

'When I Lived in Modern Times': Archive, artefact, album.

Exhibition dates: 16 Sep – 12 Nov 2005

Preview: Thursday 15 Sep 6:00 – 8:00pm

Hideko Inoue

"Because of the prevalence of the idea of progress, everyone thinks of history in relation to the remnants of the past, rather than an actual process which passes through the diversity of every human being. [But] 'history' is not a quotation of the past."

Jean-Francois Chevrier

Hideko Inoue's recent paintings are based upon a highly personal photographic archive: the albums of her late grandfather, who died 20 years ago. In particular, the artist draws upon photographs from his early life, which offer experiences from the opposite end of the previous century to the artist's own. Whilst the artist was born in Japan she relocated to the UK in the late 1990s. At this point she began to explore the differences between the two cultures, and the differences between her predecessors' experiences and her own. Her subsequent work has been, in part, an enquiry into what determines personal identity, and how far we change as individuals when we move from one culture to another. The artist has said, "My personal experiences of living in two countries have prompted me to reflect to what extent individuals are a product of their genetic make-up or of their environment i.e., nature or nurture." Her current series of paintings, made on a modest scale but with a fastidious technique reflecting their photographic origins, arose out of this problem. Inoue's approach to this has been to pull images across time and space, testing their ability to function in different contexts. Or as she has remarked, "I have personalised this by producing a series of paintings, based on old black and white family snapshots, where a number of my relatives have been relocated to a modern world of colour, i.e. colours and other visual information are manipulated in order to update memories of historical events... My recent series of work focuses on my grandfather's life who died in 1984. A number of paintings are produced, based on selected snapshots from his personal photo collection. In order to re-establish my relationship with him as an adult, I have updated a number of his photographs, depicting him in the early 21st century in Scotland."

Through their invented colour schemes and temporal transpositions, Inoue's images seem unnervingly to inhabit dual timeframes, living in both past and present. Rather than appearing as literal transcriptions of 'actual' events, Inoue's works appear as both fictional creations and as artefacts from another age. The artist's transformations seem to condense incommensurable spaces – what one might call timescapes – into single, still moments. By creating a synthesis of her own experience and that of another individual some 50 years earlier and 5000 miles away, each image becomes a product of both memory and imaginative invention. Each work appears more like a chapter in an unfolding novel than a mere 'document'. In 'Umbrella', reproduced here, we encounter three men of different generations seemingly waiting together. Lacking an obvious narrative, we are drawn to details such as the echoing of the younger men's postures and their more casual attire, which suggest a generational divide. The men's costumes, poses, and demeanours could all be from the present day. Only the occasional innocuous detail – such as the bakelite telephone on the top-left – suggest that this is a scene from an earlier age.

Such compositions are further complicated by the fact the artist often includes handmade objects alongside the paintings which echo objects within them. She describes these as being "prepared as 'presents', and included in the narrative of the painting". The objects have included a man's scarf, tie and hat, and initially appear as 'relics' – found objects rather than fabricated ones. As they are intertwined with the paintings, and appear to be their starting points, it is easy to be wrong-footed. Historical time, our own present, and the 'imaginary' time of the painting, are all interwoven and inseparable. Such objects might be described as "memory sculptures", a term which Andreas Huyssen has coined. For Huyssen, in recent years "there has emerged what I would tentatively call 'memory sculpture': a sculpture [which is] not centred on spatial configuration, but which powerfully inscribes a dimension of local and even corporeal memory into the work, and yet remains clearly distinct from the monumental or the memorial." Inoue's objects, intimately related to the body, bear the mark of touch and use, and are both 'local' and 'corporeal' in their affect.

As Huyssen has observed, our encounter with such objects is dependent on how our visual, linguistic and tactile associations are conflated. Inoue's recent work similarly offers a host of associations whilst refusing easy consumption or resolution. Being provided with what appears to be a tangible connection to a faraway place in another century supplants the feeling which anthropologist Robin Fox has labelled "ethnographic dazzle". For Fox, 'ethnographic dazzle' is the tendency, which we are all subject to, to initially be aware of

difference when encountering other cultures, however superficial or aesthetic it may be. If Inoue's work complicates our relationship to individuals who are our 'other', memory can seem to become a shape shifting, liquid entity. A series of works painted on mirrors, in particular, crystallise these concerns. As fellow artist Marc Quinn has remarked, "what I love about mirrors is that they are always in the present moment". As their appearance differs from second to second, Inoue's works on mirrors bear no traces of time or use, and are entirely impervious to projections of our own memories. The critic Thierry de Duve has also noted that mirrors, uniquely, exemplify both poles of Michael Fried's theory of 'absorption' and 'theatricality' at once: our attention is caught alarmingly between our moment of their consumption and their provocative, unfathomable distance from us.