

KAREN KNORR
MONOGATARI

Exhibition from 29th October to 28th November 2015



The Journey, Hie Torii, Tokyo, Monogatari, 2015

Opening on Thursday 29th October - 6 PM to 9 PM



Akirame, Shunko-in Temple, Kyoto,
Monogatari, 2015

Karyukai and Monogatari / Japan

Since 2012, Karen Knorr has been exploring and learning about Japanese heritage culture travelling to Tokyo, Kyoto, Nara and Ise several times during different periods of the year. She continues to travel there in order to capture the transience of the seasons which are viewed through the structures of temples and shrines. After the 2011 Toho-

ko earthquake and tsunami which killed over 15000 people in Japan, Knorr felt compelled to visit Japan out of friendship and a deep feeling of sympathy. She has been working on two series which complement each other yet use distinct approaches: *Karyukai* focuses on portraiture with *waka* (poetry) composed by the sitters and *Monogatari* places animals and people on architectural sites which serve as witnesses of an ancestral legacy that still pervades Japanese life today.

Karyukai is a series of portraits of women in traditional kimono dress created in collaboration with artists, models and friends. They refer to *ukiyo-e* (japanese term meaning « pictures of the floating world ») representing *bijin-ga* (pictures of beauties) which are found in Japanese screens and prints. The photographs are accompanied by haikus composed by the women sitters and printed on to the surface of the portraits similar to the temple prints of poets that Karen Knorr found in the Blue Lotus temple in Kyoto.

These portraits allude to the remnants of Geisha culture in contemporary Japanese life.

The geisha figure - *gei* meaning art and *sha* meaning the person practising this art - along with Mount Fuji have been symbols of Japan ever since the Meiji era, when Japan opened to west culture in the mid-19th century. In recent decades, geishas have been working more openly outside of their usual structures. Indeed, geishas usually live in a matriarchal society in the *hanamachi* (geisha quarters) in Kyoto, Osaka and Tokyo. Geisha still undergo a strict training earning their living by entertaining male business clients with music, conversation and dance.

Although today Japanese women wear western clothes, kimonos are still worn for special occasions such as the coming of age ceremonies¹ and family reunions. The type of sleeves and *obi*² are important as are colours and designs that signify status and whether the woman is married or not. For example, *furisode*³ kimonos with long swinging sleeves are worn by unmarried women and *tomesode*⁴ kimonos are worn by married women.

Monogatari, a new series following from *Fables* (2004-2008) and *India Song* (2008-2010) in its methodology considering animal life and cultural heritage this new series refers to Japanese heritage and myth. Animals appear on elegant architectures that Knorr has discovered in the *Tale of Genji*, famous modern novel written by Murasaki Shikibu, a courtesan from the Heian era, over the course of the 10th century. These temples are still visible throughout Kyoto and a lot of them contain gorgeous golden screens painted by the famous Kanō school of painters.

This work also refers to the popular tale's fantastic world. Animals look like *yōkai*, ghosts and supernatural monsters which belong to folklore. They may possess animal like features or othertimes they can appear mostly human or take the shape of an inanimate object. Women wearing kimonos, who sometimes accompany them in the Karen Knorr's stagings, corroborate the omnipresence of the tradition.

¹ Coming of Age Day (*seijin shiki*) is a holiday celebrated in order to congratulate and encourage all those who have reached the age of 20.

² An *obi* is a sash for traditional Japanese dress, *keikogi* worn for Japanese martial arts, and part of kimono outfits.

³ The *furisode* (literally « swinging sleeves ») is the most formal type of kimono.

⁴ The *tomesode* is a type of kimono with shorter sleeved than *furisode*.



Journey to the Great Sage, Hosen-in Temple Ohara, Japon, Monogatari, 2015



袖通し
顔をあげれば
紅葉舞う

Miho and Michiko, Capitol Hotel, Tokyo, Karyukai, 2015



Guardian of the Temple, Nazen-ji Temple, Kyoto, Monogatari, 2015

KAREN KNORR

Born in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, in 1954.

She lives and works in London.

An American born in Frankfurt, Germany, Karen Knorr was raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico in the 1960s and educated in Paris and London. At the University of Westminster, Knorr studied alongside Olivier Richon, Mitra Tabrizian and Mark Lewis, addressing the critical debates concerning the « politics of representation » that emerged during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Knorr has taught and lectured internationally at institutions that include The University of Westminster, Goldsmiths College, Harvard University and The Art Institute of Chicago.

Karen Knorr's work has developed a critical and playful dialogue with photography, using different visual and textual strategies to explore her subject matter, focusing upon themes that range from the family and lifestyle to the animal and its representation in the museum context. Knorr uses photography to explore western cultural traditions, from the gentlemen's clubs of Saint James to elegant Palladian country houses, presenting and commenting upon British society. Her work constantly maintains a critical dialogue with conceptual art, visual culture, feminism and animal studies.

Between 1979 and 1981 Knorr produced *Belgravia*, a ground breaking series of black and white photographs accompanied by ironic and humorous texts. Highlighting the aspirations and lifestyle of the period, Knorr interrogates the British class system under the neo liberalist Thatcher era. Her subsequent series *Gentlemen* (1981-1983) continued to investigate contemporary conservative values, photographing the gentlemen's members clubs and juxtaposing the image with text constructed out of parliamentary speeches and news reports. Knorr uses the space between the image and the text to consider the patriarchal values of the English upper middle classes, investigating the values that ally these classes to conservative aristocratic values.

In 1986 the series *Connoisseurs* used colour to explore the connoisseurship that surrounds discourses of heritage and art in England. Here Knorr introduced staged events and foreign elements into the architectural interiors of Chiswick House, Osterley Park House and the Dulwich Picture Gallery. The use of text and captioning are also deployed as a device to slow down the viewer's consumption of the image and to comment on the received ideas of fine art in museum culture; a strategy that still appears in her work today. Between 1994 and 2004, Karen has been photographing fine art academies throughout Europe. Grouped under the title *Academies*, the work reflects upon the relationship between the production of western art in the academy and the transmission and consumption of such ideas through the museum. The series explores the foundation myths of European fine art culture and the link to national identity and patrimony. This was also the opportunity for her to integrate animal figures, disrupting these symbols of western culture.

In her series *Fables* (2004-2008), Knorr's photographs mix analogue and digital photography to playfully reconfigure classical tales (Ovid, Aesop La Fontaine) alongside popular culture (Disney and Attenborough) in museums and heritage sites which include Carnavalet Museum, the Museum of Hunt and Nature in Paris, Chambord Castle and the Conde Museum in Chantilly Castle. The visuality of these photographs is rich with reference to the baroque. Knorr has also been exploring modernism, reintroducing life into the modernist aesthetic of Corbusier's Villa Savoye in Poissy.

In the following years, the artist has discovered the Indian society and history, through long journeys in India. Her project considered the country's big and complex cultural heritage through a focus on Mughal and palace architecture, hindu and buddhist temples, and mosques.

The series *India Song* has been exhibited all over India, in the United States and in Europe, and has been succesful among general public and collectors. Since 2014, Karen Knorr has in parallel begun to travel in Japan, looking for ancestral traditions and the way they are integrated in contemporary society.



Path to Enlightenment, Meiji Jingu Shrine, Tokyo, Monogatari, 2015

GALERIE
LES FILLES
DU CALVAIRE