

the poetry behind makiko harris' needle dance

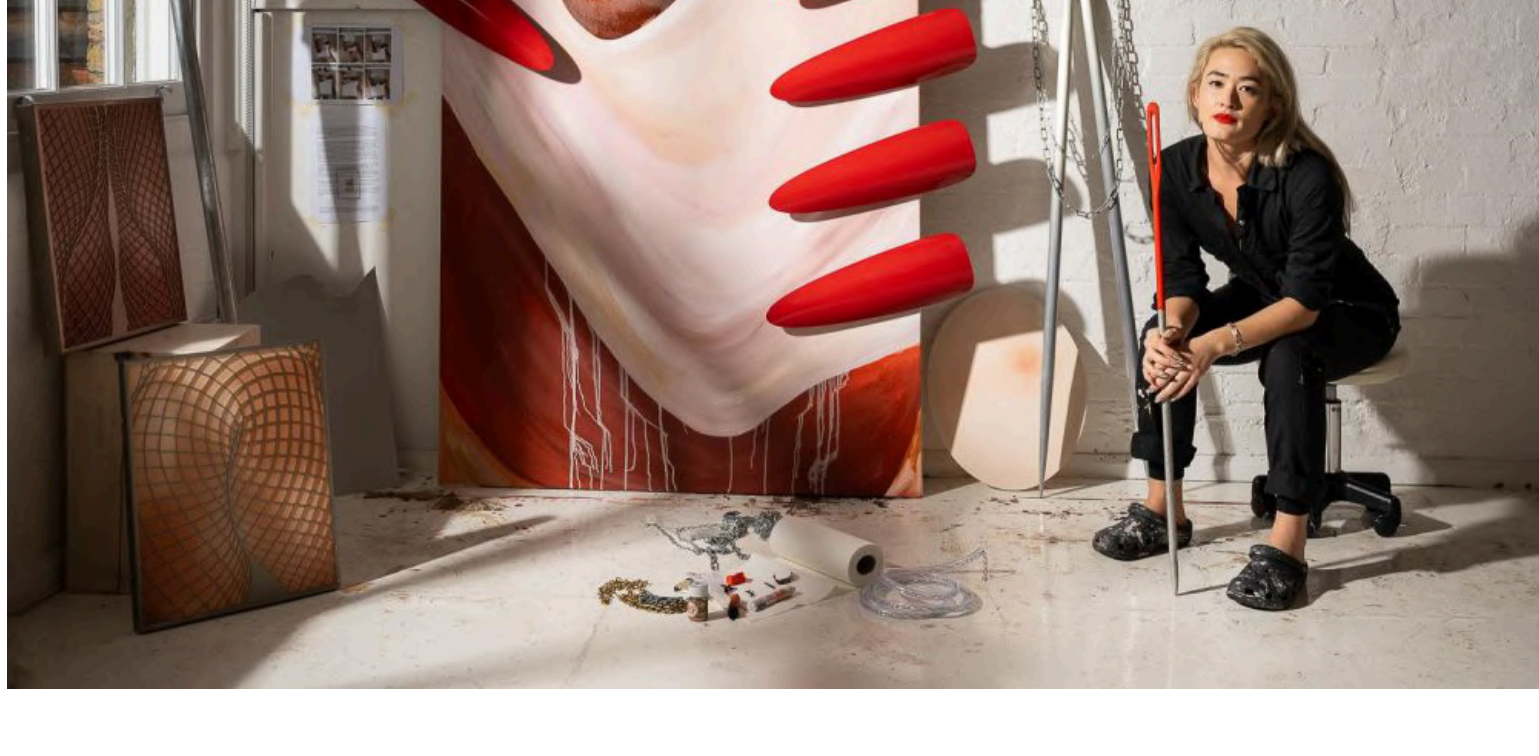


From explosively vibrant paintings to industrial installations, **Makiko Harris** is storming the art world with her feminist works. The artist is currently making headlines with her upcoming film debut of *Needle Dance*: an emotionally-charged conceptual art film and exhibition, showing at London's art'otel from February 21st. We spoke to Harris about this latest feat and her career's spellbinding evolution.

