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EIKOH HOSOE

THEATRE OF MEMORY

12 May – 7 August 2011



Kazuo Ohno 1994, from the series *The butterfly dream* 1960–2005
© Eikoh Hosoe / courtesy Studio Equis

For over fifty years Eikoh Hosoe (1933–) has occupied a unique space in the Japanese photographic landscape. As a young photographer, he was quick to forego the realist documentary style that was prevalent in the years after World War Two and produced work that breathed a sense of experimentation and freedom into photography. Using mythology, metaphor and symbolism, Hosoe has developed an inimitable style that combines photography with elements of theatre, dance, film and traditional Japanese art.

From the early days of his career Hosoe's destiny became linked to *butoh*, the revolutionary performance movement formed in post-war Japan. His close relationship to Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, the two pivotal figures of *butoh* dance, forms the basis for his seminal series such as *Kamaitachi*, *Embrace*, *The butterfly dream* and *Ukiyo-e projections*, included in this exhibition.

This exhibition also highlights Hosoe's extraordinary creativity and mastery of photographic printing techniques. Having experimented with both film-based and digital techniques to develop new methods of photographic expression, in recent years, he has started to use digital printing technologies on Japanese handmade paper (*washi*) and mounts his works in the form of traditional Japanese scrolls and screens. These 'photo-scrolls' provide a fascinating new reading of Hosoe's work and underline his commitment to push the boundaries of photographic expression.

The exhibition *Eikoh Hosoe: theatre of memory* is realised in collaboration with Studio Equis, France

KAMAITACHI

Eikoh Hosoe's long association with the revolutionary performance movement *butoh* came about through his encounter in 1959 with one of its founders, Tatsumi Hijikata. Hosoe collaborated with Hijikata on several series including *Kamaitachi*, which is acknowledged as the finest illustration of Hosoe's hybrid photographic style, combining performance and documentary with a dramatic, virile aesthetic that embodies the founding principles of Hijikata's *ankoku butoh* or 'dance of darkness'.

The dramatic and intense energy that Hijikata generated with his dance not only captured Hosoe's imagination but also opened up new ways for the young photographer to approach themes such as sexuality, gender and the human body.

Driven by the desire to re-enact his childhood memories when he was evacuated from Tokyo during World War Two, Hosoe had Hijikata perform *kamaitachi*, the legendary weasel-like demon that haunted the rice paddies in the extremely sparse, rural landscape of the Tohoku region from where they both came. Fusing reality (Hijikata interacting with the landscape and village people) and performance, Hosoe's 'subjective documentary' series opened new ground in Japanese post-war photography.

KAMAITACHI SCROLL #1 (left-to-right)

Panel #2

KAMAITACHI: TOWARD A VACUUM'S NEST

When we are photographed, our bodies and souls become the victims of sacrifice in a ritual that strips our shadows away. The Eskimo, believed that their spirits resided in their shadows and that shamans had the power to steal them. Sir James George Frazer's *Golden Bough* is not the only work to recount the dazzling drama of fate, or of life and death, that unfolds between man and his shadow.

Like life, death comes and goes—perhaps for a short time, perhaps longer. Narcissus's story will continue to dominate our lives in ways that will become increasingly complicated over time; however, the camera (or, according to villagers in Sikkim, "the evil eye in a box") seems to have reduced us, in one fell swoop, to the physics of light and shade. The objective lens seems opened to all of Nature, where all roads lead. The fact is, however, that it turns upside down once in the darkness and *then* is transformed into Nature.

To what extent were Katsu Kaishu¹, Baudelaire, and other luminaries of the early modern era who posed before the camera—tenuously sustained by their recognition of Nature amid a strange confusion of affectation and narcissism—aware of the evil lurking in the lens? Whatever the case, we will eventually see that, like the naked eye, the lens exists always "in its savage state."² We are seldom aware of the bizarre fact (or perhaps we just accept it as a self-evident truth) that both the thieves of shadows (photographers) and the thieves' victims (subjects) are human beings.

I find it almost impossible to believe that the camera could truly capture, for example, the desire of a bird in flight at a certain moment or at any moment. All too often, the photographer unknowingly loses sight of reality, and the reality runs or rolls away, just outside the frame. Or, surprisingly, reality may be there in a corner of the image, invisible and therefore completely unnoticed.

And so here I am reminded of Man Ray's trenchant modern maxim: "Photography is not art."

