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Refashioning: CFGNY and Wataru Tominaga

Japan Society's First Exhibition Dedicated to Contemporary Fashion Explores Race, Gender, and Identity Through the Lens of Two Emerging Fashion Labels

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Refashioning



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November 7, 2022 (New York, NY)—Japan Society is pleased to present ***Refashioning: CFGNY and Wataru Tominaga***, the institution's first exhibition devoted to the art of contemporary fashion. Comprised of two distinct yet complementary installations, the show

brings together the work of New York-based **CFGNY** and Tokyo-based **Wataru Tominaga**, two emerging fashion labels that explore the intersections between fashion, art, and identity.

Featuring garments, accessories, textile-based works, sculptures, and video, the exhibition examines the ways in which these two practices experiment with artistic mediums beyond conventional forms of dress to challenge preconceived notions of gender and identity. A series of related programs includes a talk with the artists, a workshop, and an exclusive presentation of CFGNY's latest collection.

Wide-ranging in their output, the work of CFGNY and Wataru Tominaga is united by an open-ended, pluralistic approach that views fashion as a vessel for new dialogues. **Tin Nguyen, Daniel Chew, Kirsten Kilponen, and Ten Izu** form the New York-based art-fashion collective known as CFGNY (Concept Foreign Garments New York). Drawing on broad sources for inspiration—from the quotidian attire of New York's Chinatown residents to the Japanese cute or “kawaii” aesthetic—their work stems from the idea that fashion is relational and clothes can be used to cultivate new forms of kinship. “Even though we each come from distinct Asian backgrounds, race works by grouping us all under one label,” the designers explain. “Instead of mourning this fact, we ask how this situation can create new bridges to others, how the shared alienation that comes from the experience of race can be the basis for a different kind of solidarity.”

Alongside a selection of archival garments since the label's founding in 2016, the installation will also feature a new body of ceramic pieces created by casting the space between disparate objects sourced from the designer's daily lives: a found pair of jeans, dollar store “Made in China” vases, and other imported items. The large scale of the assemblages and the physicality of the four-part mold-making process used to create the final forms require the active participation of the entire group. In this way, the objects become a metaphor for the material space between the artists and a physical manifestation of their collaboration. The final ceramics retain only “a third-degree echo” of the found objects used, which are barely recognizable in abstract textures and imprints left behind.

“Unruly and undefinable, they mirror the way we think about ‘Asian-ness’ or any other markers of group belonging,” the collective states. “All identities, including ones such as ‘Asian’ or ‘Asian-American,’ are collectively created. Our project works to emphasize the indefinability and malleability of identity, and we create spaces where people are allowed to be playful with it.” The group often uses the term “vaguely Asian” to refer to their disruption of notions of Asian identity. Rather than the construction of a single, “authentic” identity, the group encourages the creation of a multi-dimensional “bootleg identity.” The term carries with it connotations of something second-rate, a mere counterfeit, but in the work of CFGNY, a bootleg is an expanded object that, through the process of being altered from its original state, has acquired new layers of depth and meaning.

“We look to the generative potential of a replica alienated from its reference point: a subject untethered from a rigid authenticity, one that may shape-shift along a common thread of

understanding. Freeing something like Asian-ness from an idea of authenticity allows it to be more expansive and creative in its various appearances, creating room for the many ways of being Asian.”

This idea of bringing together disparate elements to create a new whole is also evident in the creations of emerging fashion designer, **Wataru Tominaga**. Based in Tokyo, Japan but with a global perspective informed by his international education and work experience with fashion houses like John Galliano and collaborations with brands like Marimekko, Tominaga’s work layers unexpected cultural references, vibrant colors, patterns, and maximalist volumes to create gender-fluid designs. Tominaga’s unisex garments, especially from his early collections (2015–2017), latently reference the traditional kimono and Japanese avant-garde fashions, including Comme des Garçons and Issey Miyake. His ongoing experimentation with readymade materials coupled with hand and artisanal techniques, such as pleating and twisting, serves as a testament to the ever-diversifying ways of creative expression that define contemporary fashion.

“From the beginning, I have been interested not only in the function of clothing as a commodity, but also in the relationship between form, ornamentation, and gender,” **Tominaga** explains. “I believe that all of these relationships help establish fashion as a space. Whether sculptures or fashion, I want to deconstruct and reconstruct these elements to create a space that contains fluid and ambivalent objects.” The artist’s desire to create space for ambiguity echoes CFGNY’s ideas around “vagueness,” with both practices emphasizing a cross-disciplinary approach to expand the potential of fashion as a medium.

In addition to an archival selection of garments and the designer’s Spring/Summer 2023 collection, the exhibition will feature three sculptures inspired by designs of clothing racks and fences in London, where the artist was a student at the Chelsea College of Art. The sculptures explore function and ornamentation with the same approach Tominaga takes in his fashion design practice. “Although fashion, design, and art are expressed separately in words, I believe they cannot be distinguished very clearly when presented as objects,” says Tominaga. “I create garments with the notion that they are fluid objects that can be expressed as sculpture, painting, or fashion, depending on how they are treated and the context. Based on this idea, I create works that explore new forms of artistic expression by disabling the dichotomies of male and female, function and ornamentation, and art and commodity.”

Tominaga’s garments, accessories, and textiles will be exhibited on a newly-commissioned custom display system designed by **Chen Chen & Kai Williams** composed of modified off-the-shelf parts primarily in steel. The metal aesthetic complements Tominaga’s vibrant, colorful garments. The design does not contain the mannequins typical of fashion exhibitions nor specific references to the body, echoing the works’ gender-fluid nature. By creating new functions out of existing objects, the display itself provides a foundation that furthers the concept of the exhibition.

