

FALL PREVIEW

This Artist's Next Project Has Her 'Terrified.' That's the Point.

An upcoming exhibition at the New Museum by Jade Kuriki-Olivo, also known as Puppies Puppies, puts a microscope on her experience as a trans woman.



“Sometimes, I wish that I didn’t have to make work about my identity,” Jade Kuriki-Olivo said. “But I just keep telling myself that you have to be hypervisible, because it means something different to hide.” Camila Falquez for The New York Times



By **Zachary Small**

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Jade Kuriki-Olivo’s guided tour through her apartment on the Lower East Side ended in the bedroom, where the performance artist spends most of her time. Tropical vines crawled along the walls and into a giant lantern hanging opposite a tapestry of green synthetic fur. She burned incense and described her room above a busy Greek restaurant as a sanctuary.

For an interview about her upcoming exhibition at the New Museum, “[Nothing New](#),” which begins Oct. 12 and runs through Jan. 14, 2024, the artist donned a camouflage outfit with green leaves attached. She then hopped onto the bed and crouched into the shape of a bush — as if cloaking herself from the spotlight would negate its halo. Kuriki-Olivo, 34, who also uses the pseudonym [Puppies Puppies](#), will certainly grab attention this fall, when she transforms the museum lobby into a 24/7 surveillance operation tracking her experience as a transgender woman.

“I’m terrified,” Kuriki-Olivo said, “but I really can’t watch the trans community suffer and not make work about that. I find in my spirit that I don’t have a choice.”

The trapdoor of visibility has become a common theme in her work, demonstrating how transgender people survive a period of heightened [surveillance and restrictions](#) that has coincided with a period of increased public acceptance. She has experienced that paradox firsthand, including last summer when she exhibited a [nude sculpture](#) of herself as part of Art Basel in Switzerland on a plinth labeled “woman.” Conservative groups were outraged and Kuriki-Olivo said she started receiving death threats after people online found her home address. She withdrew from a series of exhibitions for her safety, passing the opportunities onto other artists.

“The organizers ended up hiring a security guard to protect the sculpture,” she recalled. “And I watched from across the street as people would purposefully have their dogs pee on it.”



Kuriki-Olivo exhibited a nude sculpture of herself last summer as part of Art Basel in Switzerland. via Puppies Puppies and Balice Hertling, Paris; Galerie Francesca Pia, Zurich; Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo by Vincent Blebois

Details of the New Museum exhibition are still being negotiated with officials, but the artist described a scenario where she lives in the museum's lobby for several months inside a glass display with windows she can fog to obstruct the viewer's gaze. She wants the space to resemble a Zen garden — a homage to her Japanese mother — and plans on developing a repatriation project for Taíno artifacts in memory of her Puerto Rican father, whose ashes are kept in a box on her night stand.

“We are trying to flatten the distinction between her bedroom and the institution,” said Vivian Crockett, a curator organizing the show at the New Museum.

The artist has also been toying with riskier concepts, including the creation of an indoor cannabis farm and a method for continuing her sex work during the exhibition, which helps pay her rent. She also wants to livestream herself in the rare moments when she is outside the museum, sharing her perspective through a camera feed linked to television monitors in the lobby.

“I describe my role as a mediator between the artist and the institution,” Crockett said, describing the negotiations within the museum to realize Kuriki-Olivo’s vision. “Sometimes it feels like I’m also the medium, speaking on behalf of the artist.”

Earlier in her career, Kuriki-Olivo drew inspiration from popular culture. She organized a [2015 exhibition](#) on the Minions from “Despicable Me,” seeing the yellow monsters as caricatures of the working class. That same year, she [picketed an art fair](#) dressed as SpongeBob SquarePants, holding a sign that depicted the cartoon in the loving embrace of his neighbor, Squidward. And during her breakthrough performance at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, the artist dressed as [Lady Liberty](#) with a drooping crown and crestfallen eyes. It became one of the first works categorized in the museum’s permanent collection as performance art.



“Liberty (Liberté),” 2017, at the Whitney Museum of American Art. via Puppies Puppies and Balice Hertling, Paris; Galerie Francesca Pia, Zurich; Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles; Photo by Bill Orcutt

Her attempts to find herself in these everyday objects stems from a childhood of isolation. Raised in the suburbs of Dallas, Kuriki-Olivo struggled to feel comfortable in an environment where she felt the need to suppress parts of her identity for safety reasons.

“I was scared early on of speaking, that my voice was too soft for a boy,” she recalled. “At night, in the small space between consciousness and unconsciousness, I would pray to God with every cell in me that I would wake up with a vagina.”

Finding herself in seemingly banal objects was an act of survival, recalling the kind of body politics expressed by queer artists like Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who created meaning from strings of lights and hard candies. Recent works have also shown Kuriki-Olivo's preoccupation with the brutality of death. In 2009, she was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor, which was removed the following year but has remained present as a theme in her work. Nearly a decade later, she [created a ghoulish sculpture](#) described as a portrait of the artist after brain surgery. For a 2019 performance at [Galerie Francesca Pia in Zurich](#), she lay inside a satin coffin.

"I'm scared of the pain the future has in store for this deteriorating body," said Kuriki-Olivo from underneath her green camouflage. Later during the interview, she stripped the leaves from her body, lounging nude on the mattress where she entertains clients and performs for webcam sites. She said she has found inspiration from the boundary-pushing artists Marina Abramovic and On Kawara, and in the trans activist Sylvia Rivera.



"Coffin (Sculpture & Performance)," 2019, wooden coffin, coffin nails, pillow, blanket and fabric lining. via Puppies Puppies and Balice Hertling, Paris; Galerie Francesca Pia, Zurich; Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles; Photo by Annik Wetter

Curators described Kuriki-Olivo as someone who unsettles institutions; even the most progressive bastions of the art world walk a difficult line between showcasing diverse artists and tokenizing them.

"Jade really challenged us," said Pati Hertling, director of Performance Space New York. When the venue offered Kuriki-Olivo a commission, she instead asked to program a gala honoring trans women of color. The project involved many sex workers and ran late into the night — far beyond the normal hours for Performance Space staff. Moreover, the women to whom the artist extended an invitation to perform were skeptical that the institution would actually pay them.

“There is still a lot of work needed to create a relationship of neutral trust,” Hertling said; the event was an important turning point for her nonprofit. “I am very thankful for Jade to give us the opportunity to fail in certain ways and learn to move forward.”

But when she heard about what Kuriki-Olivo had planned for the New Museum, Hertling’s heart skipped a beat. Four months of 24/7 surveillance would take an emotional toll on the artist, not to mention raising concerns for her own safety.

“Jade takes on a lot, and it’s a responsibility that weighs heavily on her shoulders,” Hertling said. “It will not be an easy piece. She is going to be exhausted and emotionally at the limit of what she can take.”

Kuriki-Olivo agreed. Sitting in her bedroom with the sounds of the rainforest playing from a speaker on her night stand, she explained it all.

“Sometimes, I wish that I didn’t have to make work about my identity,” she said. “But I just keep telling myself that you have to be hypervisible, because it means something different to hide.”

Zachary Small is a reporter who covers the dynamics of power and privilege in the art world. They have written for The Times since 2019. [More about Zachary Small](#)

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