Before we even look at the Kamaitachi images, I want to stress the importance of distinguishing them from the generic concept referred to as staged photography. They are strictly, categorically, different from posed photographs of modern narcissists. If Hosoe had not met Tatsumi Hijikata, the phenomenal *butoh* master, he could not have created this extraordinary series. Hijikata is a man who—metaphorically speaking—can transmogrify in an instant into a phantasmagorical bird. This is not even theatrical photography, but rather a rare instance in which the camera obscura becomes a theater. And it is the paradoxical existence of the camera—which can photograph a vast void when we mean to capture a concrete object—that proves to be a stroke of luck for Hijikata, the master of movement.

Like the lens, Hijikata is a unique dancer, always aware that the "eye exists in its savage state."³ His "dance experience" is never a matter of leaping across a stage, pretending to be a swan: if a bird is what he has in mind, Hijikata becomes a raven. The raven plunges to the ground far below the stage. Then it runs, if it wants to run, or flies, if it wants to fly. For Hijikata, hasn't the paradoxical vacuum dwelling in the camera become a divine machine at a certain moment? Then, voluntarily or involuntarily, we may reach the lights of purgatory, for which we have yearned, beyond the millennia of human history.

At the very least, I see here an inevitable force striving to preserve the relationship between photographer and subject. In all likelihood, no other work approaches the original meaning of the term "happening" (however simplified it may be in this case) as closely as this one. Tatsumi Hijikata uses his dance artistry to abruptly penetrate the center of the vacuum between time and space, and he descends to the ground closest to the place where we were born.

to be continued on Panel #9

¹ Officer credited with the modernization of Japan's navy (1823–1899).

² Allusion to Andre Breton's *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*.

³ *Ibid.*

KAMAITACHI SCROLL #1 (left-to-right)

Panel #9

KAMAITACHI: TOWARD A VACUUM'S NEST

(continued from Panel #2)

He has arrived at the vacuum's nest, the home of *kamaitachi*, the "sickle-weasel."

Today it would seem that the *kamaitachi* belong to legend and mythology. What are *kamaitachi*? Memories from my childhood flood back to me: my father was a country doctor, and several times I saw farmers, claiming to have been bitten by a *kamaitachi*, carried to the threshold of our house. Those were frightening moments, smelling of blood, like the first bolt of lightning streaking across a dark sky. I heard the farmers say they were attacked out of the blue, under a rice-drying rack or an ancient persimmon tree. But no one bore a grudge against that invisible weasel. In fact, a family of actual weasels made their home in the loft of the thatched shed behind our house. Every once in a while, I would see them dart across a field, always taking the shortest path and then disappearing. They lived among people but avoided them. The rumor was that the disreputable little creatures were so wary and agile that they never took the same path twice. I wonder whatever happened to them. One book defines *kamaitachi* as a laceration from the localized vacuum created by a dust devil. No one really knows the truth. The days of *kamaitachi* are long gone.

Was *kamaitachi* a spirit of the soil, a phantom that appeared only to farmers? If so, that invisible flying blade must have been incredibly sharp to leap through the sky and pierce flesh.

It is hard to say whether Tatsumi Hijikata is a spirit of the soil or the air; however, even before we can contemplate the question, he approaches the ground almost vertically and rushes like a gale into a farming village. This village is in a rice-growing district, where Japan's most inconsistent and absurd social reality anomalously persists. Hijikata appears suddenly, like a hawk diving to the ground—or a kidnapper from heaven.

The god of the rice fields smiles on this scene. A faint trace of that smile is on the *kagura* theatrical dance mask, but it isn't the embarrassed smile replayed endlessly on television. It is a smile that could exist among demons, a smile that was present even on a footpath between barren rice fields during a terrible famine, a startling but comical smile from the realm of the unconscious.

At a precise moment, our dancer and photographer approach a timeworn village—their footsteps only faintly audible—and they capture a brief moment in the empty village, where zinnias and other flowers bloom, coated with white soil dust. The entire village, mesmerized like a haunted house, enthalls them.

Is he a hawk that has just landed—or a leaping weasel? It is foolish to ask. It is our dancer who would be wounded. The villagers gaze at him innocently, as though he reminds them of a long-forgotten priest. They smile, without knowing why, at the arrival of the oblivious fool. Their smiles become the same smile of the footpath between rice fields. It is a smile that borders on terror.

