

Edinburgh-based artist Camila Ospina Gaitán exhibits her dazzling sculptures in Kyoto, Japan

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The Colombian contemporary artist used sculpture to explore representations of female bodies in historical and modern Japanese media. We caught up with her about her experiences in Japan and the process behind her work.

For some years now, Camila Ospina Gaitán has been using her art to explore the sexualization and objectification of female bodies. Her interest in the topic was sparked by her experiences as a Latino woman living and working in the UK.

“I do not look like the stereotype of a Colombian woman,” explains Camila. “Often when I said I was from Colombia, there were certain reactions and comments, along with references to narcotráfico and drugs. I became aware of the UK’s construction of other countries; the sexualisation of and stereotypes about Latino women”.

“This was difficult for me and it made me quite angry. From that anger, that’s where I started working with the male gaze and deconstructing a lot of how we are socially constructed.”

Camila Ospina Gaitán was born in Bogotá, Colombia and is now based in Leith, Edinburgh. She graduated with an MFA in Contemporary Art Practice at the University of Edinburgh, having previously studied in Bogotá at Javeriana University Visual Arts.

She has exhibited across the world, including in Tokyo, Bogotá, Miami and Edinburgh. In 2022 she received the Radcliff Trust Award that allowed her to do a residency at Northlands Creative (Scotland) and she had her first solo show, Thorn in the Flesh, in Edinburgh in 2022.

Fast forward to May 2023, Camila completed her first solo show in Japan, which she titled Visual Pleasure and Narrative.

The opportunity was provided by The Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation, a collaboration between the UK and Japan that aims to create cultural exchanges and spaces.

“I felt really honoured to be able to receive this award,” says Camila. “As an independent artist I make a lot of applications and maybe receive one for every ten I make. I compare it to like a sport – training for the Olympics, you train every day of your life, trying and trying and trying, and if you make it to the Olympics, it’s your one moment to show your training and your work.”

Camila’s exhibition was held at Art Spot Korin in Kyoto, Japan, curated by Scott Hunter. The title, Visual Pleasure and Narrative, references the work of British feminist and film theorist Laura Mulvey who has been credited with coining the term ‘male gaze’. It comprised three delicate, translucent and vividly coloured sculptures, crafted in resin, which were presented alongside a talk in English and Japanese that sought to contextualise the visual creations.

“My project was about female representation sexualisation and objectification in Japanese historical and contemporary iconography,” explains Camila. “I was interested in premodern Japanese prints of onna-musha (female warriors/samurais) – huge figures in history and are represented spectacularly, with all these patterns and strength, fighting and in combat. I compared these with the contemporary Japanese iconography of anime and manga, where (I will dare to say) the majority shows hypersexualised female bodies.”

While in Kyoto, Camila visited the International Manga Museum with hopes of tracing this shift to over-sexualisation of bodies in the imagery.

“I found it began to happen since the 1980s when the female characters started to be based on their bodies,” she says. “From then, they are not powerful, they are ‘damsels in distress’. They are constrained into the ideas that a Japanese woman ‘needs’ to be.”

The concepts that run through the pieces are representations of femininity, power, fragility. For Camila, it’s crucial to question female representations in media that we grow up alongside.

“Even though we are not Japanese, people around the world grow up with Japanese culture and media. For me, it’s really important to question culture as a media that represents female bodies. We have to consider how the female characters are being represented.”

However, Camila emphasises the importance of being respectful and delicate when taking a critical view of another culture with her art. **“My way of approaching the experience was careful and open,”** she explains. “I did not want to enter a culture that is not my own only to criticise it.

“I was worried about how the Japanese audience was going to feel because it was critical of female representation in anime and manga, but it was really well taken and they did understand my questions. So, I think it was well received.”

So, what’s next for Camila?

“I still have the question of how to approach that representation and how to make different connections between the contemporary and the historical. I’d like to continue that research, asking questions about how female bodies are being represented. I still have that question in my mind.”

“When I was exhibiting in Hamburg there was a spectacular exhibition in the museum of art called Femme Fatale, which had a huge influence on me. It combined historical paintings and roles and characters and how they represent females. In one of their pamphlets they mentioned social media and I decided I really wanted to explore social media as the new male gaze. Are we being hypersexualised and almost merged through social media? Are we women falling into this trap? Is the phone working as a mirror? I thought this is the next step for me – to analyse Instagram through this lens of the ‘new male gaze’.”

To see more of Camila’s work and find out about upcoming shows, visit her website or follow her on Instagram.