"*Needle Dance* is non-linear and poetic," says Harris from her art studio-cum-apartment in London. Dreamlike and graceful, the film is a five-minute epic of desire, fate, feminism and connection. It takes inspiration from the Japanese folk tale of the red thread of fate. "According to the story, we are all born with a red string tied to our finger," says Harris. "The string leads us to the people we're meant to connect with in life." The film features two dancers arching and interweaving their bodies underwater; their limbs and torsos bound in red ropes (or threads).

The threads are ultimately unbreakable – representing a force beyond human control. Are the dancers attempting to untangle their destinies? Or could they be trying to achieve their own autonomy?

"Ultimately, it's about bodies, relationships and connection," explains Harris, who has extended the film's conceptual nature to the 'needle' mentioned in its title – an instrument which has become one of Harris' most recognisable motifs and sculptures. In *Needle Dance*, the viscerality of Harris' formidable needle sculptures and gestural paintings are, quite literally, "in conversation with bodies."



Converting a section of her apartment into an art studio, Harris lives and breathes her practice. "I've really given it a go trying to do something else," she says recalling previous "detours" into fashion merchandising and product design. "But I'm meant to be an artist." If you heard Harris speak at January's London Art Fair, then you will be familiar with her tactile approach to the female experience.

As a biracial painter, filmmaker and sculptor, Harris has been "grappling with ideas of femininity, and objectification" throughout her life. She explores these experiences through her work; enlisting nuances of contemporary feminism to cultivate a powerful visual language. Harris' work has gained international recognition; from the Tate Modern to permanent collections across the U.S., Asia and Europe.

Like the fine point of a needle, Harris' sharp critique on feminist schools of thought (across painting, moving image, sculpture, and sound) have brought her residencies such as PADA Portugal (2024) and the Buinho Creative Residency (2022), and a Master's degree from London's prestigious Royal College of Art. In fact, it was during her time on the MA course that Harris inherited her grandmother's sewing kit- now a recognisable motif among the artist's cacophony of profound sculptures. Currently represented by Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, Harris' range of motifs includes oversized fingernails, giant needles, chains and aluminum stockings.

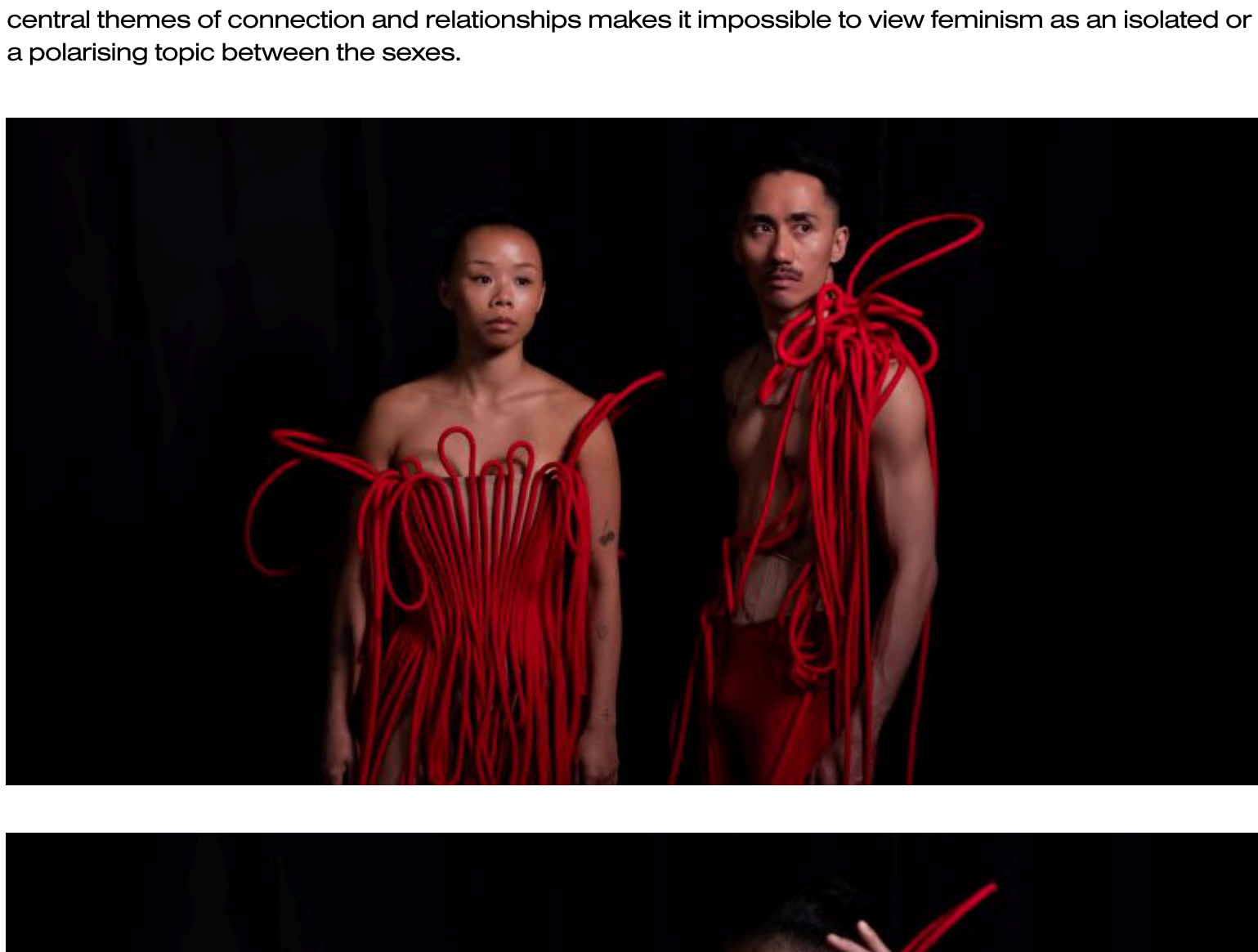
On the surface, these household objects resonate with the legacy of textile arts, while their enlarged stature and hard exteriors fetishize traditional domesticity and soft femininity. For Harris, subverting what is traditionally objectified by society is a reclamation of sorts. "Fetishization and objectification is common for women in general," she says. "As an Asian woman myself, I began experiencing this from a really young age." As such, her work feels both confrontational and familiar.