A girl smiles like a shrine maiden whom the gods have endowed with evil and innocence in perfect balance. Were the girls born fairies? Sooner or later they will experience the orgasm of life and death. Then they will depart. Will they return to the earth or to the sky? No one knows which path they will take.

In any case, two contradictory, endless journeys await them.

Hairy vacuum! Bloody vacuum! Biting vacuum! You must continue to exist on this earth!

The desire for the heavens will inexorably lead to a desire for the bowels of the earth. Then the excrescence will head for the huge void, and vice versa. The cosmic metamorphosis that this phenomenon seeks will occur, extremely and tangibly. The vacuum theater, too, is part of the evolution.

To arrive at the source of the phantom of ecstasy, we must dig deeper and deeper, day by day.

And the witness is an instantaneous flash.

By SHUZO TAKIGUCHI

Translated by Connie Prener

KAMAITACHI SCROLL #2 (left-to-right)

Panel #2

Oyomesan, oyomesan

Dear bride,
what could that be?

from the eaves of the wind-swept roof,
from the top of the frozen platform
where rice stalks dried,
listening to the screams of the distant abyss

But no,
that is not a crow at all.

Musumesan, musumesan

Dear girl,
what could that be?

from beneath the ferns in the cedar forest,
from the shadow of the buckwheat
and the wild chrysanthemum blossoms,
setting the shroud to flutter

But no,
that is not a butterfly at all

Obaasan, obaasan

Dear grandmother,
what could that be?

deep within the earthen storehouse
where ancestors sleep,
in a corner by the earthen stove
redolent with broth,
sitting vacantly, gazing at Hell

But no,
it's not a madman at all.

Ancha anecha oncha imoto

Dear brothers dear sisters
dreams that rise from the warming pan
by the sleeper's feet
on nights when blizzards roar

The peach and the plum
demon foundlings demon dragonflies
the chill of the elf fire on the night when the child
changes from his infant's sash
and the goat's horns, jutting abruptly
from the nether world.

Listen to the blood voices and the earth voices.
Taste the sighs that lie inside the chest of drawers. Swallow the
pain of the pincushion needles.

Crawl up from the bottom of the dry well,
slap the gaunt horse on the behind and softly
glide over the thinly iced surface of the fields.

Steal the eyes of the dried sardines
through which string penetrates
as they hang from rainbow-colored eaves.
Sharpen the scythe with the winnow's wind.

The madders on the field,
the comb of blossoms in the hair
of a single girl child,
and a whirlwind over the bamboo enclosure.

Suddenly the earth spirits
arise and dance,
and kick heaven in the crotch.

By TOYOICHIRO MIYOSHI
Translated by Ian Hideo Levy

BUTOH

Today butoh is widely acknowledged as an avant-garde dance form, but originally it was an underground movement that emerged in Japan in the aftermath of World War Two. At that time, many artists and intellectuals were struggling to shake off the weight of Japanese tradition – as well as the force of Westernisation ensuing from the US occupation – to redefine the identity of a new generation.

Within this chaotic socio-political climate, Tatsumi Hijikata (1928–86) and Kazuo Ohno (1906–2010), sought to formulate a new performance or dance style that would be true to their ethnic roots and the Japanese physique, free the body from conventional beauty ideals and perfection, while drawing inspiration from the art and poetry of European-based Dadaism, Surrealism and the existentialist Theatre of the Absurd, as well as German Expressionist dance, *Neue Tanz*.

Hijikata created the term *ankoku butoh*, or 'dance of darkness', to denote a cosmological dance which departed completely from existing dance movements and explored the taboo and the extreme, the psychological and physical, in short, the most hidden, dark side of human emotions.

Since the 1970s, new generations of butoh dancers have emerged in Japan and abroad. Their different approaches has lead to a diversification in butoh dance, so much so that today butoh is defined by its very evasion of definition: it has no fixed style.

THE BUTTERFLY DREAM

The butterfly dream – a collection of photographs taken over a period of 46 years – represents Hosoe's homage to the charismatic butoh dancer Kazuo Ohno. It was published as a book, which was released on 27 October 2006 in celebration of Ohno's 100th birthday.

