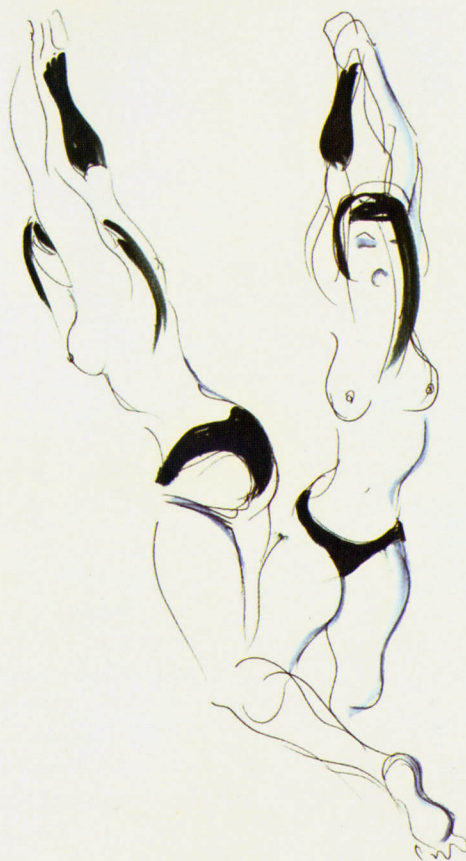


The rope the pen



Japanese *kinbaku* is far from the practice of being tied up for sex – it's a pure art form. In the first of two articles, **Isobel Williams** explains the appeal that bondage holds for the bound, the binder and the onlooking artist with her drawing pad

A woman with a doctorate in palaeoanthropology is crying with pain. She is bound in ropes and suspended from a bamboo pole. She will have hot wax dripped on her flesh and submit to other theatrical torments inflicted by her partner. Her face, ordinarily pretty, takes on more beauty with each step of degradation and abandon as her body flushes with pain-suppressing hormones.

It's disturbing and I'm not sure I like it, but I'm drawing it – pursuing my own selfish end. As, some would say, is she. Can being tied up by someone you trust make you feel safe, free and more powerful than the person tying the

knots? Yes, say devotees of Japanese rope bondage. I'm here as a refugee from the routine of drawing the nude in life class, where the model is solitary and static. This kind of bondage offers a fluid dynamic between two or sometimes three people and the shock is that it moves quickly. Bodies are rolled and trussed like veal parcels then hoisted like dockside cargo.

You'll find it on the outskirts. Tonight we're in a Victorian pub, the Flying Dutchman, a forbidding promontory in Camberwell, south London. It has been converted to a fetish venue (hooks in the ceiling). The blacked-out windows make it look as if it was condemned six months ago. It's aimed at devotees, not designed to reel in passing trade.

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Inside, all is cosy and welcoming. As I walk in, I think: alpine plant collectors' club. Away from the group around the bar, a few mixed-ability pairs are practising their tying. The fetish community as a whole may be regarded as the nerds of the sexual universe, but they themselves dismiss Japanese rope bondage people as the ultimate trainspotters and you'll even see anoraks here. Someone is dressed as a dog on a lead, but the code is casual with a smattering of glam-perv.

There are three rules in fetish world, which are all the same. 1. It's about acceptance 2. Everything is consensual 3. No means no. So you're safer from being hassled here than in the average pub.

