

The cherry blossom season has come and gone both in Japan and the UK, but the experience of enjoying the beauty of nature can always continue, for example, visiting parks or gardens, or reading about them. The April issue of *The Japan Society Review* opens with a book examining the origins and deeper meanings of Japanese gardens as an art-form. In *The Japanese Garden*, Sophie Walker addresses the question of 'What is a Japanese garden?' in relation to Japanese culture, religion and philosophy, illustrating her research with colourful images of gardens around Japan.

In our literary section, we have included reviews of two novels by contemporary Japanese writers. *Seventeen* is the latest translated work of Yokoyama Hideo, a writer specialising in mystery novels and author of the celebrated *Six Four*. Original, dramatic and thought-provoking, *Seventeen* is based on the JAL flight 123 crash in 1985. At the time, Yokoyama was a journalist at a local newspaper and was one of those who saw first-hand the crash site in Gunma prefecture. Kawakami Mieko's *Ms Ice Sandwich* is

a summer love story that segues neatly toward a comical (and at times tragic) coming of age tale offering a fine societal critique of contemporary adulthood.

Japanese documentary and visual culture have also found space in this issue of *The Japan Society Review*. Roger Macy reviews the new film by legendary documentary filmmaker Hara Kazuo, *Sennan Asbestos Disaster*. In this work, Hara follows a group of ex-workers during their eight-year struggle to get compensation from the government for their health problems caused by asbestos. The exhibition *Shapeshifter* by Yamashiro Chikako has opened a 12 month programme of solo exhibitions and projects by contemporary Japanese artists at the White Rainbow's art space in London. The multimedia work of Yamashiro focuses on questions of identity and politics concerning Okinawa and the problematic issues of cohabitation with US military bases.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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Silvia Caso, Morgane Chinal-Dargent, Graham Hardman, Christopher Hood, Roger Macy.

Image from *The Japanese Garden* by Sophie Walker  
Taizō-in, Myōshin-ji Complex, Rinzai Zen Buddhism, Kyoto.  
Picture credit: ©Akira Nakata

## The Japanese Garden

by Sophie Walker

Phaidon Press (2017)  
ISBN-13: 978-0714874777

Review by Graham Hardman  
(Honorary Vice-President of the  
Japanese Garden Society)



Those who have had the pleasure of visiting gardens in Japan will know what a wonderful experience it can be. Beguiling, stimulating, captivating, or in some cases possibly puzzling – is it really a garden? Puzzlement was the experience of Sophie Walker, author of *The Japanese Garden* when first introduced to them. What do they mean, what can they offer? Her search for understanding led to several years of research into the origins and deeper meanings of Japanese gardens as an art-form, the result being this excellent book.

Written with considerable passion and eloquence, her focus is 'not on the history or scholarship of the many types of Japanese garden, but on its broader aspiration to high art and its ability to engage complex conceptual and philosophical propositions' (p. 303). This makes it a welcome addition to the available books covering the history and styles of garden.

The main text of the book consists of eleven essays by the author with intriguing and seductive titles, each addressing different aspects of the Japanese garden. This approach works well in the context of her stated focus. The question 'What is a Japanese garden?' is deceptively simple and defies a straightforward answer. Approaching the subject by considering multiple aspects offers the reader an insight into the complex nature of gardens as an art-form.

Each essay includes interesting and informative archive photographs from many sources, and is followed by a series of garden images that relate to the particular theme being explored. Interspersed throughout the book are seven 'guest' essays by Lee Ufan, Tan Twan Eng, Miyajima Tatsao, Marcus du Sautoy, John Pawson, Anish Kapoor and Ando Tadao. Each of these excellent short commentaries provides an additional viewpoint, adding further insights into the complex nature of Japanese gardens and our experience of them.

All of these elements contribute to the overall exposition of what underlies the Japanese garden as a work of art, placing it at the heart of Japanese culture. The excellent garden images, many taken by the author, have informative descriptions rather than simple captions. The images have, unusually these days, a matt finish, which

renders them more intimate and engaging somehow, a welcome change from the all too common glossy images.

Religious, cultural and philosophical influences on the thinking behind the nature of gardens over time are explored, with references derived from three existing sources in equal measure; Japanese gardens, Japanese culture and Japanese religious texts.

