. And I have seen this legend more being used in a romantic context. So what is the connection between this legend and feminist ideas?

**M.H.:** So I've seen it more used in a romantic context as well. But at the same time, I think it can apply to any kind of relationship or connection we're meant to have in life. My core question is, amidst all the militancy that feminism can have, the push towards self-determination, the push towards agency—these needles originally symbolized that. But at the same time, as humans, we need to recognize that we're born into a particular culture, into a family of origin, into society with all these predetermined things that we may or may not choose. I think it's a bit of a fallacy or fool's errand to think we have 100 percent agency and choice in everything. Actually, there may be a lot of things where we don't have free will. For many women, and people in general, there's always going to be that tension between what we feel is predestined for us versus the need to carve our own path. And in *Needle Dance*, I hope to encapsulate that tension between the energy towards self-determination and the feeling like, "Oh, maybe this is actually what was meant for me."

**C.B.:** And the work includes, you know, you work with film, sculpture, and two-dimensional artworks. So how do these different formats speak to each other within the same space?

**M.H.:** Yeah, of course. So the exhibition space is divided into two areas. There's the main exhibition gallery room, and then attached to it is a cinema space. In the cinema, which seats 60 people, we will show the full moving image artwork *Needle Dance*. Between showings of *Needle Dance*, we'll also show a behind-the-scenes reel of what it took to pull this project together, since it involved quite a lot of people over probably about 18 months of work. The cinema space is beautiful—it was just built out in May of 2024, so it's very new and has amazing surround sound, which is really important to me because we've worked so hard on the soundtrack. Carlos and I wrote and recorded it together, and it's being produced by a fantastic local producer in Brixton. Then, in the main gallery space that's attached, we'll have projections of some of the film footage, though not the entire film. There will be moving projections alongside the physical sculptures that were actually used in the shoot. My incredible performers were underwater with these heavy metal needles—they were such champions. Those needles will be part of the exhibition, as well as some additional ones. The costumes made by Deborah will also be displayed on mannequins.



**C.B.:** And to finish, how do you think the current state of the world—politically, socially, and environmentally—affects or will influence your work in the future?

**M.H.:** I think the social and environmental atmosphere we live in will always impact what artists want to create. It's going to shape the kind of work I feel is most urgent to make. There's this ongoing conversation about how contemporary art can remain relevant and urgent, and I believe it's through responding to the current moment. We talked earlier about how it's a bit of a fallacy to try to make political artwork intentionally, but at the same time, I think it's important for art to be relevant to contemporary discourse in some way. Given everything that's happening politically, especially in the US, with the current administration and the potential loss of rights for many people, it feels more pressing than ever to tell stories about our humanity—why it's important to fight for what matters. The state of the world, even if it's not directly political, does make our choices as artists political by default. The things we decide to highlight or focus on, even just by choosing one subject over another, become inherently political because of the context we're living in. And I don't disagree with that. It's an inevitable part of responding to the world around us and the things we care about, and that's something we can express through art.





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By Carolina Benjumea · 26th February 2025

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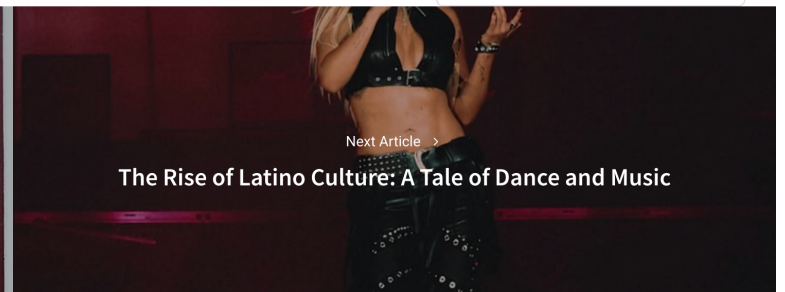
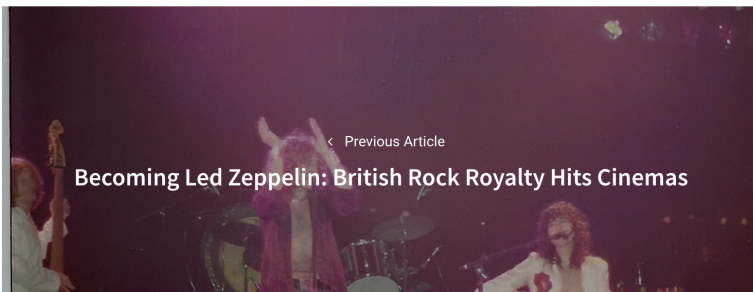
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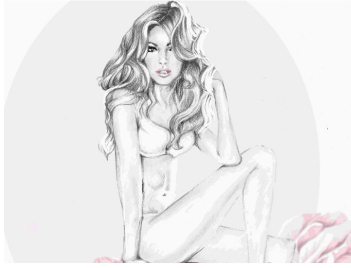
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