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Looking in : Looking out

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26 June 2002

We're all myopes—at least at first. If we're lucky we grow out of it. Lucky because it's the degree to which we strive beyond our personal horizons, especially if it's challenging to do so, that largely determines our humanity. There is a reason for this. If we're not afraid of observing, we won't fear knowing. Knowledge is a form of communion—of love (even if it hurts). As Kurosawa instructed, "To be an artist means never to avert your eyes."

In their installations at **transformer**, Mica Scalin and Misaki Kawai give us a glimpse of what it means to look beyond our horizons at a time when mass transit, massive connectivity, and encroaching surveillance make it seem easier, if scarier, than ever. Are we more willing to watch than be watched? Are the quantum mechanics correct with their claim that you can't observe something without changing it? "Don't touch life in the pond," warns the sign in Scalin's photograph. "You must peep!" seems Kawai's imperative when she presents to us a doll tree-house—beckoning us to witness through its windows the mundane lives of the famous. Inside, The Beatles watch home movies on the TV, shower, and hang out with Kawai's friends.

Scalin's photographs are hung salon style, in a manner that suggests a rock garden or a koi pond. Repeating prints of a lotus blossom punctuate a constellation of embedded images (she even seems to include Kawai's installation as one of these) depicting quotidian Japanese, urban scenes. How invisible is a classical temple roofline to the average salaryman on his daily commute? Scalin's images capture, with the fascination of new sight, lily pads and heli-pads, trees and power lines, fish and people. Some, she seems to want (us) to see more than once. Double exposures and vignetting give her photographs the quality of memories—distorted by time and hope. The way we remember something matters. Regardless of whether an action or event has innate properties, what we take from it, and how it fits into our worldview, determines its weight in the world *through our perception*—we can make it much more or much less by the sheer power of our observation. Artists can move us by communicating these interpretations. Scalin's detached approach to her subjects—not one seems to acknowledge the artist's gaze—belies her fascination with the icons we in the USA identify as Japanese.

Situational and preferential neophiles connect with the new by nuzzling it, grasping whatever purchase they can from it, and latching onto that as if it was milk-blood. When in that position, they look first at a novel territory's familiar features. From those they can then broaden their scope and also love the less familiar. Scalin shows us that initial phase of her infatuation with Japan as it becomes filtered through her memories and expectations in the darkroom and in the gallery.

Here's a false memory for you, "You kids and your crazy music!" Although I never heard that from my parents, I find myself saying it half seriously nowadays. More kids than I'd like to believe are listening to the exact same crap I was listening to at their age. I say "crap" as a term of endearment—sort of. Don't they know that there's an explosion of innovation out there? Do they care about newness? Why look (seemingly) backward instead of forward? Enough about me? Not quite yet. Kawai's memories are mutations of my memories. I was a child in Japan when The Beatles emerged as a phenomena. Kawai appears to love them more than I ever did.

At first I thought perhaps she was treating Western icons in much the same way as Mica's reportage from the land of the rising sun. I mean, how invisible are The Beatles to Joe Artlover? But upon closer examination, one sees some healthy contempt there. Something internalized that comes only after years of a kind of loving vivisection. The fab four were, after all, a global phenomenon for decades. In building her quilted patchwork tree house, she's taken apart not only The Beatles I knew, but also the sub-cultures they've spawned, and the ones they've hybridized with along the way. The creepy-cute dolls and architecture, painstakingly handmade down to the pubic hair and bathroom fixtures respectively, contrast ambivalently with her similarly neotenous but crude drawings. Both regard the world with the amused condescension of the precocious. Celebrity genitalia are barely blips on the radar anymore.

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That's how easily she offers them to us—gone are my John and Yoko as symbols of a marriage of cultures, gone the metaphysical ed and the fatal attractions, gone the calculated media coups and the public breakups. Love means never having to get back to a past that never was (for Misaki). See for yourself. One is forced to observe the everyday from pre-designated vantage points. And what does one see? If you look with enough interest, you see yourself looking out from inside and asking, "You looking at me"? Don't you just want to hug something that does that?

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transformer's guest essayist Alberto Gaitán is a composer living and working in Arlington and DC. He has worked collaboratively in cross-media projects with DC's best musicians, poets, choreographers, and visual artists of all types. His visual work has included the very first computer-based installation presented in a DC nightclub, as well as video work and photography. His music has been played in the Kennedy Center and in performance spaces around DC and in Europe. His work with collaborative artist group Art Attack International has won international critical acclaim and his solo sonic pieces have been presented internationally and locally. He is currently working with media band, id10+, which he co-founded. id10+ creates real-time sonic+visual experiences in concert halls or nightclubs.