



point and shoot



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Tim Silver's photographic series *Shooting Tadpoles at the Moon* (hereafter *STATM*) was produced while on a residency in Tokyo in 2008. As with his 2007 series *The Tuvaluan Project*, made in the Pacific nation of the title, it takes the form of a fragmented narrative about an interloper entering a foreign environment. Both series are comprised of highly staged images that feature local models, with the protagonist played by the artist himself. The scenarios draw upon a range of artistic, literary and mass-media references, with horror cinema providing the basic framework—Italian cannibal movies for *The Tuvaluan Project*, and Japanese *kaidan* (avenging spirit) films for *STATM*. On one level both works are camp fantasies, exploiting horror's fear of the Other to the hilt, but by placing himself in the frame, Silver begins to complicate who this Other might be. What emerges are wittily uncomfortable investigations of representation, cultural anxiety and desire.

The Tuvaluan Project made much of its bucolic island location, from the establishing shots of palm-fringed beaches and seabirds, to the stagy arrangements of laid-back, garlanded locals, to the quasi-journalistic imagery of collapsing trees, abandoned buildings and rubbish dumps. All of this is completely hammed up, however, with Silver presenting a *Tristes Tropiques* view of a disappearing Pacific. A key image in the series, for example, is a perfect tropical sunset, which is actually a photograph of a photograph in a book, as generic and artificial as you like. Yet in terms of a place like Tuvalu, these representations are all that we have. As Reuben Keehan has written in relation to the series, "representations frame the actual experience of place, substituting for it as in that strangely performative tolerance of cliché that seems to accompany tourism, the tendency to visit what has already been photographed".¹ Silver's artist-as-tourist act enacts this dilemma, with his presence within the images bringing to mind Christian Kravagna's observation on a set of photographs by Andrea Fraser, that explore the disparity between the mental imaging of a foreign place and the real experience of it.² Kravagna suggests that this disparity is made visible by the presence of tourists, who disrupt ideal imagery by reminding us of the condition of their production. Unlike postcards, for example, Fraser's photographs exist in a real world of power relations. Silver's presence within his set-up Tuvaluan tableaux functions in a similar way, establishing a dynamic of viewer-subject that also plays out through his narrative. His Robinson Crusoe-type character drifts onto the island and after being cared for by its inhabitants, begins to stalk, antagonise, and possibly eat them, provoking a torch-wielding crowd. Given the non-linear nature of the series, however, a sense of ambivalence prevails, with the cause-and-effect of these events left to us to figure out.

STATM by contrast is set within a typical urban milieu, and revolves around a group of handsome young men, all sourced by Silver from the gay bars of Tokyo. Unlike *The Tuvaluan Project*, there are few overt cultural cues, other than the fact that the men look Japanese. A few subtle elements creep in—the Japanese characters on a sign reflected in a train window, or for those in the know, specific kinds of

paving stones or the cityscape as surveyed from the Mori Tower—but it could potentially be any large city. Japan's celebrated, overachieving post-war development resulted in Tokyo becoming the consummate metropolis, a city that, on the surface, offers a seamless skid from across the Pacific; but of course this integration with the West is only partial. Many deeply held traditions and social structures remain resolutely in place in Japan, if somewhat unsettled. The cliché of the country's alienating otherness for Westerners needs no reiteration here, but it is made all the more acute perhaps for its operating within such a highly advanced technological society.

Silver's arrival in Tokyo therefore offers up a different set of co-ordinates to *The Tuvaluan Project*, for here he is entering a world much wealthier and more urbane than his own. His character in this series, while sporting the long black hair and pallor of a Japanese 'avenging spirit', is also wearing a black Drizabone in a nod to his Australianness. He does not contain the deadly, unstoppable potency of such characters in *kaidan* films like *Ringu* or *The Grudge*, but occupies a rather more ambiguous space—not only in terms of gender, but also in his relations to the other characters. The traditional interactions between ghost and human are blurred or inverted in this work, with Silver's character often the one under threat—he is the character being terrorised with acupuncture needles in one image (in a reference to the film *Audition*), as well as the one with the distorted face in the photograph in another (in *Ringu*, this is a sign that the subject is to be killed by a spirit within a week). In another image, the viewer of the *Ringu*-like fatal video, whom Silver is moving ominously towards on a television screen, holds a remote control, indicating that he has the power, unlike most horror movie victims, to manage his own fate. In a third scenario, directly out of *The Grudge*, Silver appears from beneath a boy's bedclothes, yet this image carries strongly sexual connotations that are not evident in the original film.

Indeed, the homoerotic aspect of *STATM* is overwhelming and provides perhaps its most interesting relational interplay. While there has been a long and vibrant tradition of homosexuality in Japan—from the *nanshoku* ('love of males') within elements of the aristocracy and the Buddhist priesthood, to the intimate master-apprentice relationships of the samurai—openly expressed gay identity in the Western sense is limited. Gay 'lifestyles' are generally conducted away from the public eye, tolerated "as long as an individual's sexual practices do not interfere with or challenge the legitimacy of the twinned institutions of marriage and household".³ Silver openly presents his models as sexual objects, with his character, in another flip of the ghost/human nexus, appearing to have been romantically involved with several of them. In one image, a boy embraces Silver's Drizabone, in an evocation of the final scenes of *Brokeback Mountain*; while in another, the one with the photograph, Silver-as-human (albeit with distorted face) is arm-in-arm with another boy in a park, as a fountain ejaculates in the background. A key theme in Japanese horror is the breakdown of the family unit, with ghosts often arising out of adulterous situations that result in murder. Usually female, these spirits return to exact revenge on the living, which in the case of *Ringu* and *The Grudge*, are troubled nuclear families. Powerful women, and by extension, openly gay men, appear to pose a threat to the traditional order. As Jay McRoy has argued, "in a transforming national and international landscape informed by increasingly reimagined gender roles, Japanese men have 'apparently suffered their own form of identity crisis', resulting in a panicked cultural reassessment in which contemporary manifestations of the 'avenging spirit' motif can be understood as symptomatic".⁴

