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Print Article

Installation view of *Midnight Awakening Dream* (1999) at Chelsea Art Museum

Miwa Yanagi
Eternal City I
1998
Deutsche Bank Collection

Miwa Yanagi
Elevator Girl House B4
1998
Deutsche Bank Collectio

Miwa Yanagi
Elevator Girl House 3F
1998
Deutsche Bank Collection

GLOBALIZED FEMINISM
by Ben Davis

"Miwa Yanagi: Deutsche Bank Collection," May 4-Aug. 25, 2007, at the Chelsea Art Museum, 556 West 22nd Street, New York, N.Y. 10011

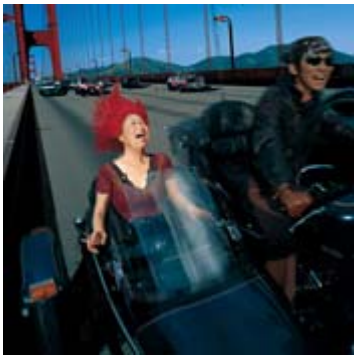
Japanese photographer Miwa Yanagi (b. 1967) is something of an artistic rags-to-riches story. Her big break came unexpectedly, in 1996, when conceptual photographer Yasumasa Morimura was looking to create a pastiche of himself as a character from a Yasujiro Ozu film, and asked to use her Kyoto house as a set. Spotting some of her photos during the shoot, Morimura contrived to have Yanagi invited to a group show he was participating in at the Shirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt. Still new enough to the life of an international art star that she literally rolled up one of her seven-meter photos and carried it on as luggage to Germany, Yanagi made her international debut alongside Japanese power players Morimura, Nobuyoshi Araki and Miyako Ishiuchi, as well as Cindy Sherman, Sam Taylor-Wood and Jeff Wall. Since then, she has been in group shows, including the Brooklyn Museum's "Global Feminisms," and her work has also become a collecting priority for the Deutsche Bank Collection, the holdings of which constitute her current solo exhibition at the Chelsea Art Museum.

The three series on view are quite distinct. The consensus is that what holds them together is a feminist sensibility -- Anne Tucker's thesis in the show catalogue is that "Miwa Yanagi has fabricated three distinct series that confront and disrupt traditional perceptions of women." Such a formless feminist statement is typical artspeak, and also a pretty thin hook to hang a career on: both Araki and Sherman "disrupt traditional perceptions of women," obviously to very different ends. To make this statement mean anything, it's worth getting an idea of what, specifically, Yanagi's feminism disrupts, and who it represents.

Her early work involved performances in which she would hire other women to perform various rituals -- her first photo series, "Elevator Girls," grew out of a performance she staged at an art gallery in Kyoto, hiring models to stand with a fake elevator dressed as "elevator girls" (i.e. hostesses who greet shoppers in department stores) for two weeks. From there, Yanagi went on to create large, ambitious, Vanessa Beecroft-ian tableaux featuring groups of young, attractive Japanese women in matching uniforms. They look as blank, stylish and homogenous as Japanese Barbie dolls, and Yanagi uses digital manipulation to augment the sense of homogeneity. The groupings are set in empty, vaguely sci-fi surroundings that resemble vast mall complexes or airport terminals.

In Japan, the development of Yanagi's practice coincided with Takashi Murakami's rise -- Murakami founded his "factory" in Tokyo the same year as her unexpected international debut. And in "Elevator Girls," there is an echo of Murakami's dictum that Japanese artists must openly embrace commercial forms and ambitions. The sterility and enforced uniformity of the images have a critical edge, yet it is hard to be too affected by this angle because of the clear

Miwa Yanagi
White Casket
1998
Deutsche Bank Collection



Miwa Yanagi
Yuka
2000
Deutsche Bank Collection

Miwa Yanagi
Regine & Yoko
2001
Deutsche Bank Collection

Miwa Yanagi
Sachiko
2001
Deutsche Bank Collection

esthetic investment in the costumes and sets. "I am critical of this aspect of Japanese society," Yanagi herself has stated, "but I am also 'comforted' by it because I am used to it."

Consider *White Casket* (1998), a series of four images. The first features three women in matching red uniforms thrown dramatically on the floor of an elevator, seen from above; the second repeats the same image, only the bodies seem to be melting into a nail-polish-like red goo that is the same color as their uniforms; the third features the same elevator filled only with the mysterious liquid; and finally, the last image features just splashes of red on a pristine white background, one of which is stamped with Yanagi's Westernized signature. If there is a critical angle to the idea of the "Girls" melting away, the whole thing also looks unmistakably like a fashion spread (Dutch photographer Erwin Olaf did a series on liquefying models for the *New York Times Magazine* not so long ago). The artist's signature looks like a brand. This "disruption" is also really an adoption.