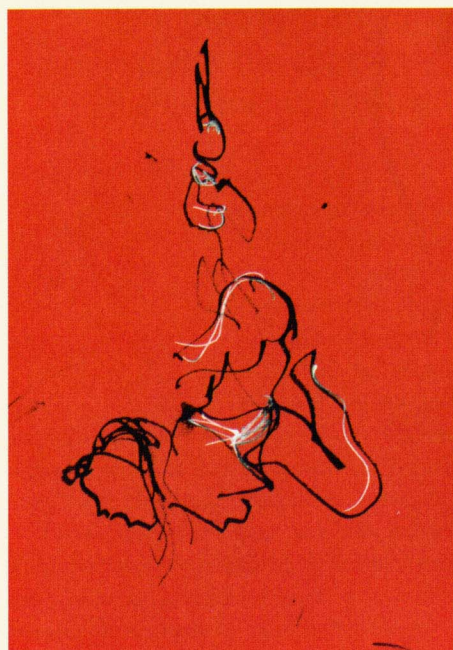
Tonight, we begin with a health-and-safety pep talk for rope bottoms (the ones who are tied) from Kinky Clover. Think about your rigger, she says. Does she mean rigor, as in mortis? Or rigour of the pursuit? Oh, she does mean rigger – the one who ties.

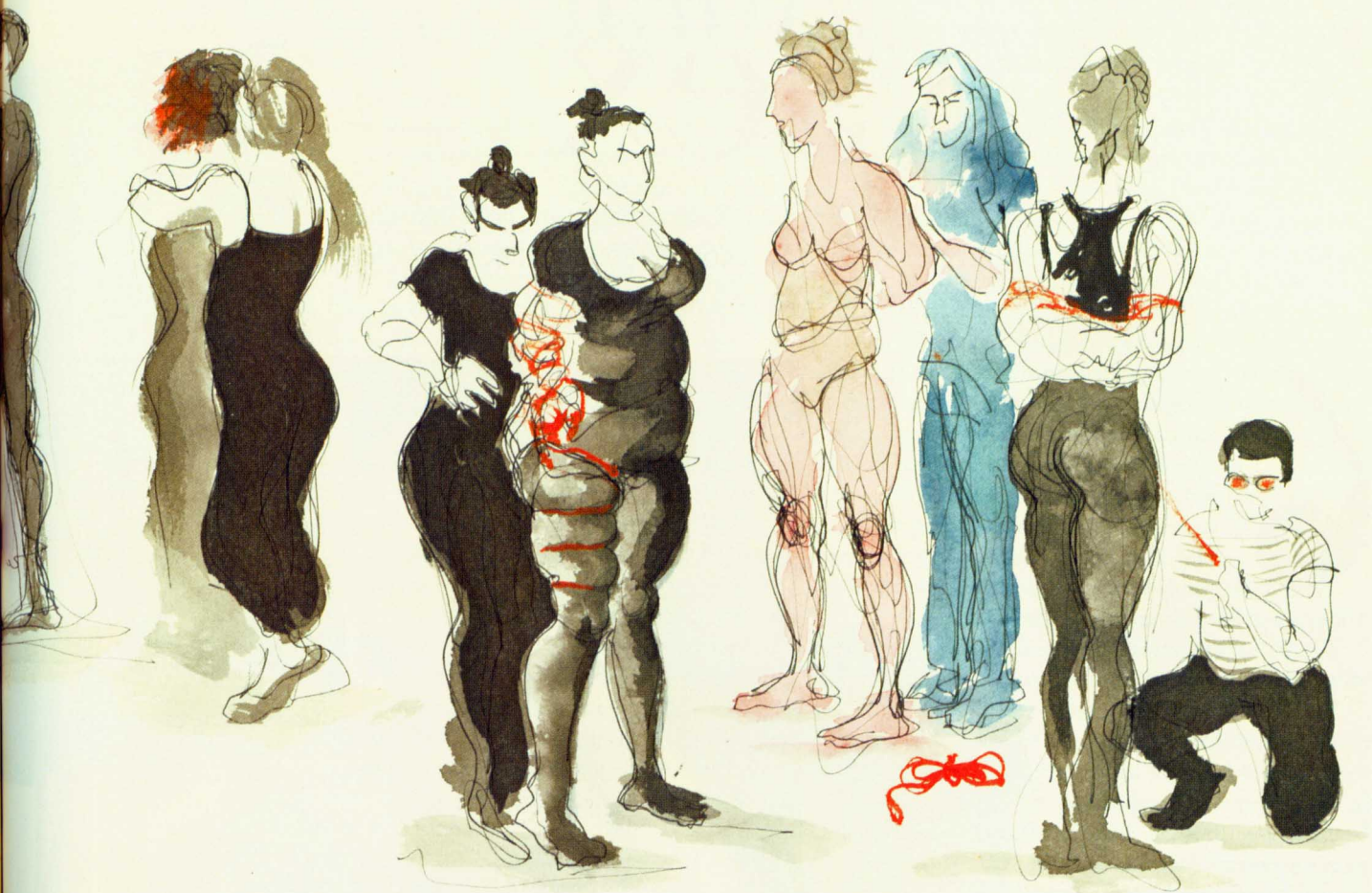
'I firmly believe an informed bottom is a more

