



Courtesy Tina Kim Gallery. Photo: Hyunjung Rhee.

Why Folding Screens Are Popping Up in Contemporary Artists' Work

BY JOSIE THADDEUS-JOHNS

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Ghada Amer never intended to make folding screens for “Paravent Girls,” her show on view at New York’s Tina Kim Gallery through December 9th. Even so, there they are—cast in bronze from flattened cardboard boxes, and in the show’s title, which borrows the French word for these sculptural room dividers.

Amer’s ambivalence came from the function of screens, which “always hide something,” as the artist said in an interview with Artsy. “I’m more interested in the dividing aspect than the hiding aspect,” she explained. Blown up on one side of Amer’s zigzagging bronze sculptures are bold sketches of appealing young women. Many are appropriated, as is common in her practice, from porn magazines: These “girls” are certainly not concealing themselves.

Amer’s works tap into current global interest in folding screens as an art form. Her show in New York coincides with a new exhibition, “Paraventi: Folding Screens from the 17th to 21st Centuries,” which unfolds across Fondazione Prada’s Milan, Shanghai, and Tokyo spaces. The institutional show considers the history of the format, from its use in Zhou dynasty China for objects of contemplation, all the way through contemporary artists’ appropriation of the medium as a barrier-cum-canvas. Folding screens continue to pop up, splitting art fair booths, gallery spaces, and museum halls, as artists use these divisive devices to examine current ideas on representation, as well as our collective infatuation with digital and projection screens.

Nicholas Cullinan, who curated the Fondazione Prada's three-venue show, noted that, while previous museum exhibitions had focused on either contemporary folding screens or their antecedents in China and Japan, this was the first to bridge these histories in a single show. At the Milan section of the exhibition, stunning examples of early folding screens are shown alongside contemporary artists' takes on the genre. An ornately gilded, 18th-century Chinese example featuring lacquered depictions of Macau and Guangzhou is positioned near Mona Hatoum's iconic, cheese grater-style metal screen, for instance. "It's rare that you get an exhibition, especially one that has such a roster of artists in it, that can cover such grounds," Cullinan said.

Many of the historical examples in the show depict grand military narratives, evoking might and authority. "They become an ostentatious display of wealth, or power," said Cullinan. But for a number of contemporary artists, part of the fascination of folding screens is their dual function of hiding and revealing: While obscuring the space behind them, they draw attention to their own subject matter.

Many artists in the show play on the tension created by that duality, using screens to highlight subjects that are usually hidden. Lisa Brice's *Untitled* (2022), for instance, depicts, over five hinged screens, a series of anonymized nude women smoking, drinking, and admiring themselves. One, standing astride a mirror, is painting her own version of *L'Origine du Monde*, Gustave Courbet's famous 1866 picture of a vulva. Here, Brice revels in putting on display what women are supposed to hide: their creativity and self-assuredness. The folding screen's conventional purpose of providing cover and preserving modesty is thereby subverted.



Lisa Brice, *Untitled*, 2022. Photo by Mark Blower. Courtesy of the artist, LGDR, and Rennie Collection.

Nearby is *The Apple of Adam's Eye* (1993), a bright orange three-panel screen by Carrie Mae Weems, created in collaboration with the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia. The work depicts a female figure, covered head to toe in a blue cloth, with Gothic-style gold text on the surrounding panels reading: "She's always been the apple of Adam's eye." Here, the artist points to the historical dynamics of portraying and concealing nude women, whose bodies are seen—in this biblical story, for instance—as provocative and dangerous. The artist is "tak[ing] on directly the story of Adam and Eve and the idea of female temptation," Cullinan noted.

Further uses of screens to probe ideas around feminine modesty can be seen throughout art fair booths and galleries. Koak, whose wavy, gridded screen *Modesty* (2023) was on show in Union Pacific's booth at Frieze London in October, said that she wanted to make a "self-defeating object." While some sections of the screen are opaque, painted with gestural portraits of women, elsewhere, it has large gaps that viewers can see through, creating a dissonance between its form and its apparent function. "I wanted something that mocked the societal constraints often enforced on women's bodies, through a celebration of the humor, joy, and all the emotion that is inextricably part of our lived bodily experience," Koak explained.

The gender politics of visibility are particularly relevant to the medium of folding screens, which, Cullinan explained, have not always been welcomed by the art world: "The reason that they've not been given the attention or respect that they deserve is because they're seen as 'decorative' or 'domestic,' and both of those words have connotations that are gendered." He pointed out Francis Bacon's early work *Painted Screen* (ca. 1929), also included in the show, as an example. While the artist originally worked as an interior designer, he "buried that part of his career when he achieved success as a painter," Cullinan said. The screen shows a pivotal early moment in Bacon's artistic journey, with its three monochrome figures that are a far departure from his famously unsettling imagery.

Seeing the potential in this historically underappreciated medium, other artists have used it to spotlight narratives that are ignored elsewhere. Polish artist Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, for instance, collages recycled textiles to represent women from her local Roma community, a group that has historically suffered immense persecution. Having studied furniture design in school, she chose to use folding screens in works such as *Face Value* (2021) partly because they allow the viewer to see both sides of the object. For her, the screens create a dual pictorial space that allows the viewer to gain a wider context for her brightly patterned portraits, connecting those portrayed—often Roma people from different time periods—on each side.



John Stezaker, installation view of *Screen-screen*, 2023, in "Paraventi: Folding Screens from the 17th to 21st Centuries" at Fondazione Prada, Milan, 2023. Photo by Delfino Sisto Legnani and Alessandro Saletta – DSL Studio. Courtesy of Fondazione Prada.

Many of the contemporary artists in "Paraventi" also consider the parallels between folding screens and digital or film screens. A 2023 work by John Stezaker, for instance, presents a black-and-white image of two shadowy figures—seemingly borrowed from an Old Hollywood film—silkscreened onto a classic paravent. The work's title, *Screen-*

screen, seems to question the functional overlap between the two varieties of screen: Does a domestic folding screen, perhaps, put itself on display? And does a movie projection, in fact, hide something?

Cao Fei's work in the show makes this point even more contemporary. In her new installation *Screen Autobiography (Milan)* (2023), folding electronic devices shimmer with an oil-slick pattern, with two collapsible green screens, used to manipulate photos and video by inserting digitally rendered backgrounds, set up behind them. The work gestures to the blurring of reality in the images we consume on our devices: an unavoidable facet of contemporary life. Indeed, as relatively new types of screens blanket our world and demand our attention, perhaps it's only natural that the old models—paravents—would take on a new resonance. Alternately concealing, revealing, and producing new versions of reality, these multifunctional objects remain a useful tool for contemporary artists.



Cao Fei, installation view of *Screen Autobiography (Milan)*, 2023, in "Paraventi: Folding Screens from the 17th to 21st Centuries" at Fondazione Prada, Milan, 2023. Photo by Delfino Sisto Legnani and Alessandro Saletta – DSL Studio. Courtesy of Fondazione Prada.