The introduction, 'The Nature of the Garden' describes them as '...an ancient cultural form that is potent, mysterious and esoteric' (p. 6) that has 'stated and restated invention with imagination and ambition for some 1,500 years' (p. 8). Here the enigma of the Japanese garden and its place in our current era is explored.

In 'Beauty, Terror and Power' the author sets the scene of the wide range of influences – nature in all its beauty and the terror of the forces of the earth so prominent in Japan, Shinto, Chinese culture, geomancy and Buddhism. How these have been interpreted during the periods in Japanese history follows, with an emphasis on early prototypes that embody important and enduring characteristics. Aspects of design are used as themes in several essays: 'The Hidden, Implied and Imagined' covers how symbolism is used, gravel becoming the ocean, stones becoming mountains and so on, allowing the viewer's imagination to create the scene hinted at by the garden maker. 'In the Japanese garden beauty lies not simply in the thing itself, but in the possibility of what it is able to impart' (p. 122-123).

'The Way, Body and Mind' deals with how a garden is revealed as the viewer walks through a Stroll garden, how it requires engagement of body and mind in doing so. The manner in which garden makers have used the path (or way) to engage the viewer in this journey is well described. 'Time, Space and the Dry Garden' discusses the power of the abstract Dry Garden of stone and gravel, perhaps the most commonly associated with Japan. 'This unlikely form of garden is conceptually challenging, and yet its inanimate nature broadens the intellectual possibility of the garden, giving rise to multiple readings of content, scale and meaning...' (p. 182).

'Inner Space: the Courtyard Garden' explores how enclosed gardens and spaces have been used in the past and their significance in ryokan, Japan's guest inns. A small space within the machiya house 'produces a very particular and intense private garden...' (p. 225). Religious themes are referenced throughout, but in particular: 'Expanded Understanding' in which we read about the influence of the sun and the moon in the garden, relating this to Zen Buddhist thinking, while 'Zen Challenge: the Unenterable Garden' beseeches us to 'enter the garden not with our feet, but with our imaginations' (p. 156).

'Duality and Reflection' describes the use of opposites in the garden, 'the whole exists only with the mutual reinforcement of duality: 'being' and 'non-being'... heaven and earth, birth and death, time and void, zero and infinity...' (p. 94), a common thread in many Japanese arts. 'Death, Tea and the Garden' deals with the Tea Ceremony and Tea Garden, having equal status with the Tea House and the associated wabi sabi aesthetic in the garden. Finally, 'The Poetry of Plants' discusses the role of plants in the Japanese garden, strikingly different from that in Western gardens. When plants are used in the Japanese garden 'they form an indispensable symbolic contribution to the philosophical or poetic vision of the garden' (p. 242).

At the end of the book are several useful reference sections: on plants found in Japanese gardens, giving the Japanese name in romaji and kanji as well as the western botanical name, a helpful short description of the periods in Japanese history, a comprehensive glossary, bibliography and index.

This is an impressive, informative and very readable book, written with considerable passion from an artistic

perspective, providing insights and imagery not usually found in books on Japanese gardens. It should appeal to anyone with an interest in Japanese gardens, or indeed Japanese culture. On picking up the book it is immediately clear that this is not a typical glossy-image based treatise. It has no dust jacket with photograph, just a plain green hard cover with a circle cut into it, presumably representing the Buddhist 'window of enlightenment' as seen at Genko-an, a temple in Kyoto that is described in the book.

Inside there is a background colour coding to distinguish the different contents: grey for the author's text, white for garden images, green for the reference section and seven different colours for the 'guest' essays. This visual identification works well in identifying the multiple elements of the book, and will appeal to those who like to 'dip in' or return to sections of particular interest. The author is a young British Garden Maker with a burgeoning international portfolio. After a degree in Art History and further study in Horticulture, she has the accolade of being the youngest woman to design a Show garden at Chelsea in 2014. §

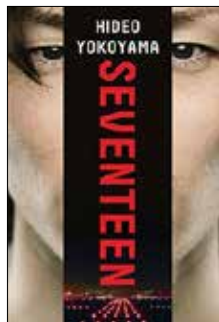
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## Seventeen

by Yokoyama Hideo  
translated by Louise Heal Kawai

Riverrun (2018)  
ISBN-13: 978-1786484604  
Audiobook narrated by Tom  
Lawrence

Review by Dr Christopher Hood



Back in 2007 I began conducting research about the Japan Air Lines flight 123 crash (JL123), the world's largest single plane crash. At the time there were no books in English wholly about the crash (there are now two – *Dealing with Disaster in Japan* and *Osutaka*). There were over 60 books in Japanese, however – a number which has continued to grow over the years. Most of these books are either questioning what really happened to the plane (unlike in most English texts and documentaries, many Japanese are not convinced by the findings of the official report) or are covering the experiences of the bereaved families. However, amongst the books were two novels; *Shizumanu Taiyo* and *Kuraimazu Hai*. The second of these is what has now been published in English under the title of *Seventeen*.