“Both CFGNY and Wataru Tominaga are practices that embrace the expansiveness and potential of fashion as a medium, using it as a catalyst to open up larger dialogues,” says **Tiffany Lambert**, Curator and Interim Director, Japan Society Gallery. “The works on view exalt

CFGNY's and Wataru Tominaga's formal excellence while demonstrating their ongoing interest in deconstructing and reconstructing ideas about identity formation—gender, race, affiliation to a culture or subculture—through their primary medium of fashion. As individual creators, their work shares a sensibility to obscure boundaries between art and design, high and low, global and local, representing the complexity and richness of a new approach to fashion.”

Although the exhibition is the first devoted to contemporary fashion design at Japan Society, the institution has a history of engaging with the world of fashion and providing a platform for emerging designers. In the early 1970s, when Japanese fashion designers were expanding their horizons abroad, two now legendary designers—Issey Miyake and Hanae Mori—staged shows at Japan Society, forging a new wave of Made in Japan influences in the Western fashion scene. Five decades later, this exhibition revisits the medium of fashion through the perspectives of two contemporary designers, inviting the opportunity to reflect on the current zeitgeist while also paying tribute to the indelible influences of figures like Miyake and Mori, both of whom passed away in August 2022.

“Japan Society has historically showcased and anticipated the best of the arts of Japan, championing under recognized artists and embracing a broad scope of artistic practices. This exhibition builds upon that legacy as the gallery continues its strategic forward plan to present diverse narratives and a more global account of Japanese art, including the art of the Japanese diaspora,” says **Lambert**.

ABOUT CFGNY

The New York based fashion-art label CFGNY, which stands for “Concept Foreign Garments New York,” began in 2016 as an ongoing dialogue between Tin Nguyen and Daniel Chew on the intersection of fashion, race, identity, and sexuality. Joined by Kirsten Kilponen and Ten Izu in 2020, CFGNY continually returns to the term “vaguely Asian” — an understanding of racial identity as a specific cultural experience combined with the experience of being perceived as other. Through topics including the meaning of the Japanese term *kawaii*, their collections and art projects and installations continue to explore an ongoing dialogue that seeps through the entire body of Asian-American art.

ABOUT WATARU TOMINAGA

Wataru Tominaga is a Tokyo-based fashion and textile designer, best known for his distinctive textiles using vibrant colors and patterns. Born in 1988 in Kumamoto, Japan, Tominaga is trained internationally, including at the Chelsea College of Art, Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, Bunka Fashion College, University of Art and Design Helsinki, and Musashino Art University. He has worked under established design houses, including John Galliano, Eddie Peck, and BLESS. In 2016, he won The Grand Jury Première Vision Prize at The 31st International Festival of Fashion and Photography in Hyères and has since collaborated with brands including Petit Bateau and Marimekko. For his eponymous fashion

label established in 2019, Tominaga designs unisex garments that feature playful motifs and graphics inspired by wide-ranging time periods and cultures.

ABOUT CHEN CHEN & KAI WILLIAMS

Chen Chen & Kai Williams is a design studio that explores materials and new ways to use them. The studio invents new techniques and materials or diverts common industrial supplies to off-label applications. The duo met while attending the Pratt Institute and founded the company in New York City in 2011. The studio creates a wide range of products from hand made one-off and limited production collectible works to manufacturing specialty home goods carried by retailers around the world. Whatever the method, an overarching sensitivity to materials and production processes carries through every object. Past clients include Whitney Museum, Gagosian, Kvadrat, Hem, Heron Preston, Mission Chinese Food, and Warby Parker. Presentations of their work have been held at the Museum of Art and Design (USA) and the Venice Architecture Biennale (Italy). Manufacturing clients include West Elm, Tai Ping Carpets, Areaware, and Good Thing.

ABOUT JAPAN SOCIETY GALLERY

Since 1971, Japan Society Gallery has been the premier institution in the United States for the display and interpretation of Japanese art and culture in a global context. Through groundbreaking exhibitions and related programs, the Gallery cultivates a broader understanding and appreciation of Japan's contributions to global artistic heritage; explores the artistic interconnections Japan shares with Asia, the U.S., Latin America, and Europe; and celebrates the diversity of Japanese visual expression from prehistoric times to the present day.

ABOUT JAPAN SOCIETY

Japan Society is the premier organization connecting Japanese arts, culture, business, and society with audiences in New York and around the world. At Japan Society, we are inspired by the Japanese concept of *kizuna* (絆)—forging deep connections to bind people together. We are committed to telling the story of Japan while strengthening connections within New York City and building new bridges beyond. In over 100 years of work, we've inspired generations by establishing ourselves as pioneers in supporting international exchanges in arts and culture, business, and policy, as well as education between Japan and the U.S. We strive to convene important conversations on topics that bind our two countries together, champion the next generation of innovative creators, promote mutual understanding, and serve as a trusted guide for people everywhere who seek to appreciate the rich complexities and abundance of Japan more fully. From our New York headquarters, a landmark building designed by architect Junzo Yoshimura that opened to the public in 1971, we look forward to the years ahead, which will be defined by our digital and ideational impact through the *kizuna* that we build. Our future can only be enhanced by learning from our peers and engaging with our audiences, both near and afar.

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HOURS:

Wednesday–Sunday 12–7 pm
Free admission 6–9 pm on Fridays
Wednesday–Friday, 12–1 pm: Members Exclusive
Closed on major holidays

ADMISSION:

\$12/\$10 students and seniors | FREE for Japan Society members and children under 16. View our visitor guidelines and safety protocols [here](#).

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