

Unspeakable (like the lock of hair in her drawer)

In the English language, we call it the skeleton in the closet. The relative Japanese idiom refers to dirt under the carpet with an earthy subtlety that skirts around those other cultures going a step further, hiding away the corpse flesh and all.

If the purpose of idiomatic language is to slip a layer of obfuscation over our dirty deeds, then *Bones in Tansu* is an especially stealthy turn of phrase that cuts across cultures and stashes the stripped skeleton in spaces much smaller than a closet, in the Japanese *tansu* or dresser drawer that seems too shallow a grave for so many bodies. And the secrets concealed in the stacked drawers are very often matters of the body that is murdered, neglected or bartered – sex and violence preoccupy the silenced conscience brought to life in Yoshiko Shimada's ongoing project.

Bones in Tansu: Family Secrets insists on the complicity of the viewer who is initially cast in the role of the nosy houseguest by the need to engage in the opening and closing of drawers to view the work, an act that skews towards the voyeuristic in reading the secrets inscribed on the enclosed prints. This privilege is complicated by the inclusion of a curtained desk in the gallery for the writing of one's own secrets. The opportunity for coy exhibitionism lends immediacy to the archival thrust of Shimada's project, one that pushes forward to future sites where the secrets gathered in this show may contribute to the next, their identities left behind in the anonymity of travel like a businessman conferencing in Vegas.

Paradoxically, it is the artist's hand that performs this necessary negation of individuality. The gesture of printmaking, of layering literal transparency in both word and image, serves as the means by which these secrets are stripped of their identifications with the speaker. As mediator, Shimada renders personal glimpses of past lives that reawaken a wider cultural memory of wars and civic liberties hard won and lost.

The two-way exchange of secrets enabled by *Bones in Tansu* contains a quiet tension between anonymity and intimacy at this meeting point of a collective consciousness. The voyeuristic viewer experiences relief in knowing that one is not alone in harbouring secrets – despite their disparate cultural origins, these secrets reveal a humanity held in common among the subtly shifting causes of shame. Choosing to pass a secret into the artist's keeping reflects a desire to share in that act of making difficult truths known, of being recognized and reconciled.

This gathering and display of secrets subverts the brightly shallow sheen of much contemporary Japanese art that celebrates popular culture and is symptomatic of a revelatory digital display of the self that seldom penetrates beyond the two-dimensional surface of being. In refusing these slick aesthetics, Yoshiko Shimada valorizes markers of time and age, holding our secrets in real-world constructs brought to life with smell and touch that wash away shameful isolation, like dirty laundry come clean at last and neatly tucked away.

Stephanie Vegh + May 2009

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