It is in this context that Silver's artist-ghost character exerts his power. He is bringing these men into the open, 'outing' them; exploiting their beauty for his own gratification, as well as that of the audience, he oversteps cultural sensitivities and offers a form of sexual tourism. Perhaps the most telling image in the series is that based on Manet's *Olympia*, which as any art history student knows, replaced the usual goddesses with a working-class prostitute and scandalised the 1865 Paris Salon, uncovering the class and gender relations implicit in the tradition of the female nude. We see Silver in the position of the painting's flower-bearing African woman, looking longingly at a naked Japanese man lying in Olympia's position. While Silver's photograph is clearly quoting Manet, we might also consider its connection to another photographic version, the Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura's *Portrait (Futago)* (1988). Morimura's reworking features himself in the role of Olympia, wearing a wig and lying on a kimono. According to Norman Bryson in a 1995 essay, Morimura's inserting of a sexually ambiguous Asian body into the picture "foregrounded a connection between certain Western constructions of femininity, and certain Western constructions of Asia".⁵ In other words, it plays upon the stereotyping of Asian men, and Asia itself, as feminine, which in the Western imagination is aligned with passivity, delicacy, even weakness—something to be conquered (although with the shift of economic power towards Asia in recent years, this perception has taken on an added complexity). In his image, Silver appears to have subjugated his object of desire; blood streams from



the man's mouth and his eyes are closed, relinquishing the famously defiant gaze of Manet's model. Bryson also notes Morimura's production of the work in an age of "global flows of capital, images, and information", in which the sheer volume and diversity of images collapses any sense of cultural specificity or fixed identity. Almost fifteen years later, these arguments have become a truism; Silver's reading of Manet, for instance, cannot really be read without considering Morimura as well. Keehan describes Silver's approach as "remediation" (mediating that which has already been mediated⁶), a hall-of-mirrors approach to referencing that quotes from sources that are already a pastiche. Tracey Moffatt's *Something More #1* (1989) is re-enacted in *The Tuvaluan Project*, for example, as is the infamous Benetton AIDS advertisement, while Darren Sylvester's faux-KFC advertisement *If All We Have Is Each Other, That's OK* (2003) makes an appearance in *STATM*, as does the whispering scene from Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*, a film which echoes Silver's foreigner-in-Tokyo narrative (and is apparently loathed in Japan for its lazy stereotypes).

Silver's promiscuous quoting and camp theatricality, along with his physical presence within the work, conveys an active participation in the exploitative processes he is commenting upon. Like Morimura, his stance is "not from any moral ground above or outside the system".⁷ This is in contrast to many contemporary critiques on transnational or intercultural relations, with their images of shipping yards and airports, Chinese factories and Middle Eastern border crossings, conveying a critical take on the flows of goods and people from a magisterial distance. According to Pamela M. Lee, such "globalist" imagery reflects "an art world that still sees itself as distinct from the 'real' world 'outside' it".⁸ These works might include the icy, panoramic vistas of Andreas Gursky, for example, or the documentary imagery of Allan Sekula and countless others, which tend to position the artist—and by implication, the critic, curator, collector or gallery-goer—at a remove from what is being depicted, without

acknowledgement of their own participation in these same processes. As Lee puts it, "the activities constitutive of the art world's horizon (such as extensive international travel) are indivisible from the activities of globalisation itself".⁹ Silver's work, as a part of this contemporary art world, with its international residencies, cultural exchanges and site-specific projects, lays bare its conditions of production, leaving us in no doubt as to his position as artist/ethnographer/tourist/voyeur.

Notes

¹ Reuben Keehan, 'Wondering Who the Real Cannibals Are: Tim Silver's The Tuvaluan Project', *The Tuvaluan Project* (exhibition brochure), Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, 2007, unpaginated

² Christian Kravagna, 'Political Art, Aesthetic Politics, and a Little Story About the *Nachträglichkeit* of Experience', in Roger Buergel and Ruth Noack (eds), *Things We Don't Understand* (exhibition catalogue), Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2000: 95-96

³ Jennifer Robertson, quoted by Mark McLelland, 'Male Homosexuality and Popular Culture in Modern Japan', *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, Issue 3, 2000; accessed at <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue3/mccllland2.html> on 3 February, 2009

⁴ Jay McRoy, 'Introduction', in McRoy (ed.), *Japanese Horror Cinema*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005: 4

⁵ Norman Bryson, 'Morimura: 3 Readings', *Art & Text* 52, 1995: 75

⁶ Keehan, op. cit.

⁷ *ibid*: 78

⁸ Pamela M. Lee, 'Boundary Issues: The Art World Under the Sign of Globalism', *Artforum* Vol XLII No 3, 2003: 167

⁹ *ibid*.