protected bottom,' says Clover. I'm picking up the lingo. A rigger is also a top. A bottom is also a model or bunny. The pursuit can be called *kinbaku* ('tight binding' in Japanese) or *shibari* ('to tie') – it's adapted from samurai techniques of restraining captives.

When it comes to the spectacle, I am partly complicit, partly lost in the callous detachment of drawing. Wedged into the end of a sofa, I'm trying to find room for ink and things to dip into it: reed pens, bedraggled goose feathers, bendy wooden coffee stirrers, the end of a white man's dreadlock, and a few inches of hemp bondage rope. Felt tips are my dirty secret. Despite the physical confinement I'm trying to free up my line. I'm a parasite on the performers, hijacking their energy.

The performance is a hectic blend of emotion and technique. Just as a top-scoring figure-skater's blades must leave a perfect trace on the ice, so the red herringbone rope marks should be in alignment on the skin. I'm reminded of General Peckem in *Catch-22* who





Portraits of pleasure and pain: Isobel Williams' studies of Japanese kinbaku bondage

doesn't care if the bombs hit the target as long as they make good patterns on the aerial photographs.

There's split-second assessment of the body's shifting centre of gravity as it is tilted and spun. The rigger's dexterity turns the rope bottom into a helpless, entranced mass: stoic, trembling, whining, yelping. Spatchcocked. But who is really dominant?

The model fakes being passive. Otherwise his or her spine might snap. The rigger fakes control but is in subtle communion with the model, depending on touches, breaths, glances. I do not presume to be able to distinguish between the riotous out-and-out sadists and those who have a deep psychological dependence on the model. They may be one and the same. People who both tie and are tied say that true dominance lies with the model.

A model can choose from degrees of feeling. At the blunt end is going into sub zone, a helpless purry golden trance, on the floor or in a hammock-like suspension, with restraint but no pain. Then there is discomfort. I look away if the tongue is tied with rope or clamped – it has too much to do with a scold's bridle.

And, of course, pain: being suspended and contorted

– body origami – while a limb turns purple on the wrong side of a near-tourniquet. The performers seem to be addicted to the huge slugs of chemicals delivered to their bodies by a pantechicon of hurt.

Before a session they are brisk and animated; during, they may be flinching and sobbing. Some riggers use accessories such as circus whips; as for the hot wax dripped on the body, these are special candles with a low melting point, but even so...

Afterwards the models are bouncy, gleaming, charged, demonstrative, glowing with the praise they are receiving. They are mostly the kind of people I used to avoid (good at games), which reminds me that ballet dancers, athletes and weekend runners also accept pain. It's all torture lite.

But when you ask bondage models how they can bear the torment, you get a bland or a blank look and a refractive answer: 'You eroticise the pain.' That's a matter for the performer. But for the onlooker, is it porn or art or erotic? Yes. No. Shrug. It all depends on you.

Draw, draw, draw. I'm dazzled by the spotlight but my paper is in semi-darkness. On the sofa, a Japanese girl, hopelessly abandoned to the performance, is weeping.