Originally an instructor in physical education and performer of modern dance, Ohno befriended Tatsumi Hijikata in the 1950s and became a pivotal figure in the development of the butoh performance movement. Ohno's poetic dance style stems from his belief in the transcendental nature of human experience, that the human body has a memory of sensations and knows no limits of self-expression.

Following closely his friend's extremely long and successful career – Ohno continued to perform late into his 90s – Hosoe has captured some of the most poignant and magical moments in the history of butoh. In honour of Ohno's long-held conviction in the importance of achieving freedom of body and mind, Hosoe named his photographic exploration of Ohno's unique art after the famous Daoist allegory in which the philosopher Zhuangzi dreamt he was a butterfly, but once awake, wondered if he was a man dreaming to be a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming to be Zhuangzi.

THE BUTTERFLY DREAM SCROLL #1 (left-to-right)

Panel #3

SONG OF PRAISE DEDICATED TO OHNO KAZUO

receiving the special favor of the gods
the miraculous butoh dancer
you'd think was a voluptuous dancing princess with wings of Pegasus
in time for a split-second with the Milky Way
an aviator inside a forest of souls
or
making Napoleon
into a child's kewpie
carried on his shoulders
with grave humor as a bearded shogun
then
with pure innocence the ninety-odd year old infant
is beloved by Jesus
is cherished even by Judas
"I'm also a friend of Judas," he proclaims
and begs forgiveness
facing Jesus
ahh, that was in Nancy, wasn't it?
May 1980
Theater Festival, Nancy, France
sparkling with green, glittering light
Ohno Kazuo
embraced the sorrow of Judas
"for a long time
I prayed for Judas
I wanted to become Judas
and dance
despite my belief in Jesus
to the extent of that faith
I even wondered
if it wasn't me
who was Judas selling out Jesus
(do you understand this feeling?)
then
Jesus even forgives Judas
but not knowing he is forgiven
Judas kills himself
on Judas' behalf, I pray
at the church in Nancy
I danced the butoh of
'beckoning Jesus'"
who danced in the church in Nancy?
the one who danced was Judas
while tears were flowing out of Ohno Kazuo

he became Judas dancing dancing
then there was Bach
a blind man
while playing the pipe organ
reaches his hands out to me and Ohno Kazuo
then ahh
the foot of Jesus held by the Virgin Mary is in my hand
it becomes an artificial flower tickling tickling
the artificial flower's foot
Mary and Jesus and me
enjoying ourselves as a threesome, we played
within the playing, we prayed
for Judas
and then oh
then, that 'red tray with legs'
that was surely
'the tray from the dream of the aborted fetus'
for Judas
preparations were made by Jesus
what, there's an empty seat
which I had no idea about

By SHIRAIISHI KAZUKO

Translated by John Solt, Keiko Inoh, and Hollis Goodall

THE BUTTERFLY DREAM SCROLL #2 (left-to-right)

Panel #16

THE PIETY OF FATHER AND SON

the tranquil god manifests form
it's afternoon
there's the beaming, broad smile of Shohaku
holding a red-lacquered fish
wearing a black, strange fish on his head
Jakuchu with a gorgeous peony flower
makes it bloom and swim in mid-air
now Ohno Kazuo looks heavenward wondering
what's happening Yoshito the fathering son
when he holds aloft his father who called himself Judas
the ogre god who danced wildly childlike
extinguishes and the melody of a magnificent spirit
drifts to the shore

By SHIRAIISHI KAZUKO

Translated by John Solt, Keiko Inoh, and Hollis Goodall

UKIYO-E PROJECTIONS

When Hosoe heard the news that the Asbestos Dance Studio, founded by Tatsumi Hijikata and his wife Akiko Motofuji, was to close in April 2003 after 40 years of activity, he felt the need to pay tribute to the achievements of this experimental studio. With the help of Hijikata's widow, he organised a series of performances in 2002 and 2003, in which the dancers were asked to coordinate their movements in accordance with images from his own work, as well as from 19th-century Japanese paintings and woodblock prints projected on their naked, white-painted bodies.

The result of this 'photographic theatre' was stunning: a mysterious four-dimensional space transcending ordinary space and time was created as the two-dimensional images were projected on the three-dimensional bodies. The idea to use *shunga* – the erotic woodblock prints by noted ukiyo-e artists such as Utamaro, Hokusai and others – stemmed from Hosoe's conviction that Hijikata's archaic, ecstatic dance style had its roots in this particular art genre of the Edo period (1603–1868).

