Ambiguous Beauty / Aimai-no-bi

Primary Maker
Yasumasa Morimura

Date
1995

Medium
Photolithograph on fan

Dimensions
20 x 20 in. (50.8 x 50.8 cm)

Credit Line
Gift of the Peter Norton Family

Object number
1995.79

Type
Prints

Morimura first came to prominence in the 1980s for his staged photographs and parodies of Old Master paintings. He commonly featured himself as the model in these photographs, which were based on famous works from art history. Beginning in the 1990s he started to portray himself almost exclusively in female roles in his <i>Actor/Actress</i> series. In this work, complete with prosthetic breasts, Morimura models himself after the Hollywood screen idol Marilyn Monroe from the <i>Red Velvet Marilyn</i> photographs of 1949 by Tom Kelley.<br>Folding fans such as this were first invented in Japan in the seventh century and were used all over East Asia by the well-to-do. Often an artist was commissioned to decorate one side with imagery and another with calligraphy, which is the model that Morimura emulates in this piece. By combining a famous image of mid-century American popular culture with an enduring symbol of Japanese culture, Morimura provokes a playful cultural tension. Morimura also challenges the nature of subjectivity in such works, blurring the lines between gender and the relationship of mass, popular culture and the world of fine arts.