

## "Kindling Uncanny Flames -- On Erika Kobayashi's 'His Last Bow'"

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'His Last Bow' Installation View, photo: Alexander Christie  
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In her latest solo exhibition 'His Law Bow' at Keiko Yamamoto Rochaix London, the Tokyo-based Japanese artist Erika Kobayashi has created a kind of gesamtkunstwerk, bringing together drawing, text, photo-conceptual works and video. This densely layered and productively contradictory exhibition is the result of Kobayashi's research into the story of her own paternal lineage, and in particular the passing of her father, a psychiatric doctor turned Sherlock Holmes scholar. In a manner reminiscent of the fictional detective, she encircles the histories of her father, grandfather and their respective generations. By taking the catastrophe of World War 2 and the disparate events leading up to the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan as a structuring force, she shows how personal and social histories and her own creative impetus are inextricably linked.

Artist Erika Kobayashi was born in 1978. I belong to this same generation, one which has experienced successive moments of tremendous social change, though I suspect every generation makes such a claim. In our respective island lives as British and Japanese people, we both experienced the boom years of the 1980s that enriched both societies but also produced rising social division and inequality. Then came the 1990s, a period of prolonged stagnation, out of which came the rise of new technologies for imaging, computation and communication. Technologies where memories would be parsed, that offered new means of employment and modes of existence. Children of the late 1970s and early 1980s would be the generation to grow in tandem with the home computer, with one foot in this technological world, the other outside. There is a sensitivity to the effects of technology engendered in us -- technology happens; to us, around us. It makes tangible desires we

didn't know we had inside us, and yet we can also observe it somewhat dispassionately. The generations before (the post-war babies, their 60s kids) looked at our rapid engagement with this new world with incredulity, though quickly this techno-reality encompassed them and they would in turn look to us for guidance. Our formal in-betweenness, in history, in society, writes itself into the art of our generation.

Kobayashi is an artist who measures the gap between herself and her family, her peers, her environment and her memory. She creates narratives, pondering beginnings and endings. What she finds is that the personal and the historical, the factual and the ephemeral are not so clearly delineated. This uncertainty is reflected in the lived experience of those of us now approaching middle age. Our unexpected precarity wasn't characteristic of our parents' generation. The job for life, a retirement and pension, owning a home -- these societal guarantees have evaporated. The generations exchange glances with confusion and disappointment. It makes sense then that the art of this time takes into itself these ambiguities, and artists such as Kobayashi speak of loss and uncertainty through their choices of medium as well as subject. Though she is perhaps best known for her work in manga, Kobayashi has created films, drawings, prints, and photo-conceptual works for this exhibition, in order to create a framework through which her subjective vision and certain objective historical facts meet. The ideas exceed the container of a specific medium, and though her work speaks to the material qualities of each component she remains resolutely conceptual in her approach.

The exhibition shows the relation between successive fathers and their sons, in the lineage of doctors from her great-grandfather, through her grandfather to her own father. Her father, having had four daughters, retired from medicine. The lack of a son brought a certain line to a full stop. He began a new life, as a Sherlock Holmes scholar, translating with his wife the entire corpus of Conan Doyle's fictional world into Japanese. In a series of drawings produced in her characteristic off-the-cuff expressive style, Kobayashi renders three 'sons', who are characterised by their sameness, save for differences in their clothing. She describes in a text-work titled 'His Last Bow' how each father would celebrate the birth of their son with red rice, and the hope that the infant would continue in the tradition of working as a doctor. Kobayashi's drawings expose the uncanny aspect of this kind of patriarchal generational ideology. By refuting a likeness and instead drawing the face of each boy as a motif, she draws attention to the uncanny doubling between father and son, mother and daughter (she has produced another series of 'daughters' in the same manner).

Freud's account of the double in his essay on the Uncanny is helpful here, 'acting as [an] insurance against the destruction of the ego', where the achievements and even life itself is passed on through the child as a facsimile of the parent. The text-work is printed on red paper, which recalls blood ties and the red rice of celebration, and this generational continuity is ultimately concluded with two breaks, the birth of daughters rather than sons, and the dropping of atomic bombs that so utterly disrupted the Japanese psyche. In the three drawings 'The Sign', 'July 16', and 'August 9' the artist renders a scale diagram on paper of the three nuclear weapon devices Gadget, Little Boy and Fat Man, alongwith information about the day on which they were deployed. Importantly, she uses her own blood and gold leaf to both represent visually the devices, and index certain material historical facts, for example the use of gold leaf in the bomb making process, but also in the regional history of her family. Her blood (the red of blood coming from iron) and gold come together to extract a terrible beauty from the bare facts of these technologies, and at the same time, by making her blood the 'core', Kobayashi points to herself as a kind of disruptive potential energy which finds a double in the abstracted image of the bombs.