Whilst the original Japanese title gets its name from the English words 'Climber's High', the official translation focusses upon the period of time it took Yokoyama to

come to terms with his experiences in 1985 (it is probably also a nod to the only other translation (*Six Four*), as things stand, of one of Yokoyama's books being numerical). Yokoyama was a journalist at a local newspaper in 1985 and was one of those who went to the JAL flight 123 crash site. As noted by Yokoyama's own words in the introduction to the English version (which doesn't appear in the Japanese version), it took him 17 years to reach a point where he could fully come to terms with his experiences. So there are good reasons for the change in title, but it does make it that much harder to find when searching for it – particularly if you make the mistake of looking for it as '17' rather than 'Seventeen'. The cover has also mirrored the style of the English version of *Six Four*, but I can't help that feel a cover more in keeping the original Japanese version would have been preferable. But in the end, we should not judge a book by the cover – the contents are a masterpiece.

Whilst Yokoyama was a journalist at a local newspaper in 1985 and *Seventeen* centres around a journalist at a local newspaper covering the crash (together with a second storyline set 17 years later), this book is not directly based on Yokoyama's own experiences. It is a work of fiction, albeit set within the backdrop of a real event. So what type of book is it? In some ways, this is a bit of a puzzle. The publisher appears to have promoted it as a thriller, but that doesn't really do the book justice. It's

not completely about a disaster. It's not totally about the life of a journalist. If anything, it's about humanity. In many respects the key storyline is not the one you think it is (I won't say any more so as not to spoil your read), and the omission of this storyline from the 2008 movie (directed by Harada Masato) was the source of the main criticism of what, otherwise, was a well-regarded movie.

Getting to grips with the full meaning of the book takes time – I've read the Japanese version many times, watched the two Japanese dramatizations numerous times, met and interviewed Yokoyama Hideo himself (and also some of those involved with the dramatizations), and have now read and listened to the English version. But the full implications of some of the words didn't come to me straight away. That is not because there is a problem with the way the book is written. It's just that it's one of those books where you need time to let it get under your skin and you need to give time to thinking about what is written. Having said that, it is also an easy-page turner and it's possible to enjoy the story for the sheer drama.

The translator has done an excellent job in faithfully keeping the feel of the original Japanese text. Japanese doesn't always map well into English and so this can be a real challenge. That one of the key phrases in the original Japanese (下りるため登る, oriru tame noboru) presents itself as a riddle and challenge for the protagonist to fully comprehend, coming up with something in English that can also remain a riddle and open to various interpretations must have been especially difficult. I particularly liked the translation of the 'Sayama article' and find it much more emotive than the one used in the English subtitles of the 2008 movie (and which also appear in the book *Dealing with Disaster in Japan*). It is a shame that publishers don't allow translators to have a short chapter to discuss the challenges they had to deal with and a space to explain

some of the translation choices they made. However, two things the publisher did do that may help some is that some of the original names were changed so that there are less similar-sounding names. Second, a glossary of names, as well as a diagram showing how key personnel in the newspaper company fit into the organisation, are provided. Both of these are very helpful for people to be able to double-check who everyone is.

Turning to the audiobook version, there are a few things that could be improved. First the inclusion of a Foreword by Yokoyama has thrown out the chapter numbers as the Foreword is listed as Chapter 1. Second, and more significantly, it is a real shame that so many of the Japanese names and words are mispronounced – and some inconsistently. For those familiar with Japanese the errors will make you cringe, but I suspect that many more will be unaware of the errors and so it will be less of an issue for them. However, the narrator is very easy to listen to and generally has interpreted the style of interactions between characters in a suitable manner which makes it easy and enjoyable to listen to.