"The needle is not just a weapon in the battle of feminism, but also a symbol of reparation and love," says Harris. Its capacity to repair, stitch and unify "echoes Louise Bourgeois' idea that needles are tools for mending rather than harming." Like many feminist artists, Harris has drawn inspiration from the iconic French-American artist, whose work also explored relationships and generational trauma.

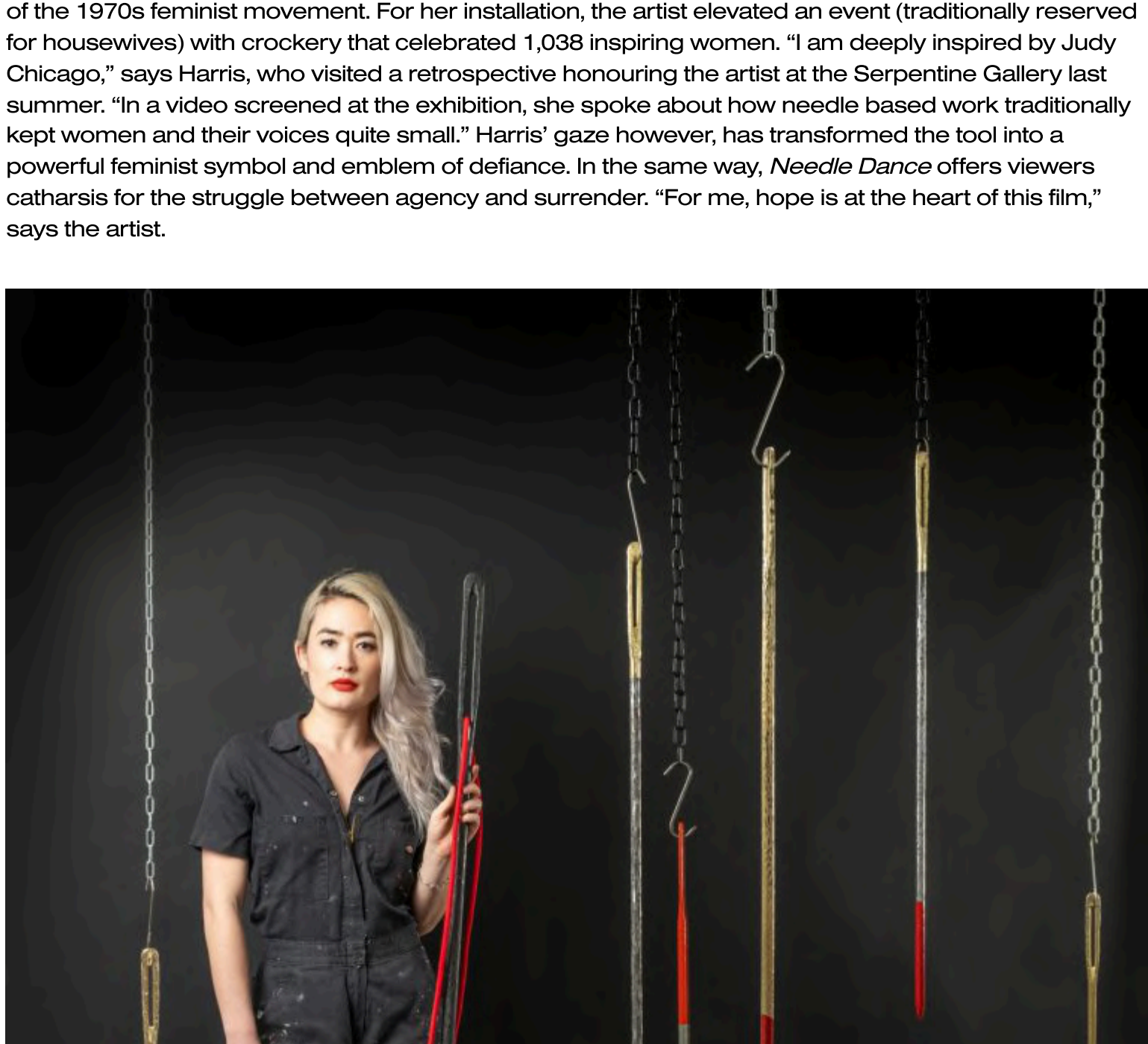
Needle Dance is the second film Harris has made, with the first having premiered at Tate Modern in 2023 as part of the Tate Lates series. The screening was a significant milestone in the artist's career, and *Needle Dance* promises to make a similar splash. The film is accompanied by a dynamic violin score co-composed and performed by the artist herself with Carlos Basilsco. Its undeniable high-fashion sensibility is magnified through shibari-inspired costumes by Deborah Milner (former head of couture at Alexander McQueen). Meanwhile, the film's director is none other than acclaimed hair stylist and director Peter Gray (of Vogue, Harper's Bazaar, T Magazine, Hermès, Ungaro, and Dsquared).

To understand *Needle Dance*, we must consider Harris' proclivity to portray the needle as a symbol for feminist and generational struggle. The push and pull of the red threads, for instance, may reflect women's historical desire for self-determination in a patriarchal system. "It's like we have to surrender to what's predestined," she explains. "So much of contemporary feminism is about being militant in your own agency. For example, I have decided to be an artist and forge my own path." The film's central themes of connection and relationships makes it impossible to view feminism as an isolated or a polarising topic between the sexes.