Through the photographic works in the show the theme of uncanny doubling is further articulated. In the multi-part work 'A Father Photographs His Child' Kobayashi brings together three photographic images, taken by her grandfather, father and partner of their children, and companies them with text placed on top of a mirrored surface. Elsewhere in the works 'Study', 'The Reichenbach Falls' and 'After a Father's Death' the artist incorporates mirrored surfaces alongside photography.

'Study' shows the secret location in of the Japanese nuclear weapon development programme, a seemingly inconspicuous hillside. Into this photograph a circular hole is cut, revealing another mirrored surface. The dimensions of this space hold extra significance -- the sphere is the dimensions of the 64 kilogrammes of uranium used in the Hiroshima atomic bomb. The mirror aspect of this work also reveals a somewhat uncanny formal quality to the work, whereby the mirror 'image' perceptually shifts between seeming in front of or behind the photograph. In 'The Reichenbach Falls', Kobayashi appropriates a photograph of her parents visiting the Swiss landmark popularised by Arthur Conan Doyle as the place where Sherlock Holmes meets his end. The photograph is enlarged and mounted onto a mirror, and her mother is removed leaving only the suggestion of her through her mirrored cut-out silhouette. Beside her, the father has had his likeness obliterated by a vigorously executed mark, reminiscent of Kobayashi's energetic drawing. Finally in 'After a Father's Death', documentary images of her father's home are presented alongside a commentary by Doyle on the necessity to bring to an end his fictional hero. Here another of Freud's concepts comes to mind, that of the death drive. The endless doubling of the patriarchal figure across the generations, and the persistence of the father's authority into old age, resembles a kind of monstrous uncanny life force, a death drive which finds its corollary in the half-life of radioactive material, which endures into deep time.

Each of these works carry further the idea that the patriarchal society which seeks to reproduce itself through sons, professions and traditions takes on an uncanny, perhaps unstable quality. The use of the mirror as a material speaks of the double of ourselves, of the ego looking at itself and scrutinising itself. In the creation of these works Kobayashi locates herself in the work through the apparatus of the mirror, locating her difference and separation from the order of fathers and sons. This oedipal trajectory is made more apparent through the transformation of the mother into a mirrored silhouette, we are invited to identify with the degree to which Kobayashi finds herself uncannily doubled in the figure of her mother, but also in the invisible force of the uranium-235, with its invisible disruptive light.

While these works show the culpability of photography in the reproduction of social forces, elsewhere in the exhibition Kobayashi employs photography and film with a distinctively different sensibility. 'In My Hand -- The Fire of Prometheus' is comprised of three photographic prints showing the artist holding a flame. The single-channel video work 'My Torch' shows again the artist hand bearing a flame from an outstretched index finger, notably gendered by the red-painted fingernail. In her roving historical framework the flame recalls the story of the Olympic torch which had meant to travel 'by foot and by horse' from Athens to Tokyo, but which was cancelled due to the second world war. Underlining further is the story of Japan's effort to secure enriched uranium for the creation of an atomic bomb which was thwarted by the surrender of Nazi Germany, a second flame that failed to make the journey. When considered in the context of other works in the show the failure to make the journey, the discontinuity, the break, becomes significant. Though our attention is directed outward from the personal to the overtly political and macro-historical, the possessive 'My' used in the titles of these works circles us back to the figure of the artist herself. The failed journey becomes the break in lineage from father to son, and the Promethean fire presented to us speaks not only to the story of wartime Japan but present day life.

This fire can be understood as Kobayashi's creative power as both an artist who originates an ongoing narrative but also exposes invisible aspects of life. It also speaks of the woman's role in the creative act of bearing children, disavowed by the formula of the photograph of a father with his son that omits the mother. The powerfully symbolic image of the Kobayashi bearing the flame assuages the patriarchal documentary image of the father and his infant son, she becomes a sun goddess capable of harnessing the power of invention.

Another mirror work stands alongside 'My Torch', a large landscape format work onto which a passage from John Donne's holy sonnet 'Batter my heart' is inscribed. Kobayashi cites J. Robert Oppenheimer who half-remembered the poem when naming the first nuclear weapon site, 'Trinity'. In his poem Donne implores God to use force to repair his fallen and broken character, through imagery suggestive of a village under siege. Again here the mirror comes into play, and we parse Donne's quoted text alongside the image of ourselves reflected. The images intermingle with our double, with Kobayashi's artistic ego. Together they suggest a kind of purification of our uncanny double. In this way the artist makes sense of the loss of her father, how an overbearing sense of discontinuity might be overcome through rendering the invisible visible, by working with the taboos of family and history.