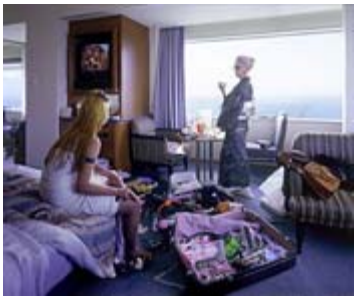
Most writers find in Yanagi's next series, "My Grandmothers" (begun in 1999), a programmatic reversal of the claustrophobic world of the "Elevator Girls." Based on interviews the artist did with a variety of women (including some of the models from "Elevator Girls"), she created photographic scenes depicting their ideas of themselves 50 years in the future, complete with elaborate old-person make-up and occasional futuristic touches. Each is accompanied by a text, a sort of capsule internal monologue for the character depicted. In Japan, reproductive roles are an explosive topic (even this year, a government official touched off controversy when he referred to women as "baby-making machines"), and if Yanagi's earlier series depicts young women existing to serve the desire of others, the new series depicts women projected beyond their reproductive years and very much liberated by this fact.

Thus, *Yuka* centers on a woman with wild red hair in the sidecar of a motorcycle, being raced across the Golden Gate bridge by her much younger lover (he is almost cropped out of the photo, emphasizing his disposability), while *Regine & Yoko* shows a lesbian couple -- one German, the other Japanese -- playfully embracing while cleaning up the remains of what looks to have been a lavish dinner party. *Sachiko* and *Mineko* both feature lone women in airplanes, the former a first-class traveler taking a vacation, the latter at the helm of her own glider. Yanagi's own self-portrait, *Miwa*, depicts her elder self racing adventurously across an ice flat.

Aside from the recurrence of lone, in-charge women, the key theme is international travel, hinting at the material basis for the transition between the two series. When she started making art, Yanagi was full of ambition -- the eye-grabbing panoramas of the "Elevator Girls" leave no doubt about this -- but had no promise of successfully finding an audience, because Japan has no real contemporary art market; her critique of confining gender roles thus coincided with a sense that her artwork itself was confined. Her unexpected encounter with the international scene opened up the possibility to plug her own artistic fantasies into the circuits of the global art market, at the same moment as it provided a concrete exterior to the sexual politics in her native land. This confluence is the subtext of "My Grandmothers."

The result, however, is that Yanagi's gender politics shade into what Naomi Wolf dubbed "power feminism," the notion that women's liberation means becoming affluent and succeeding in business rather than resisting male-dominated structures (Wolf: "enough money buys a woman out of a lot of sex oppression.") Indeed, a photo like *Hiroko* is a kind of "power feminist" limit case -- a younger woman sits on a bed in a luxury hotel room, getting made up, as a severe older woman in a kimono lectures her. The accompanying text

Miwa Yanagi
Miwa
2001
Deutsche Bank Collection



Miwa Yanagi
Hiroko
2001
Deutsche Bank Collection

Miwa Yanagi
Mika
2001
Deutsche Bank Collection

Miwa Yanagi
Minami
2000
Deutsche Bank Collection

Installation view of Miwa Yanagi's "Fairy Tale" series at Chelsea Art Museum

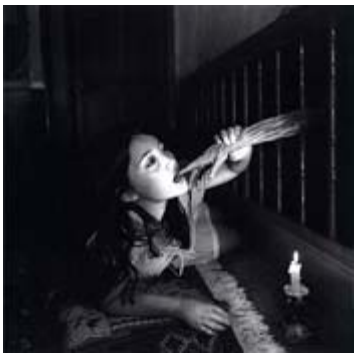
indicates that in this future, prostitution is legal and safe, and while the "discrimination and unfair laws" of the past are mentioned, apparently the basics of the profession have not changed -- our protagonist is instructing her granddaughter via some pretty standard-looking pornography on a nearby TV (featuring blond, Western actors). The more unpalatable things about this quintessential exploitation of women seem to have dissolved into history now that granny is in charge.

This ambition sits uneasily with a more longing, romantic side of Yanagi, on view in works like *Ai*, *Ayumi* and *Mika*. All of these have a kind of magical realist vibe, depicting their subjects' visions of themselves as mildly fantastic figures -- indexing the failure of these young women's dreams to place them in reality, perhaps. Both sides come together in *Minami*, showing a woman in an office overlooking an enormous theme park, served by two secretaries. The text tells us that Minami helms an entertainment empire that rivals the Walt Disney Corp., with locations in Hawaii, Los Angeles and Paris. She is clearly an eccentric, reclining in the costume of her company's signature character, "Little Milky," a pink, fuzzy space alien. Here, being CEO of a Disney-like corporation means that you have the liberty to broadcast your personal dreams far and wide, not that you are a soulless corporate hack -- a stance that probably best touches on Yanagi's *Minami*-like self-perception as fabricator of idiosyncratic fairy tales for a global audience.