I sincerely hope that we will see more translations of Yokoyama books in the years to come. He has a very engaging style of writing, with vivid descriptions, engaging dialogues and wonderfully crafted storylines. If you were to write a fictional novel based around the real JAL flight 123 crash, I doubt that you would chose a storyline like the one in *Seventeen* – but that is the beauty of this book; it is original, dramatic and thought-provoking. I hope that we will see a translation one day of the other novel related to the JAL flight 123 crash, *Shizumanu Taiyo*. As for *Seventeen*, it is a fabulous read for, and should be a compulsory read for anyone who deals with journalism (either as a journalist or as a consumer) on a regular basis. §

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## Ms Ice Sandwich

by Kawakami Mieko  
translated by Louise Heal Kawai

Pushkin Press (2017)  
ISBN-13: 978-1782273301

Review by Morgane Chinal-Dargent



Despite the fact that Kawakami Mieko's *Ms Ice Sandwich* is a short novel, not more than a hundred pages, the touching story crafted by the awards winning author is sure to live long in the memory.

The plot revolves around an unnamed boy and his everyday life in his family's house. His father died when he was younger and he now lives with his bed-ridden

grandmother and his mother, who is busy spending her time between her mystical job and her phone. During a lonely summer, the young protagonist develops an affinity for visiting a local department store where he buys sandwiches all the while doing so merely to catch a glimpse of the clerk, nicknamed 'Ms Ice Sandwich', on account of the peculiar ice-blue make-up she uses on her eyelids. Gradually the boy becomes obsessed with her unusual beauty and upon returning home, draws her face everyday, paying particular attention to her mesmerising eyes.

However, things begin to change when, during one of his daily visits, the boy witnesses an altercation between his favourite clerk and a customer. This is followed by

disturbing rumours regarding her appearance, which persuades him to keep his fantasy to himself, with his grandmother, unable to communicate due to her medical condition, the only person who knows about his feelings. As the story develops, he encounters a fellow lonely soul in Tutti, a lively girl who begins to help him gain courage to face Ms Ice Sandwich, and his feelings.

Kawakami's has been acclaimed as a talented writer in Japan since finishing her singing career in 2006. Among the many prizes that she was awarded, her most notable one might be the Tsubouchi Shoyo Prize for Young Emerging Writers she won in 2007 for her debut novel *My Ego Ratio, My Teeth, and the World*. The prize was received by Murakami Haruki the same year in the established writers category, and in *Ms Ice Sandwich*, it has come clear why she keeps such fine literary company.

Successfully addressing topics such as loneliness, love, loss and friendship through the eyes of young protagonists, Kawakami finds a truly poetic voice in her story where she conveys the troubles of youth, especially in relation to sentimentality and attachment. It is here that the novel's strength really lies as it takes the reader back to their own childhood, challenging them to confront their own youth through the author's delightful and minimalistic style. She gently reminds us to not underestimate children's intelligence nor their perception of the world. This is especially powerful in relation to the character of Tutti who expresses such themes in the following line:

*'...there's loads of hard stuff in life, and maybe when we're grown-ups, there's going to be tons more hard stuff to deal with. And when that happens, I'm going to tell myself I can't give in or freeze up and get discouraged and do nothing. I have to believe that.'*  
(Kawakami, 2013, p. 76)

In contrast to the youngest protagonists' wisdom, we are also presented to the folly of adulthood. Both

the central boy and Tutti's loneliness can be prescribed to a lack of parental care or involvement, their lives dominated not by their children or their duties as adults, but rather by the excesses of medias such as television and smartphones. Besides, the argument witnessed in the supermarket leaves the boy both overwhelmed and puzzled as the rumours arising from that situation reflect the narrow-mindedness of the adults.

This is yet another example of Kawakami's strength as an author; her ability to comment on what is and has become normative in our society, and in turn what it has begun to neglect. Kawakami herself neglects to pursue 'absolute truth' with regards to gossip, rumours and hearsay, and instead maintains her more emotional presentation to the characters, allowing us to empathise and identify. Nevertheless, Kawakami's tone never gets judgmental, rather, the genuine comments resulting from her characters' observations lead the reader to his own reflections about prejudices and acceptance. As such this creates a refreshing tale of understanding and acceptance.

The translator Louise Heal Kawai should also be commented on her excellent translation from the original Japanese source to English where she manages to make the story flow in a natural manner. Her translation remains faithful to the original version, retaining the sensibility and sensitivity of the main character's personal journey and presenting it in an easy-to-read format that English readers should no doubt massively appreciate.

