

S h r i n k i n g V i o l e t

Cao Xun, Jess Robins, Motoko Kikkawa

Alone, the photograph holds a lot to its chest. While it's the most meticulous record of the world as we see it, the photograph is also defined by what it doesn't reveal, and what can't be known about it, despite itself. You could say that it's shy—the wallflower of visual mediums. Cao Xun, Jess Robins and Motoko Kikkawa present practices which use photography's elusiveness to their own ends.

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Motoko Kikkawa's photographs pick along shorelines, footpaths and ceramic basins. Appearing predominantly on her Instagram, they're wandering and spontaneous, carrying us with her solitary observations of the world around her. A series of smoothly circular pools, encrusted with pink and green algae, are documented with fleeting curiosity before morphing into a muddy puddle with a thick slick of oil and foam, the patterns of which then become a tangle of tree branches. Her interiors are eerie—a ceramic bunny peers up at a plastic-wrapped poster of a performing Michael Jackson, a silver moonscape branded with the ominous word 'Elite' reveals itself as a faucet.

Kikkawa's art practice is broad and intensive—spanning drawing, sculpture, video, photography and sound. Her interests are primarily formalist and driven by shape and depth. The writhing forms in her water-colour drawings, which range from small to wall-size, are echoed in her sculptural experiments with dried seaweed, tissue and paint, which might later reappear as subjects in her still-life photography. Her stamina not only characterises the way she works, but how we come to understand what she makes. Each work is organically connected to what has come before it and anticipates what will come next.

The flow of Kikkawa's work represents a sharp, undistracted eye. Her photographs embody this subjectivity, as obscure windows they look inwards—to her impulses and attractions—as much as they gaze out onto the scenes they capture.

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In contrast, Jess Robins's works retreat indoors, as if into the sanctuary of a teenage bedroom. They recall mood rings, tarot readings or a Tumblr with a colour-scheme. Her collages carefully arrange found photography (Google searches, clippings, stock imagery) with her own photographs, which are mainly shot on her phone. Some of her own photographs imitate stock imagery, or capture softly gloomy scenes that become abstract and uncanny in their eclectic arrangements. Cushioning her images are lo-fi and luxurious materials—velvet, glitter, scrappy tape, jewels, lace, gluey love hearts.

Mainstream, 'banal' photography, such as social-media or stock photography, already has an art-speak of its own. It often figures in contemporary art as some satirical gesture, or as a comment on the sterile commercialisation of the experiences which it represents. But Robins twists these ideas by evoking a simple fondness for it. She especially loves the romanticism of sunset images, which, despite their excess, remain naive and sincere. Her series 'Sunset Postcards' (2020) scribbles over images of sunsets with a Photoshop smudge tool, like drawing into a car window fogged up with condensation.

Robins's practice has a curiously conventional relationship to Surrealism. For example, she references Hans Arp's collages as a key influence on the works in *Shrinking Violet*. Her works play on the connotations of methods that delve into the subconscious—which epitomise the introspective artist—but Robins translates them to the present through the language of the ubiquitous, post-internet image.

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The subjects in Cao Xun's photographs withdraw even further, into themselves. They bend and curl into unnatural poses, wrapped in all manner of apparel recognisable and unrecognisable. Cao works across art and fashion photography, and you can see how their objectives blur into one another in his work. The ego is transplanted by the body, which becomes amorphous, sculptural.

Cao's practice expands on the representation of queer experience, particularly the contested terrain of the queer body. It is the ultimate contradiction to the so-called 'norm', and Cao's images negotiate the threshold between how such bodies are viewed and how they are embodied. In his compositions, they are swaddled, adorned and made private. They portray the beauty in misshapeness, and are captivating without being necessarily open or inviting. They revel in themselves, but from behind the barriers delicately constructed by the artist.

Cao explores how opaqueness can convey a multifaceted experience, image by image. While his work in previous years has been light and playful, the tone shifts in the two works in *Shrinking Violet*. They suggest that there is more to be discovered through Cao's visual formula. These works contain a dense anxiety—; reclining under plaid, silicone and a cold spoon; clinging to each other within a suffocating cocoon of plastic, a dark line tattooed along a folded arm. They repel us more intensely.

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Shyness is linked to a heightened aesthetic awareness—perhaps to offset its shortcomings. The trait's attention to detail may have helped with the painstaking invention of photography. Henry Fox Talbot, who invented the photographic negative, was known as reclusive and timid ('painfully' so). Apparently he only made his discoveries public when he was urged

to—due to the Daguerrotype rival across the channel. Talbot's tranquil images of lace, leaves and windows, chosen for their ability to be still for a long exposure time, encompass the inward kind of making that shaped photography's beginnings.

For obvious reasons, the shy outlook has been overrun by an extroverted one. It's a rarely acknowledged fact that society is organised by the latter's standards—a dictatorship which is described in Hamja Ashan's small manifesto, 'Shy Radicals: The Antisystemic Politics of the Militant Introvert' (2017). The quietly ironic, quasi-fictional text sticks up for the introverted individual, imagining a utopian introverted society where the national anthem is the sound of a seashell against the ear. It also defends the introverted act (reading, people-watching, solitary dwelling and deep-and-meangingfull's) against the assault of the extroverted norm (politicians, job interviews, 'cool people' and art openings). Put plainly, taking a photograph could be thought of as an introverted act too, in the way it causes us to stop, be still, quiet and focused.

Building on this idea, we need to think about the status of the photograph once it is no longer our own, private observation. Nathan Jurgeson has claimed in his book 'The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media' (2019), that 'any contemporary social theory should be, in part, a theory of social media, which should be, in part, a theory of social photography.' But his definition is wrapped up in a form of socialising which is outgoing and fun-loving—selfies, meet-ups, food-porn and latte-art. It's the reality which dominates the making of everyday images, and has been the case ever since the moment we could make and star in them. These social contexts have since split, shattered and multiplied across platforms real and virtual. Images are now released from our thumbs constantly and unconsciously, swept up into cyberspace and beyond. Regardless of how much art might try to fend it off, this hyper-sociality defines how we look at any photograph today. You can't look at a photograph without feeling already saturated by it.

Photography is, essentially, 'how we know our selves as selves'. But can we imagine a form of photography which is still social by definition, but introverted by nature? While there are artistic tropes which could fall into this category, such as the Gothic, they hold on to a time before the contemporary conditions which have changed photography forever. As an incomplete answer, the works in *Shrinking Violet* occur through and respond to the current reality. From Kikkawa's itinerant musings to Robins's cloistered experiments to Cao's recoiling figures, they reveal their unique sensitivities without giving themselves over entirely. As Hamja Ashan would say, 'the world is their corner.'

—Moya Lawson