All of which brings us to "Fairy Tale." This, Yanagi's most recent series (made between 2004 and 2006), consists of slick black-and-white images staging scenes from classic folk stories, often with a Gothic, horror movie vibe, as in *Gretel*, which features a little girl nibbling erotically on the withered claw of a witch who reaches through the bars of a cage. These works are a synthesis of the concerns of her previous two series, focusing on the interplay of girls and old women in these iconic narratives -- the arty touch being that the old women in the scenes are also played by young girls wearing "hag" masks, incongruous amidst the otherwise impeccable production values. It is as if the fantasy elements of "My Grandmothers" have been amplified, highlighting the uneasy, out-of-joint feeling in these images of youth and age.

Whatever the mise-en-scène, however, the key thing about "Fairy Tale" is the choice of subject matter itself -- with a few exceptions like her picture based on the Japanese folk tale *Wandering Dune*, Yanagi seizes onto the most recognizable of Western tales: *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White*, etc. One might argue that this is intended as a critique of Disney-style colonization of these fantasies, except the images are too clearly meant as examples of Yanagi's own sensibility. There is, rather, an underlying, Disney-esque ambition: adopt fairy tales for their universal familiarity, then stamp them according to the house brand. In this way, the recourse to fairy tales dramatizes Yanagi's self-consciously international aspirations. One result is that, while "Elevator Girls" was at least superficially about a certain role real women occupy in a male-dominated culture, in "Fairy Tale," the explanation for constricting roles has become diffused into a general, mythical structure -- the "feminist" element becomes a sort of intellectual garnish on top of the seductive set-ups.

Surveying all this, it becomes clear that the connecting thread in Yanagi's work is less a straightforward, unapologetic feminism than it is a sort of uneasy circling between a sense of being thwarted by the system, on the one hand, and a sense that success can be had by adopting its terms, on the other (with the latter running slightly ahead of the former). It's a deadlock that Yanagi has repeated on an ever greater scale, but not resolved. It makes her work at once intriguing and poignant, and slightly stilted and equivocal.



Miwa Yanagi
Gretel
2004
Deutsche Bank Collection

Miwa Yanagi
Cinderella
2005
Deutsche Bank Collection

Miwa Yanagi
Sleeping Beauty
2004
Deutsche Bank Collection

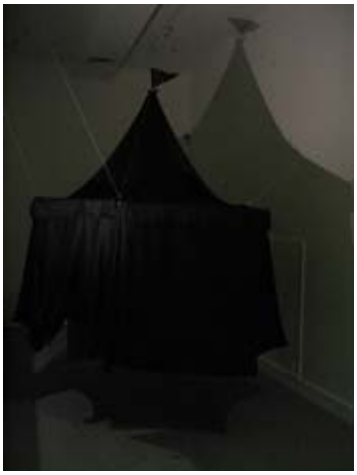
Finally, this trajectory is symbolized by two video works that bookend the show: the exhibition's earliest piece, *Kagome, Kagome* (1994) and one of the most recent, *Girls in Her Sand* (2004). The first, drawing on the imagery of "Elevator Girls," features young women in a hall of elevators, wandering back and forth robotically, as the landscape morphs to become an airport corridor filled with stewardesses, before cycling back again to the first setting. The second, an offshoot of "Fairy Tale," has the viewer watch a cryptic black-and-white landscape where girls in old woman masks dig in the sand, before the landscape shifts, and a figure veiled in a weird canopy costume approaches slowly in the distance, before the whole phantasmagoria starts again, cryptically. Perhaps symbolizing the internal paradox of Yanagi's practice, both depict a kind of circling limbo.

The development between the two is in the works' sense of their audience. *Kagome, Kagome* is displayed in a small, almost hidden, mirrored compartment -- an image held at bay that you inspect, as if from a distance. *Girls in Her Sand* is projected on the curtains inside a large, carnival-tent-like canopy that you can step into, suspended in a darkened basement space; the girls in the film approach the camera, as if to stare in at you, implicating the viewer in the film; the canopy resembles the costume of the character who approaches at the end of the piece, so it is as if you are invited into the action -- all aptly symbolizing Yanagi's transition from a more resigned and discrete to a more confident, but also more global and abstracted, approach to her work's animating contradiction. As if to give still more evidence of this evolution, in a catalogue interview, Yanagi suggests that her next project might be to design a building, in China.

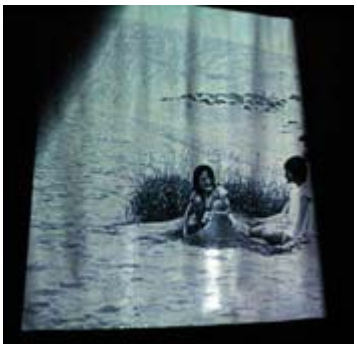
BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*.

Miwa Yanagi
Kagome, Kagome
1994
Deutsche Bank Collection

Miwa Yanagi
Untitled I
2004
Deutsche Bank Collection



Miwa Yanagi's *Girls in Her Sand* film installation at the Chelsea Art Museum



Inside Miwa Yanagi's *Girls in Her Sand* film installation at the Chelsea Art Museum