Psychological landscapes

Naohiro Utagawa's Psychological Landscapes

The surreal photo collages by the Japanese artist Naohiro Utagawa create psychological landscapes that are as fascinating and surreal, as much as they appear daunting and even violent at times. The primary source material for Utagawa are photographs which he cuts, tears, bends, crumbles and folds. In so doing, Utawaga does not only subvert the traditional application of photography, but he also reinterprets it: here photographs are not just created through the click of a button, but they are assembled, put together or installed much like a sculpture artist uses clay for instance. The effect that he creates by using or even abusing photographs in such manor is that he defamiliarizes the photographic print as a material object.

Utagawa's method of assemblage evokes the intricacy of micro installations by the American artist Joseph Cornell. While Cornell used the rectangular shape of a soapbox as a physical boundary for his works, Utagawa 'frames' his collages through photographs. Photography is therefore used twice: as a primary source material for the sculptural installations and as a method of recording these very installations. One of the many tensions alluded to in Utagawa's series is that on one hand he abuses photographs by tearing into them, thus subverting their traditional purpose, yet on the other hand he uses photography to document these collages in all their intricate detail. Utagawa thus sets out a visual and conceptual contradiction which navigates inbetween a document and an anti-document.

Utagawa's highly unorthodox approach to photography is partially related to his training, or lack thereof, in this area. Born in 1981 in Kanagawa, on the outskirts of Tokyo, Utagawa completed a four-year law degree in 2004. Yet in his own estimation, by the time he entered into his third year at Chuo University, he knew law was not for him and he focused instead on a career in the arts. An autodidact in photography ever since his break from law, Utagawa climbed the echelons of the photographic establishment in Japan to be shortlisted in 2013 for the New Cosmos of Photography award – one of the most prestigious awards for up-and-coming photographers in Japan.

Utagawa's idiosyncratic approach to photography is also mirrored in the way he creates his collages: working from a small studio space in Tokyo, and with black out curtains drawn to prevent natural light from entering the room, he works in near darkness. To create his works, Utagawa seems to need the darkness more than he needs the light. His studio becomes, quite literally, the *camera obscura*. Traditionally speaking photography tends to depict elements that are somewhere outside in the real world, outside of the *darkened room*, though here the artist uses photography as a primary source material to make collages that depict a deeply introspective portrait of the artist.

Utagawa describes the process of making his artworks as a form of searching, whereas the searching itself becomes a means to an end to create his works. That being the case, looking into Utagawa's world from the outside it is difficult to tell when an artwork can be considered complete. Or perhaps these works are never

complete and all the viewer gets to see is a glimpse into the process of art production. This is yet another tension in Utagawa's project: by using photography's capacity to document the artwork, the viewer makes the assumption that the collages are completed artworks and thus worthy of being re-photographed, whereas in reality we become privy to a process of assemblage that might, in fact, be never-ending.

The multiple contradictions in Utagawa's work are best signified through an image that depicts two hands, one of a man and one of a woman, held in mid air. At first sight it looks as if they are tenderly touching each other, yet at closer inspection both hands are wounded alluding to a sense of violence. Utagawa recalls that while working on a shoot, one of his colleagues broke a finger and the model incurred a scratch. The violence must not be read in the literal sense, but rather as a metaphor for what Utagawa does to the photographs. He treats the photographs, all of which are from his own archive, like very few photographers would ever treat their own work. Utagawa's treatment of photographs can be referenced with the Greek origins of the word *iconoclast*: breaking a likeliness or more commonly understood as breaking an image.

Utagawa's work purposefully goes against the grain of photography: he treats his own photographs like throwaway objects allowing him to compose works long after the photograph has been taken. The resulting artworks are much less about the subjects depicted in the photographs than they are a depiction of Utagawa's complicated as well as self-reflexive relationship with photography.

Text by Marco Bohr