

GIRL POWDERING HER NECK

Little is known about the details of Kitagawa Utamaro's life (1753–1806). An eighteenth-century Japanese painter and printmaker especially appreciated for his woodblock prints called *ukiyo-e*, Utamaro focuses on the intimate world of cultivated courtesans and geishas who entertained male clients. His work includes nature scenes and martial themes, but he is best known for his mysterious delicate portraits of beautiful sensuous women whose inner lives are subtly revealed, as in *Girl Powdering Her Neck* (ca. 1795). Cathy Song, of Chinese and Korean descent, was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, and was educated at Wellesley College and Boston University. Her poetry frequently explores the world of family and ancestry. Among her collections of poetry are *Frameless Windows, Squares of Light* (1988) and *Cloud Moving Hands* (2007). In “Girl Powdering Her Neck,” Song responds to Utamaro's print with a series of vivid images that add imaginative details to the woodblock while simultaneously scrutinizing the female's life depicted in Utamaro's image.

CATHY SONG (B. 1955)

Girl Powdering Her Neck 1983

from a ukiyo-e print by Utamaro

The light is the inside
sheen of an oyster shell,
sponged with talc and vapor,
moisture from a bath.

A pair of slippers are placed outside
the rice-paper doors.
She kneels at a low table
in the room,
her legs folded beneath her as she sits on a buckwheat pillow.

Her hair is black
with hints of red,
the color of seaweed
spread over rocks.

Morning begins the ritual
wheel of the body,
the application of translucent skins.
She practices pleasure:
the pressure of three fingertips applying powder.
Fingerprints of pollen
some other hand will trace.

The peach-dyed kimono
patterned with maple leaves drifting across the silk,

falls from right to left
in a diagonal, revealing
the nape of her neck
and the curve of a shoulder like the slope of a hill
set deep in snow in a country
of huge white solemn birds.
Her face appears in the mirror,
a reflection in a winter pond, rising to meet itself.

She dips a corner of her sleeve like a brush into water
to wipe the mirror;
she is about to paint herself.
The eyes narrow
in a moment of self-scrutiny.
The mouth parts
as if desiring to disturb
the placid plum face;
break the symmetry of silence.
But the berry-stained lips,
stenciled into the mask of beauty,
do not speak.

Two chrysanthemums touch in the middle of the lake
and drift apart.