Indeed, the fact that the two dancers are fated partners enhances *Needle Dance's* intimate scope. Submerged in water like babes in amniotic fluid, the figures move towards their pre-destined fates together. This joint quest for self-determination poses universal questions about self-sacrifice and self-determination in relationships. Can binding ourselves to a person encroach on our personal freedom and individuality? Is independence and connection truly compatible? "If we remove the feminist context, then we can explore how humans struggle with parts of themselves which they have no control over, when that's the culture we born into or social conditioning."

Art aficionados may recall *The Dinner Party* (1974-79) by Judy Chicago, a prominent artist and pioneer of the 1970s feminist movement. For her installation, the artist elevated an event (traditionally reserved for housewives) with crockery that celebrated 1,038 inspiring women. "I am deeply inspired by Judy Chicago," says Harris, who visited a retrospective honouring the artist at the Serpentine Gallery last summer. "In a video screened at the exhibition, she spoke about how needle based work traditionally kept women and their voices quite small." Harris' gaze however, has transformed the tool into a powerful feminist symbol and emblem of defiance. In the same way, *Needle Dance* offers viewers catharsis for the struggle between agency and surrender. "For me, hope is at the heart of this film," says the artist.



Needle Dance by Makiko Harris runs now until 2nd of March at art'otel London Hoxton.

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