

Ukiyo-e Projections

Eikoh Hosoe's Photographic Theater

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

"These pictures express the true ecstasy of a male toward a female," said my good friend Kokichi Asayama, editor of a science magazine. "And a woman, fearful, floats in air, losing herself and groaning with pleasure, cries 'Ah, I am dying.' For me this is the moment of joy where life and death meet as one," he added.

I think this is the highest of praise for my "Ukiyo-e Projections." Indeed, I myself was thrilled during its staging and while photographing. Then, three days later, I enjoyed that excitement again as I studied contact sheets of the images. For me, that was a rare moment to experience.

I had arranged a kind of photographing theater at the Asbestos Dance Studio in Tokyo, the venue established by Tatsumi Hijikata, founder of Butoh Dance, and Akiko Motofuji, Hijikata's widow. Upon the dancers I projected slides of ukiyo-e, the erotic Japanese woodblock prints from the 18th century by such artists as Harunobu, Utamaro, Hokusai, and sometime Jakuchu whose pictures I used were cocks and flowers, not ukiyo-e prints.

The main photo-session was held in the end of 2002, in January, and February, 2003 just before the Asbestos Dance Studio was to close. That was hardly a normal time for the Studio and I am grateful that this new work turned out so well. Indeed, the results were miraculously successful, surely the result of Tatsumi Hijikata giving me an invisible helping hand. Under such hectic conditions surely it would otherwise have been impossible for me to make these photographs. The Asbestos Dance Studio was not only a place for instruction in dance but also a kind of salon where artists like Yukio Mishima, Tatsuhiko Shibusawa, Shuzo Takiguchi and Tadanori Yokoo and many others gathered to discuss art, to drink and to argue their views - gatherings that I regularly attended in the 1960s and 1970s.

When I heard that this intellectual center was about to close—a sacrifice to our modern economy—I felt intense sadness; this was a kind of tragedy that could not be met with mere words of farewell. I felt that I must create something new, even experimental from the Asbestos Dance Studio to express my gratitude for all that it had produced. And I need to use the very floor of the Studio that had absorbed the sweat and tears and even blood of countless dancers and artists in their work.

Having long thought that Hijikata's Butoh Dance was derived from the ukiyo-e so loved by the common people of Edo Period Japan, I would say that *butoh* is a kind of ukiyo-e, and that the background of *butoh* is ukiyo-e.

In the realm of Japanese performing arts, both classic and modern, the Noh play and Kabuki drama are original creations of their times, but we may ask also today's avant-garde performing arts represent today, the present time and world. Granted that today's avant-garde performing

arts are rooted in tradition, we recognize that *butoh* dance, created in the 1960s by Tatsumi Hijikata, is a premiere contemporary art appreciated both in Japan and internationally.

In his later years, Hijikata called *butoh* dance "Tohoku Kabuki," kabuki of the northeast region of Japan. As a friend of Hijikata's since his first dance recital in 1959, I have watched many of his performances and often photographed him from that time until his death in 1987. Now, as I have reached seventy years of age, I have come to understand his *butoh* dance as modern ukiyo-e. Of course, this is my own hypothesis, but, as a photographer, I wanted to test that idea, and this exhibition is my response.

Now, it seems, Hijikata returned back from (the demonic performance of) the mysterious demon of *Kamaitachi* to take part in this project involving images from 18th century ukiyo-e. I believe he must have danced before my camera with his beloved wife Akiko Motofuji, and with his then young Yoshito Ohno, and his former student dancers who are now all prominent artists, among them Koichi Tamano, Saga Kobayshi and Mitsutaka Ishii.

In making these photographs I projected slides of the ukiyo-e on the bodies of white painted young dancers of the Asbestos Dance Workshop as I directed their movements. To make a four-seconds exposures needed for the photographs I had to shout "Hold, one, two, three, four," and it was during that interval the mysterious world of Time, the fourth dimension, appeared. This is a mystery still, even though I have often experimented with this technique and experienced such moments at other times in such work as "Gaudi and Tatsuhiko Shibusawa," (1965); "Shohaku and Kazuo Ohno" (1999); and the series of "My Friends and My Photographs" (2000).

In painting, regard for the Time dimension emerged during the early 20th century. For example, Picasso learned of Albert Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity and wondered how he might express space/time in his own paintings as the second dimension. His solution appeared in "Les Demoiselle d'Avignon" (1907) in which he presented the idea to the new century.

In photography Moholy-Nagy published *Painting, Photography, Film* (1925) in which he discussed the space/time problem and thereby stimulated serious photographers to consider a solution to this persistent challenge in camera work.

Since the closing years of the 20th century, digital technology has expanded greatly. It would now seem the moment for both digital and analog photography to deal seriously with the medium's relationship to space and time. The images of "Ukiyo-e Projections" are simply my attempt toward integrating space and time in the medium of analog silver-halide photography in which I have worked throughout my life.

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I would like to dedicate this exhibition to Akiko Motofuji, a good friend of mine, a great dancer who danced for my Photographic Theater. She has had a promise with me that she would come here to dance to celebrate this "Ukiyo-e Projections" on this March 18, my 71st birthday, but it became eternally impossible as she passed away all of a sudden because of her heart attack on October 19, 2003. But she is here in my photographs.

Eikoh Hosoe

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