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# Artist Li Shurui Finds Living Goddesses Through Idolatry

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**Artist Li Shurui talks to Zaneta Cheng about the complexities of women and worship, and why feeling confused is the first step to clarity when it comes to her Lady Dior As Seen By video animation.**

Dior is familiar with idolatry. From its beginnings the fashion house has been an object of worship, with legions of women – be they celebrities or otherwise – lusting after its creations each season, from ready-to-wear to handbags.

Artist Li Shurui sees worship and idolatry as almost an inherent need in humans, and when she was commissioned to create a video installation for the Lady Dior As Seen By exhibition at Art Basel Hong Kong, she knew it was the concept she wanted to work with.

“Paintings are easier, because you work within the confines of a canvas,” Li explains as we sit in front of the screen showing her video animation of a conversation via messaging app between two people, which is conducted in English on one side and Chinese on the other. “But this project was harder, because it requires more of an idea, so I needed to think about what I wanted to say through this canvas and then, once I set my direction, think of the language and the various ingredients that would be needed to make my point.”

In the video, the dialogue – which was written by Li – discusses Kumari, the Nepalese tradition of living goddesses. In this virgin-worshipping practice, which dates from the 17th century, a prepubescent girl is selected from a particular caste of Nepalese society and worshipped as a goddess until her menstruation begins, at which point she re-enters normal society.

“For me, fashion is akin to religion,” says Li when I ask her what piqued her interest in the Kumari. “It’s an industry, but you see customers worshipping brands. Brands can become so powerful, they become part of cultural change. When I heard about the Nepalese living goddesses, I saw a connection.

“Worship is a complicated act, I think. It’s one single word but it encompasses so much and so can apply in so many contexts. When I go to church or a temple, I worship statues and feel a sense of calm. When I read something that blows me away, that, for me, is also a sense of worship.

“Today,” she continues, “beauty is something we idolise. We all have a face, which is open for people to judge. Some faces become objects of worship. It’s out of the subject’s control. Brands consume beauty. Women, models, icons –



they're very similar to these living goddesses – these women are used as materials and symbols for worship but in different cultures they take on a different form.”

The collaboration is particularly apt as Li identifies strongly with Dior's current feminist message. “I really think we're living in the best era – better than ever before. I myself am a feminist,” she declares. “There have been many instances in my working life where I've been treated poorly because I'm a woman, so I'm glad there's a brand that's willing to take this stance. It's great that Dior is giving women a platform to make themselves heard and to tell stories.”

The story she tells through her digital creation is not quite as it seems and it's important to remember that Li, who mostly works as a painter, was surprised when Dior approached her specifically for a video work – one that, when you really look at it, evokes slight feelings of disconnection.

“It's not totally digital,” she admits. “It's a mix of traditional techniques. I've tried some animation before, so when approaching this piece I wanted to create a blur between past tradition and the future.”

