

ART IN REVIEW

IMAGES FROM A FLOATING WORLD': '18th & 19th Century Japanese Erotic Prints and the Echo in Modern and Contemporary Art'

By Karen Rosenberg

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Fredericks & Freiser Gallery

536 West 24th Street

Chelsea

Through March 5

The perfect occasion for a Valentine's-weekend outing in Chelsea, this group show combines erotic Japanese prints and prurient contemporary art. The chemistry between these two groups isn't always perfect, but the combination still titillates more, at any rate, than Jeff Koons's recently exhibited "Made in Heaven" series of the early 1990s.

In free-associative fashion the curators Damon Brandt and Andrew Freiser mix and match the Japanese prints with drawings, collages and other works on paper by contemporary artists (and a few not-so-contemporary ones; look out for two Matisses).

Edo-period prints by Isoda Koryusai and Suzuki Harunobu remind you that anything being done today on video has had a life in images since at least the 18th century. Couples go at it behind screens, in front of open windows, on verandas and (in one remarkably acrobatic case) while standing ankle-deep in a rice paddy. Sometimes additional partners join in — usually just one or two, although Koryusai's "One Man, Eight Women" imagines a busier scenario.

Drawings by William Copley and Carroll Dunham pick up on the prints' salaciously descriptive line quality, as do small acrylics on paper by John Wesley (who was the original impetus for the show). And relatively recent photographs by Kohei Yoshiyuki and Nobuyoshi Araki show that the nocturnal "floating world" of the Edo period is alive and well in modern-day Japan.

But it's the female artists who best capture the stealthy yet explicit sexuality of the prints. Tracey Emin's neon sculpture of splayed female legs looks harmlessly abstract, until it doesn't. Mickalene Thomas's photograph hides an odalisque in plain sight by surrounding her with patterned fabrics. And from the side, Pipilotti Rist's "Ginas Mobile" flirts with G-rated, Calder-esque whimsy; seen head-on, with its video projections, it's shockingly intimate.

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