Exploring many of the themes that recur in Hosoe's work – sexuality, the human form, movement and the passage of time – this series epitomises his unique approach in synthesising photography with various forms of visual and performance arts.

UKIYO-E PROJECTIONS SCROLL #1 (Right-to-left)

Panel #1

PREAMBLE

I humbly offer this bit of writing.

Without knowing
From time immemorial we were united
And let that wonder remain wondrous
This maiden child, that boy
Brought together by mutual attraction
Heaven granting the moment
Don't regret having taken this flesh.

For one twinkle in the flow of time

Our two voices one thunderous clap
Let's sing the joy of living
Let's offer reverence to the joy of living.

Humbly yours.

UKIYO-E PROJECTIONS SCROLL #1 (Right-to-left)

Panel #3

1 Man

*Lotus flower rising from the mud, the great wheel of the Buddha
Golden color in golden light, blue color in blue light*

Lotus flower, pure in its fragrance
Still, in the midst of this
There is voluptuousness and elegant eroticism
If these are present
I'm helpless helpless
I proceed loving but I cannot bear it.

*White color in white light, red color in red light
Delicate, pure and fragrant.*

from the postscript of Saito Mokichi's poem "Shakko".

Panel #5

2 Woman

Well, my beloved
Favor me with your loving
Well, my beloved
Favor me with your body

Panel #8

3 Man

No matter how foolish
To reveal myself
Yet secretly
I don't know what to do and where to go

Neither where
Nor why
The love that floats up is hard to fulfill.

Like a pointing arrow
One voice pierces and disappears
Be ready! Be ready!

Blossoming, blossoming
Accept it. As petals scatter, accept it.

Panel #10

4 Man

The ultimate cry,
Resembles a crane.

Ringing out the single syllable,

"Ahhh!"

5 Man

Calling and calling out
Without knowing her name
Must be proof
I'm alive.

It breaks off, becoming strange
A single cry.

Climbing, climbing
And a limit presents itself

Die and be reborn
A new beauty.

Panel #13

6 Woman

Please love me like a flower
Give me your everything

To the limit, through the limit.

UKIYO-E PROJECTIONS SCROLL #2 (Right-to-left)

Panel #3

7 Woman

Blossoming forth
Blossoming forth
I bloom for you.

Emitting aromas
Emitting aromas
I am fragrant for you.

Being beloved
Being beloved
I serve to love you.

Panel #8

8 Woman

Captivate my heart
To the utmost of your power

This fountain bubbles up and overflows
Don't ask where it will flow

Spurting out
Must be the rapture of loving in spring

9 Woman

Spring is ablaze
Fall is ablaze
Strong but tranquil
Trickling water
A wettened voice.

The waning moon eyes me.

Panel #10

10 Woman

My black hair
Disheveled tonight
Recalls you fondly.

What shall we ponder in the moonlight?
Ending, being born, ending again
Gratitude for the wheel of life
Gratitude for rebirth.

Panel #14

Words of closure Woman

Tossed aside, thrown away, as if discarded
I'm resigned to nothingness, yet
A tingling mystery is born in me
Accepting, accepting, accepting into my deepest recesses
I'm filled with delight
Strangely mysterious
Ah! I'm delirious

It is the Buddha's merit.
Humbly yours.

Poems by ASAKURA ISAMU
Translated by John Solt, Keiko Inoh, Hollis Goodall

EMBRACE

First published as a book in 1971, *Embrace* represents a return to the study of the human body that Hosoe undertook in earlier series such as *Man and woman* (1959) or *Ordeal by roses* (1963). In this new body of work, however, he abandoned the strong contrast and dramatic, baroque visual aesthetic in favour of the purity of the human form. Showing abstract fragments of male and female nudes in intimate placement, the series is not merely about eroticism or the dialogue of rivalry between the opposite sexes but is also a celebration of the pure beauty of the human body.

By depersonalising the bodies of his models, Hosoe attempted to reach a universal expression of corporeality. The extreme abstraction of these images focuses the attention on the flesh, which, according to Hosoe's belief, is the essence of human beings.

The author Yukio Mishima comments on this series: 'The viscosity which is associated with sex – those earthly odours and temperatures of soft and indeterminately formed internal organs – has been painstakingly removed from these photographs. To me this is a series filled with a hard, athletic beauty. First and foremost, it is about *form*.'