*Ms Ice Sandwich* is unusual for sure. A summer love story that segues neatly toward a comical (and at times tragic) coming of age tale that offers a fine societal critique of adulthood in our times. It never falls into the melodramatic, but does have a slick sentimental edge which seeks to remind us of the importance of acceptance, letting go and moving on. A hopeful message which validates the talent of the author and makes it a good introduction to Kawakami Mieko's universe. §

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## Sennan Asbestos Disaster

directed by Hara Kazuo (2017)

Review by Roger Macy

Hara Kazuo is probably the best-known director of Japanese documentaries in the West, with a number of his films available on DVD, including his 1987 *Yuki, yukite shingun*, retitled in English, *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*. After years of immersion with his subjects, in 2017 Hara completed a new documentary on an epic fight of the bottom with the top of Japan, *Sennan*

*Asbestos Disaster*. Prior to its release in Japan in March 2018, this film has already won the audience awards at both the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival and Tokyo FilmEx, following its award of the 'Best Asian documentary' at BIFF in Busan.

Sennan is an industrial area of Osaka, on the southern fringe of the city where Japan's asbestos industries were concentrated. To anyone above a certain age in the West, 'asbestos' is just a historic material, sometimes discovered when renovating or demolishing old structures, which requires strict precautions to prevent inhalation of the

carcinogenic fibres. Its use in construction, or any other purpose, has long been banned. Not so, in Japan, where asbestos continued to be manufactured until around 2006, when the government finally banned its use, some 40 years after other major economies, and about sixty years after its health hazards were first identified.

Hara's long film gives the briefest of briefings on that historical background before spending nearly all of its four hours following a group of ex-workers of the area during their eight-year struggle to get some compensation from the government for their health problems. Indeed, the Japanese title of the film is '*Nippon koku vs. Sennan ishiwata mura*' – 'The Japanese state versus the asbestos village of Sennan' (the city of Sennan where most of the claimants came from). Most publicity on the film follows the briefing of Hara's company in saying that the film documents the court battle. It doesn't. Hara does not even glance at the legal arguments and procedures. Although not able to film in court, he could have re-enacted scenes or given an account of some of the arguments but he is not interested in these points, which were, after all, decided long ago – at least by the 1970s, in other legal domains.

What Hara documents is the final eight years of these people's campaign to get compensation. Their unimpeachable argument was that, for decades, the Japanese government chose to encourage the continuance of an industry that was considered to be deadly by competent experts and authorities elsewhere. The legal landscape in the West is that there has been no resistance to the facts of the damage, with occasional resorts to the courts to determine leading cases that test and quantify precise liabilities. But in Japan, the government, years after the medico-legal facts were determined, fought a tenacious battle to deny liability whatsoever. In a legal domain less deferential to power, the Japanese government might reasonably have been ruled a vexatious litigant for doggedly arguing the unarguable and been curtailed by abbreviated procedures; but it was allowed to appeal, at a snail's pace, to every possible court, until there were none left in 2014.

Hara could, and should, have interrogated that denial. In Western countries, it has been the insurance companies who have had to foot the bill, as they preserve their liability, even after the closure of their clients who paid their premiums. Nothing in Hara's four-hour documentary even touches on their absence from providing compensation in an economy with a highly advanced insurance industry. Nor does it explain the dates that eventually limited the government's liability to a period roughly from 1973 to 2006. None of this is even hinted at in Hara's documentary, which focuses, without



Promotional image of *Sennan Asbestos Disaster*

blinking, on the campaign of the claimants. This should come as no surprise to anyone who knows anything of Hara's work. Relatively little is spoken to the camera or to Hara, we mostly observe members of the group in conversation or demonstrating their grievance. The significant change in his latest film is that it's a struggle of a group, rather than an individual. There is an interesting discussion where some members try and highlight the preponderance of minorities in their midst, only to be resisted those of Korean descent, who don't want to be defined as such.

One member, however, does stand out, often literally, although he is scrupulous in his commitment to the collective. The founder of the Citizens' Group for Sennan Asbestos Damage, Yuoka Kazuyoshi, was introduced as the ex-manager of one of the factories which was owned by his family. That crucial double identity of the most outspoken of the claimants is mentioned at the beginning before we realize how repeatedly he will put himself in the line of fire; but it is not examined further, nor are we reminded of this during the four hours, the better to have pondered his motivation.

