

curator's  
statement

When Don Ed Hardy wants to integrate into his artwork the expertise he has gathered as one of the world's great tattoo artists, he translates to paper or canvas those design elements that are so vital on the living human body. The tattoo is on a two-dimensional yet folded and curved space full of the sensuality and dynamism of human skin. A painting is still, even inert, permanent and frozen in time. In *2000 Dragons* Hardy has found a solution that yields up a masterpiece: the five-hundred-foot length of the work is in itself a dragon's skin, a moldable surface that comes to life as it makes its serpentine turns around the gallery space.

One of the most important developments in turn-of-the-century artmaking in the United States is how many artists and curators alike are interested in looking at the wider array of visual culture and how it can reinvigorate the fine arts. This includes but is not limited to such areas as popular music; science fiction and other aspects of genre filmmaking; fashion and advertising; and aspects of working class or previously outsider forms—sports like boxing and wrestling, the art of untrained artists and the disabled, and most relevant in this case, tattooing. Hardy has spent a lifetime studying the entire catalog of tattoo imagery, and has added to the canon with his own inventions. These inventions are often created with the artist's knowledge of Chinese and Japanese, as well as pre-Columbian, mythological forms. The resulting amalgamation of tattoo's popular stylizations with classical Asian forms and conceptual modes of painting produce a hybrid that is often, in the nature of alloys, stronger and even more beautiful than its individual parts. It also results in a work of art that embodies new formal approaches to painting with content that takes up ideas from three continents, contributing to the globalization theme of the Cuenca Bienal. While globalization can result in an exploitative kind of cultural tourism, Hardy has earned the right to his sources through decades of exhaustive study and residency in Japan and Hawaii.

Suspended from the ceiling and adapted to its specific exhibition space, *2000 Dragons* is so long that it requires active participation on the viewer's part. It's a twisting tenth-of-a-mile, soaking-wet hike along a trail like Kauai's Na Pali coast, but one where the forest service signs warn that scale, time, geography, even the weather ahead are jumbled and unpredictable. The work is like the offspring of a Japanese shoji wall and a Torah scroll, or a paper kite wedded to an illuminated manuscript. Finding a way to combine all his interests has been Hardy's quest; he has found a way to subdue his beasts by painting on the skin of his dragons. The resulting object is like a pelt from a medieval cabinet of curiosities that we have been privileged to stumble upon early in the 21st century.

Renny Pritikin

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*Renny Pritikin was Visual Arts Director at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts from 1992–97, and has been Chief Curator since 1997. As Chief Curator he has overseen many large-scale, multidisciplinary projects, most recently an intensive examination of hip-hop culture in film, visual art, music and theater in the spring of 2001.*