Simon Fujiwara's Strange Confessions at Andrea Rosen

by Ben Davis
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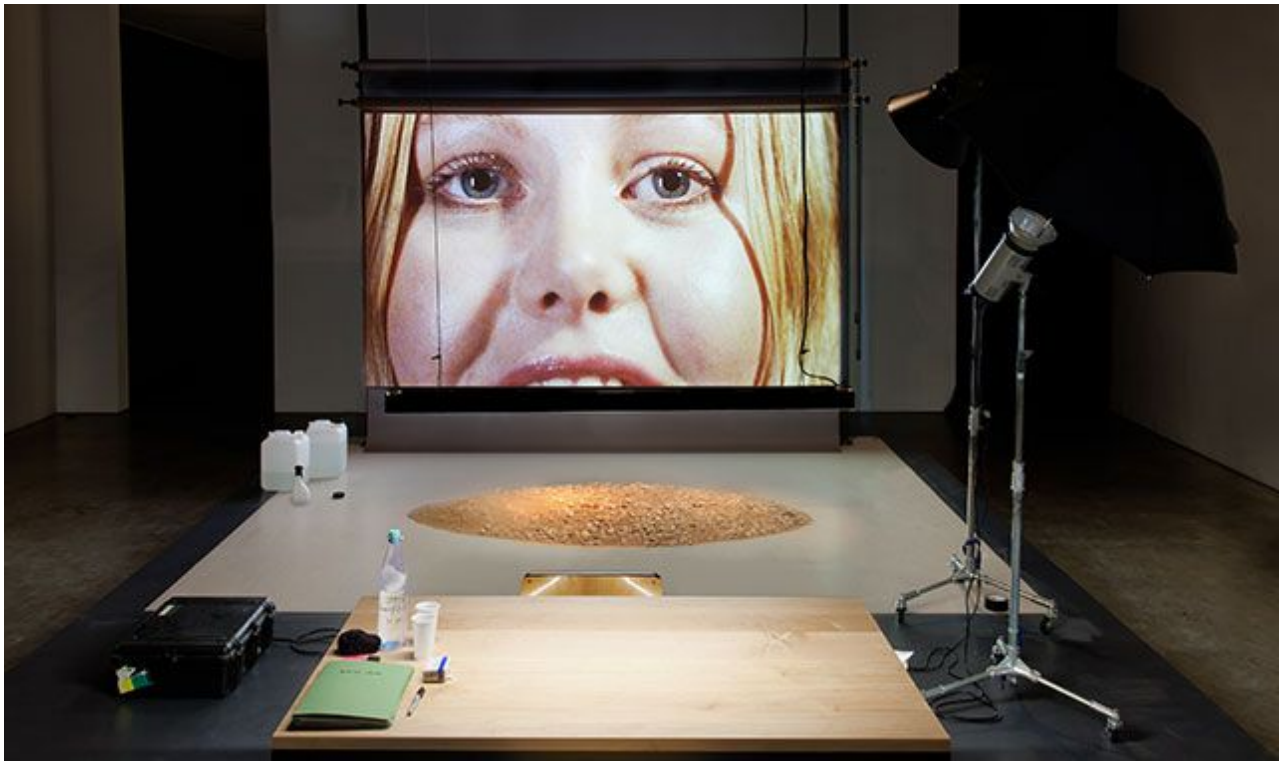
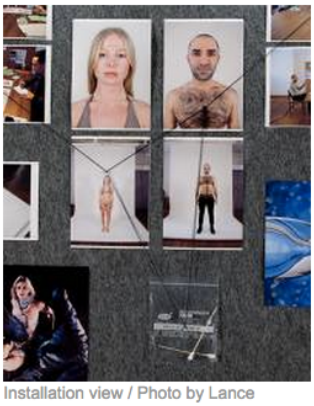


An installation view of "Studio Pietà (King Kong Komplex)" at Andrea Rosen Gallery
(Photo by Lance Brewer; © Simon Fujiwara; Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York)



Installation view / Photo by Lance Brewer; © Simon Fujiwara; Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

Explaining the autobiographical themes that run through his work, Simon Fujiwara once offered an anecdote from his art-school days in Germany. Because he hailed from an architecture background, his peers tended to dismiss his sculptures as the work of an architect. Turning to his own story, then, was a means to an end, not the end itself: "What we do as artists is almost always read against our biographies, and... the only way I could take control of this would be to use my biography as the material for my works."

The British-Japanese artist, now based in Berlin, has since mined his personal history to good effect in sly multimedia installations: In 2010 he won Frieze Art

Fair's Cartier Prize, and last year, at 30, he scored a career survey at Tate St Ives. His current project at Andrea Rosen, "Studio Pietà (King Kong Komplex)," marks his first solo presentation in New York. In the rear gallery, a series of three large photos centers on the image of a blonde model cradling a shirtless man in her arms, Pietà-style. The main gallery, meanwhile, features a documentary film in which Fujiwara narrates, in the form of a Q&A interview with himself, his motives for staging this image and the process of realizing it. A series of bulletin boards adorned with actor head shots, family photos, and other documents shown in this film surround the projection.

Here is what we learn, from Fujiwara's voice-over: His intent was to re-create a photo of his own mother, taken on a beach in Lebanon during her days as a traveling showgirl, in the arms of a man other than his father. The image, he suggests, had a personal erotic kick for him; he recalls finding the features of the man in the photo exotic. In the process of telling his story of restaging the image, Fujiwara takes off on a variety of asides: explicating what he calls the King Kong Complex (that dark-skinned men have served as symbols for repressed European sexuality); investigating water pollution on the beach where the original photo was taken (he remembers the figures in the photo as wet—but could they even have been swimming?); and detailing the challenges of casting "Middle Eastern–looking men" in Berlin.

In the age of over-sharing, Fujiwara's obsession with confession might seem a bit cloying. That's why, in a kind of reversal of figure and ground, his detours from autobiography are probably the real thing of interest here. The final photo deliberately flips the one Fujiwara set out to re-create, with the woman holding the man. In one of the more poignant turns of his film's narrative, Fujiwara recounts that the actor playing his mystery man, who once portrayed a terrorist in Stephen Spielberg's *Munich*, 2005, told him during the shoot how he resented being continually typecast because of his ethnicity. The final inversion is framed as a coy response to this, and the whole installation then can be read as less about the artist's personal story and more about how that story, bound up with that of others, becomes restructured and reshuffled. And in that sense, Fujiwara does indeed still think like an architect, in that architecture is the art that pits us most directly up against the challenge of living together.

Simon Fujiwara, "Studio Pietà (King Kong Komplex)," runs at Andrea Rosen Galley from June 28 to August 9, 2013.