

Women of Work

by Avery Naughton '18

My eyes lock on her. Unblinking, I wipe away a stray strand of hair to get a better view. The gallery is filled with Kyoto natives and American tourists, but I remain unfazed by their shuffling footsteps and hushed debates. I stand with one hand on my hip and the other clutching a monochromatic brochure, attempting to stay as still and quiet as possible. I want to give her the undivided attention she deserves and commands. It is one of those rare occurrences when one party is completely entranced by the other. Linked together by an invisible, unbreakable chain. Some may say spellbound. Others may say under an unfortunate curse.

Her gaze, in turn, follows me through her archaic camera lens. Her eyes do not pursue me in the same way mine do her; instead she is focused on the art, the dedication to obtaining the perfect image. I do not think she gives a damn about my presence in her space, but merely needs a subject for her work. The image could be of me, or of the attractive Japanese businessman in a blue pinstriped tailored suit. He may make the better image. Her camera is large and black, the size of her face. The protruding lens must be carefully coerced into place with her gentle hands. The camera sits on a bamboo stand so that this woman must kneel in order to be eyelevel for her shot. But she will never be able to take this shot. Frozen in time and space, this Japanese woman is a fragment of an artist's imagination. She is only a painting.

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My mother, however, stumbles through the modern art gallery that overlooks the Western front of Kyoto equipped with massive red gates, Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. She takes part in a trigger-happy camera campaign with the goal to take as many photos as possible of the

museum, and of her time visiting her daughter in Kyoto, Japan. She plays the role of a typical tourist, forgetting to take the lens cap off of the camera as she eagerly moves from one piece to another. A museum curator comes to the rescue of the images that can fade due to the flashes coming from my mother’s rudimentary photography skills. The curator places a hand on my mother’s shoulder, takes the lens in my mother’s free hand, and gently places it back onto the camera lens. He gives a slight bow. All order is restored from a managerial perspective. My mother, completely unaware of Japanese customs and especially the maneuver of subtle critique, turns a shade of bright red I have rarely seen in my lifetime. Usually rigidly stoic and calm, my mother has been caught in an action she rarely performs: blushing.

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The woman in the painting’s facial expression is instead feminine and self-assured. The tint on her cheeks is pink, not red, and matches the shade of lipstick that outlines her delicately peaked cupid’s bow. It is clear her flush is one of cosmetic choice and not one of curator-instilled humiliation. The vivid green of her earrings, necklace, and dress trim demonstrate a fashionable color-contrast that brings life to the gallery; a modernized warehouse with open vents, lighting systems that looks as though they would instantly fall in an earthquake, and floor-to- ceiling glass windows. The woman sits horizontal to the viewer so we see her side profile, giving us the ability to view both her face and her kneeling body. Her dress interplays silver fern prints on a cream background that is clenched drastically in at the waist with a black belt with golden studs. Her almost unnaturally concave waist is synched by the belt, magnifying her hips. Her dresser, however, leaves much to the imagination in the way her garment cascades down her back into a train that bleeds off of the painting itself.

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My mother too possesses one of these nature-defying abdomens and waists of runway models. After birthing twins some twenty years ago, this is an impressive feat. However, nobody would ever know of this hidden, slender figure. Instead, she drapes herself in billowing dark blue and yellow sweaters with cartoonish animal prints that have not been replaced since the early 1980s. She prefers sweatpants or anything with an exceptionally high waist and stretch that can be worn from the office to the gym and any location in between. Her go-to footwear, which graces the presence of this fancy institution, is a pair of tennis shoes with holes and a thick layer of padding for arch and heel support. Her clothes give me a sense of familiarity and safety, but they are not at all similar to those of the woman on the wall just steps from her. They do not scream “woman” in the way most people believe clothes should identify someone as male or female.

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The woman in the painting is feminine in other ways besides her dress. Her bundle of jet-black hair is perfectly curled, a waterfall rippling down the back of her neck. Her eyebrows are dainty and plucked to perfection, forming curved, thin lines above her eyelids. The Japanese, I believe, will never fully embrace the beauty trend of thick brows that grow like wild ferns never to be cut down. Her eyelashes are lush and dark. The fullness of her cheeks and slim forehead create almost a girlish appearance, a beauty standard coveted by Japanese women. There are no wrinkles or frown lines that adorn her smooth, almost post-pubescent surface.

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My mother could give a rat’s ass about curling her hair, and only does so when absolutely forced to for court appearances. And even at that, the trial has to be for a major case or else she would spend approximately two minutes primping in the mirror, instead spending her mornings

walking the dog and watching the Minnesota Twins recap on television. She tells me to never pluck my eyebrows and claims that “along with bra-burning and outspoken women, bushy brows are one of the best things to come from the 70s.” Her face is unmistakably one of a woman that has lived. There are faint crevices and visible pores that are only covered on major occasions using the grand total of three cosmetic items she owns.

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This woman, who captivated my attention immediately as I walk into the gallery, is not completely inhuman in her graceful femininity. She breaks conventions and does it unashamedly. Her prominent nose is angular and takes up a good deal of her rounded face. Her chin extends far beyond her dainty lips, giving her a bone structure similar to those of old white presidents in White House portraits. Her arms are round and full, shying away from the standard that the upper arm should be equivalent to that of a chicken’s leg. Her large hands clutch the heavy base of the camera. Her cuticles are tainted a pink, presumably from her hard work surveying the landscape for the right moment to grace the world with her art. Most of all, her eyes are focused and alert, dedicated to her art and nothing else. Her adornments and cosmetics scream “feminine,” but her actions represent a woman testing her place. Photography, at her time a newfound hobby, was not immediately the natural home of a woman’s creative eye. It’s peculiar therefore that she makes photography her mission, completely focused on her image rather than those who walk by the gallery floors. She does not need your approval, but automatically earns your respect.

For the first time since glancing at my mother’s encounter with the curator, I take my eyes off of the woman in the painting. I read the plaque assigned to her by museum curators. Though my Japanese translation may prove unclear even after years of tedious study, her description reads *wife trying out her husband’s camera*.

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Finally I shift my gaze away from the woman in the painting and towards my own flesh and blood. These two women in my presence are undoubtedly beautiful. One is more concerned with this typical standard of beauty: plucked eyebrows, painted lips, manicured hair, form-enhancing clothing restrictions. But she is also defined by her relationship to her husband. Though the woman in the painting pursues a new craft, jumping into modernity with complete direction and focus, she will forever be categorized as a woman, a wife, and not an artist. I will never share this same concern for my own mother, who had will never be in the same situation.

My gaze leaves this fictitious woman. I search the gallery floor high and low, my heeled footsteps banging on the wooden floorboards, interrupting the whispers and quiet worship of the visitors. Finally, I find my mother in the bathroom quickly jabbering on her phone. It’s about business. It always is. As a child, I used to ice out my mother for taking work home with her, to soccer tournaments and class field trips, to the London Olympics and Hawaii. I used to scold her for not cooking and baking, for hiring nannies instead of picking me up from school, for giving little care about her appearance and refusing to wear a dress except on birthdays. I used to shun her for not being “womanly.” But in this moment, I realize my mother breaks barriers the woman in the painting never will. She is free of these pressures, of these ridiculous standards and placement of accomplishments on the crowned heads of men.

I watch as she continues to talk about briefs and juries and judges, aimlessly washing my hands and sticking them under the magically warm and efficient hand dryers equipped in all Japanese restrooms. She notices this awkwardly long period of an unbroken stare and places a hand over the phone speaker.

“What is it kiddo?” she questions.

“Oh nothing, you’re just really, really pretty.”

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