Elon Cook: A young Japanese woman sits, knees splayed, left hand searching into her kimono sleeve, the other hand disappearing provocatively beneath the rolls of thick fabric. Her face is serious—concentrating on something close, but unseen. Her skin a toffee brown, all except for her ears, the back of her neck, and hairline. Untitled I (female) is in blackface.

The artist Rozeal’s nearly lifelong fascination with Japanese culture began during childhood trips to kabuki performances in Washington, D.C. Untitled I (female) is in kabuki blackface as interpreted through ukiyo-e, but unlike its cultural reference, the face paint is brown instead of white. The artist is intentionally interpreting brown skin as a mask in order to explore what is beneath it.

Rozeal identifies her subject as ganguro, a subgroup of Japanese youth culture that started in 1990s Tokyo. Ganguro, which translates literally to “black face,” is Americana in drag with unnaturally dark skin. But is blackface a uniquely American phenomenon? Is performative blackness inherently offensive? Are distinctively Japanese-style ukiyo-e prints of Asian youth painted in racial drag by a Black American artist racist? When Rozeal first came across the ganguro, she thought of the words of King Louie, the orangutan from the movie The Jungle Book: “Someone like me can learn to be like someone like you.” Rozeal’s prints in this series focus solely on a hip-hop-loving subgroup of ganguro sometimes called B-Style, who style themselves like Black American hip-hop heads. They lock their hair like in Untitled I (female) or wear cornrows with saggy jeans, standing in direct contrast to the bihaku, or the skin-whitening ideals and conservative mores of older generations and of society at large.

To Rozeal, ganguro had so intensely immersed themselves in the superficial trappings of hip-hop culture that they had moved beyond appreciation into a form of racial performance. “So you like black skin?” Rozeal asks, “You want to be like me?” In a country where racist caricatures like Little Black Sambo are still marketed to children, ganguro safely mimed Blackness. Insulated, for the most part, from actual Black Americans, they could seemingly wear blackface without the four hundred years of racist American context.

Rozeal’s portrayals of ganguro youth were created using ukiyo-e woodblock printing techniques popularized during the Edo period (1615–1868). Like hip-hop culture and the ganguro themselves, ukiyo-e prints were “created by and for the lowly masses,” and were, at least at first, largely “ignored or despised by the privileged classes.”

Rozeal’s provocative work teases the concept of the remix—a foundational component of hip-hop music—by juxtaposing the complexities of race, class, culture, and values in a seductive ukiyo-e woodblock print that is provocative and disorienting. Left with more questions than answers, we ponder how the racist cultural heritage of the United States is reflected back to us across the Pacific Ocean, through a medium half a millennium old.

Rozeal
American, b. 1966
Untitled I (female), 2003
Color screenprint on paper
Image: 75.6 × 56.2 cm
(29 3/4 × 22 1/8 in.)
Mary B. Jackson Fund 2005.5

2 Ibid.
Josephine Lee: Performing multiple shifts in time and racial identity, Untitled I (female) moves from the present-day commercialization of African American culture in Japan to the historical traditions of blackface minstrel performance and orientalism in America. The female subject’s darkened skin, bandeau, and afro comb point to the contemporary Japanese trend of ganguro (“blackface”) makeup and dress and the profitable global market for African American music and culture. Her wig of black dreadlocks is also reminiscent of Topsy, the unruly character popularized by late nineteenth-century blackface minstrel enactments of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. This suggests a connection between ganguro culture and the long history of blackface representation in Japan, beginning with Commodore Matthew Perry’s 1854 shipboard staging of blackface minstrelsy to Japanese delegates.

Though Untitled I (female) works as a critique of contemporary racial typecasting, its use of the style of Japanese woodblock prints from the Edo period also reminds us of the “Japan craze” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Just as the grotesque stereotypes of minstrelsy became a standard part of American popular entertainment, exotic fantasies of Japan heavily influenced American art and consumer culture. Japanese woodblock prints and other arts and crafts became ubiquitous features of European and American homes and inspired prominent artists such as Claude Monet, Aubrey Beardsley, James McNeill Whistler, John Singer Sargent, and Mary Cassatt. Untitled I (female) uses the flat perspective and striking coloration of these prints, and echoes their fascination with subjects from “the floating world,” the districts of urban Tokyo that offered theatrical, musical, and sexual pleasures. The figure’s tiny reddened mouth, downcast eyes, and pensive expression reflect how a favorite set of subjects in ukiyo-e (“images of the floating world”) were bijin-ga (“images of feminine beauty”) that often depicted high-ranking courtesans or geishas. Multiple layers of racialized eroticism operate in Untitled I (female): the afro comb sits alongside a traditional kanzashi hairpin and the languid, revealing pose suggests the sexual allure and commodification of both Japanese and African American female bodies.

While her conspicuously darkened skin seems to comment on the white privilege assumed by the blackface performer, the figure is not drawn with white skin tones or in the white makeup often used by Japanese women of the Edo period. Though her face and neck are distinctly outlined, her “natural” skin is the same color as the pale yellow background. Thus she is conspicuous not only as a performer of blackface, but as also a decorative object that is part of an equally long American tradition. Although ostensibly targeting Japanese ganguro in producing and consuming black stereotypes, Untitled I (female) also addresses the dynamics of orientalism, and the continuing patterns of desire and capital that commodify both “black” and “yellow.”