Just one example of Yuoka's actions must suffice. The group have waited but never rested for years, as they stand outside various courthouses for the inevitable victory, followed by another long-drawn appeal. This time, they are off to Tokyo for a press conference to publicise their objection to another government appeal. But Yuoka suggests to the group that they attempt a direct appeal at the prime minister's residence. He eventually persuades the group that they cannot ask the permission of their lawyers as they couldn't say 'yes'. That struck me

as a very atypical Japanese insight. Yuoka is unflinching as he takes on waves of gatekeepers at the prime minister's residence in fruitless application.

Far more bizarre is a later round where the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare admit the group into their building for them to ask for the appeal to the High Court to be waived. The Ministry allow this meeting to be adjourned, daily, readmitting them – along with Hara's camera – for weeks of stonewalling where an endless supply of the most junior officials merely state that they have no authority to disclose if any decision has been taken. We are left to guess why a ministry would prolong themselves being depicted so poorly on camera. I presume that no news-teams were admitted and Hara was regarded as too committed to reach a wide audience. And, if the object of appeal is to delay justice, then spending a few more weeks failing to explain one's actions does not undermine one's objective.

Eventually, the appeal to the Supreme Court is lodged by the government and, more years down the line, it loses. So, if the government lost the final battle, did they lose the war? Hardly. Hara has taken us on an emotional journey where we have formed a relationship with the claimants over many years, seeing many of them die. But it seems that the government have not been ruled liable for all asbestos workers after 1973, but only those who were foolhardy enough to devote years of their life to fighting their government, and then only those that survived to receive the compensation. One claimant, in particular, survived the entire legal process only to die three days before the titular visit of the Minister of Labour.

But the show must go on. Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare: Shiozaki Yasuhisa came down to Sennan to make formal apology. Whilst the news media got slots for their cameras as Shiozaki made his performance to various claimants, Hara evidently drew the straw for the minister's apology to the late Machimoto Sachiko.

Shiozaki duly performed the apology to Machimoto-san's corpse with exquisite manners. Those manners are seen to win over the poor claimants of 'the asbestos village', who are heard having nothing but gratitude to express for the minister who took eight years – and all the courts in the land – to apologise. I had my reservations about Hara's general depiction – removing the legal arguments had conveyed a bi-polar, feudal relationship but, if even the very few who fought and won have such deferential gratitude then my objections must be dismissed.

Hara avoids any suggestion of conspiracy and never speculates as to the locus of the mind of such government resistance to its responsibilities. For my part, the only way I can understand it as rational behaviour is if the government is aware of much wider liabilities for similar industrial policies in the period of high growth. Another kind of documentary would have homed in on whose Departmental budget these liabilities actually fall. Since they fall outside annual allocations, they surely are taken up by the Ministry of Finance. The formal apology of a mere minister of health or labour may just be a bishop's sacrifice when available pawns have run out. The stakes for the government had, of course, increased by trillions of yen during the course of their resistance, as by now they are also disputing through the courts their liability for inadequate regulation of the nuclear power industry.

The film was not quite over. We saw the formal meeting of the Group where they decided to redistribute their compensation so as to recompense even those who had lost entirely due to the 1973 cut-off. It struck me that it would have only taken one member to object for that plan to have unravelled. It was a sweet moment of collective generosity – in painful contrast to that of some other claimant groups – from a community for whom we had formed a rich bond during the four hours of Hara's off-centred but inspired documentary. §

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## Shapeshifter

exhibition by Yamashiro Chikako

White Rainbow, 15 March – 28 April 2018

Review by Silvia Caso

Okinawa is the largest of the Okinawa Islands, which are part of the Nansei (also referred to as Ryukyu) island group in Southern Japan. Since the end of World War II, several islands of the archipelago have been hosting US military bases. Their presence especially concerns the main island of Okinawa; despite being reverted to Japanese authority

in 1972, more than a 20% of its territory is still occupied by airbases of the United States Forces Japan. Across the years, the presence of American soldiers has given rise to three major waves of mass protest, in what scholars have referred to as the "Okinawan struggle".

This forced cohabitation, very unwelcomed by the Okinawans, is the main preoccupation of Yamashiro Chikako's work, on show under the title of Shapeshifter at White Rainbow's non-profit space in London until the 28th of April. Born in Okinawa in 1976, Yamashiro has witnessed the last public outcry in the "Okinawan struggle" caused by the rape of a local schoolgirl by American soldiers in 1995.

Leaving behind White Rainbow's dark glass façade and entering the space, a large screen is playing a movie with an intense in- and out-of-the-water camera movement; the installation is accompanied by loud gurgling sounds. The protagonist is a barely-floating, frantically-breathing fictional mermaid, witnessing fishing boat trips, soldiers' maritime activities, protesters lining up on the seashore in Henoko. Once famous for its coral, Henoko has been recently rebuilt to allow the relocation of a military base, a governmental choice that has inflamed the protests of activists and citizens alike.

Using the mermaid as a neutral standpoint, Yamashiro chooses to approach the debate on reconstruction diffusing the space between the binary constructions of "us" versus "them". To reinforce the "outsideness" of the artist, on the right-hand side of the screen Millaisque photographs portrait Yamashiro as the mermaid herself, an open-eyed Ophelia immersed in a water stream, with her mouth covered by seaweed. The pre-Raphaelite undertones exuding from these self-portraits seem to hint to the formative practice of Yamashiro, who graduated with a major in painting.

Across the room, three video installations compose the work titled *OKINAWA TOURIST*, which takes its name from the major tour operator of the island. In *I Like Okinawa Sweet* Yamashiro is devouring an ice-cream with gusto; in *Trip to Japan* she is offering facts as population, climate, geology of Okinawa, as if delivering a sightseeing tour. Lastly, in *Graveyard Eisa* the artist and her clique stage the evocative Eisa, the island's traditional dance performed during summer festivals.



*Shapeshifter* by Yamashiro Chikako, White Rainbow

A casual observation of these video performances might suggest that Yamashiro is operating a not-too-subtle mockery of local traditions; however, the locations chosen for each of the depicted activities are carefully balanced to suggest a sense of displacement. The fence of a military airport base becomes the best place where to

savour ice-cream; holding a sign while standing in front of a government building is an acceptable option for a tour operator; and Eisa dances are now meant to take place in a graveyard. Within these works, the artist seems to firmly reposition herself on the side of her fellow countrymen, left without a land to claim as their own, and having to negotiate their space in a territory that originally belonged to them.

The most impressive video piece is screened at the back of the gallery, in White Rainbow's newly built-in cinema. Walking into the pitch dark room mid-screening, the overwhelmingly aggressive noise of a military aircraft is soon replaced by the silence accompanying impressive aerial views of rice fields. The vibrant greenery of the beautiful landscape is interspersed with the views of someone moving through dark tunnels of rocks. Eventually, the scene moves to an extreme close-up of mud-encrusted eyes and fingers. Unravelling their arms and legs from a network of intertwined limbs, opening their glassy eyes, men and women covered in mud emerge from a human mud-slide that has taken over a whole field. The continue change of camera angle is disorientating, with grand angles on the vastness of the space juxtaposed to abrupt zooms on dirty limbs and eyelashes.

The piece, aptly called *Mud Man*, has been filmed between Okinawa and Jeju in South Korea: the whispering sounds that can be occasionally heard in the background are either of the two languages, softly dispersed into thin air by murmurs emitted by these mud men. As the Korean-Japanese relationships have been tainted by a past history of colonialism, the use of this second filming location recalls an element of duality on the role of victims and perpetrators Japan has assumed in the generic discourse of land appropriation.

Leaving the exhibition, we are left wondering if Yamashiro's work could be ascribed to a certain cultural perspective of the "artist as ethnographer", as theorised (in shape of a question) by Hal Foster in 1995. The unexpressed questions raised by these mud men remain unanswered: are we aware of the space we occupy? Are we fighting enough to recover our voice and to re-establish our presence in open air, from where we can see and be seen? Skilfully, Yamashiro has indeed shifted the inner structure of these questions, weaving the narrative of an identity crisis into an act of resistance towards political and power constructs that have no interest in the future of Okinawans.

*Editor's Note:* The art space White Rainbow reopened in March 2018 with a new 12 month programme of solo exhibitions and projects by contemporary Japanese artists Chim ↑ Pom, Sasamoto Aki, Izumi Taro, Koizumi Meiro and Katayama Mari. §