

Anne Tucker

Three Views / One Eye: Miwa Yanagi's perceptions of women

Over her relatively short but impressive career, Miwa Yanagi has fabricated three distinct series that confront and disrupt traditional perceptions of women. *Elevator Girls*, her first body of work, began with young women in uniforms who work as floor hostesses or "elevator girls" in Japanese department stores. The stores hire these women based on physical traits (youth, beauty, light skin, slim build) and their ability and willingness to perform as the management expects. Hiring physically similar types, Yanagi photographed various groups of models dressed in red uniforms and posed in modern shopping-mall environments.<sup>1</sup> She then used her computer to replicate and manipulate the groups and to aggrandize the settings, which are devoid of other people. The affectless girls breathe in the now-mummified Modern architecture. On occasion, the women are placed inside the showcase windows, becoming the merchandise, and are subject to the same standards of predictable desirability as other commodities. As Professor Okabe Aomi observes, Yanagi achieves an "anesthetized eroticism."<sup>2</sup>

Like *Elevator Girls*, Yanagi's next series is colorful and obviously staged from her vivid imagination. *My Grandmothers* is also Yanagi's first series in which a text is integral to the piece. A few sentences are fabricated from extensive interviews that Yanagi used to pick her subjects, some of whom she met by advertising on a special Web page. Answering Yanagi's questions, the young women skip middle age and forecast their lives fifty years in the future. Rather than dread the indignities of being old or of conforming to societal constraints, they presume they will enjoy power, respect, and occasionally, adventures, all of which grate against tradition in Japan. Their strong wills and free expression of emotion are antithetical to the elevator girls, who are prisoners of what is expected of them. Men in the *Grandmothers* series are the male equivalents of handmaidens. The most frequently reproduced image portrays a joyously windblown woman seated in the sidecar of a motorcycle driven by a younger man. More significant, many of the "old" women have positive and influential relationships with children, or with young women who are close to the subjects' actual ages. Throughout the second series, Yanagi physically transforms the young women into old age by using makeup and costumes, or the computer, but the women exude benevolence and/or joviality and are important counterpoints to traditional crones, because no woman forecasts herself as an ugly witch. Powerful, yes; ugly, no.

In an earlier interview, Yanagi expressed a hope that her work would make Japanese audiences wonder and possibly rethink their understanding of women's roles.<sup>3</sup> Yanagi has given considerable thought to the status of women and the complex history of feminism in Japan, and she embeds levels of meaning in her art relative to specific women's issues in Japan. Therefore, Japanese audiences are likely to understand best the layers and subtleties of the first two series, but the worldwide exhibition and publication of Yanagi's work proves that viewers from other cultures also find the pictures challenging and engaging. For instance, considerations of age and of beauty in understanding women's public regard and self-esteem is a topic that crosses all cultural boundaries.

In her third series, *Fairy Tale*, Yanagi steps closer to a universal base of understanding by building on well-loved fairy tales written by Western writers. From the Dane Hans Christian Andersen she appropriated “The Little Match Girl.” From the German Brothers Grimm’s repertory, she used “Rapunzel,” “Snow White,” “Hanzel and Gretel” and “Cinderella.”<sup>4</sup> Some of the stories have entered literature from European oral traditions and have no assigned authors, such as “Sleeping Beauty” and “Little Red Riding Hood.” The only twentieth-century story in her list is *The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Erèndira and Her Heartless Grandmother* by the Columbian writer Gabriel García Márquez, which he acknowledges was influenced by fairy tales. However, Yanagi also cites the importance to her work of Japanese novelist Kobo Abe, particularly *Women of the Dunes*, a story that slowly unfolds as a man’s ordinary vacation shifts radically.<sup>5</sup> He is led into a trapped existence with a woman in an underground house of sand. The story is both plausible and extreme. Abe manages to engage our sympathy for both protagonists-- the man entrapped and the woman whose desperately hard life needs his enslaved assistance, but only because she is incapable of imagining living outside her subterranean world with its endless, life-preserving tasks. In Abe’s story, the predictable clarity of who is a villain and who is innocent is clouded because the man’s prior existence was no less an entrapment of his own making.

Like children worldwide, Yanagi read fairy tales in her childhood. Part of their appeal to her now is that they are time-tested and universal, which makes their ingrained stereotypes also time-tested and universal. (The established life stages of women in these tales are maiden/innocent, mother, and a bifurcated old-age-- loving grandmothers or evil crones.) She has chosen stories for this series that focus on the two extremes of female age and exclude middle age, but she reinvents the stories by confusing distinctions between youth and age. Both old and young roles are played by girls ten to twelve years of age. The elderly are identified by a mask that features wrinkled skin and a witch’s hooked nose, but no attempt is made to hide the girls’ youthful bodies, which offset the telltale mask of “evil hag.” Yanagi calls her creations hybrids.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to *My Grandmothers*, Yanagi does not give the girls a chance to choose their roles. She takes the role of fate and decides who is innocent and who is evil. Neither girl is obviously the princess, as would be true in a traditional fairy tale. In this confusion, our response to the characters is no longer prescribed. Sometimes in her particular staging of the story, innocence appears evil. In *Sleeping Beauty*, the graphicness of the girl’s final attack on the witch is disconcerting rather than satisfying. Reflecting on these reversals of traditional constructs, Yanagi encouraged audiences to dwell on the reversals with her titles for two recent Japanese showings of *Fairy Tale*. For a show at the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, her title was *The Incredible Tale of the Innocent Old Lady and the Heartless Young Girl*.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, at an exhibition at the Marugame Genichiro-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art in Kagawa, Japan, the title was *Darkness of Girlhood and Lightness of Aging*.

The *Fairy Tale* photographs are edgier and not as seductive as her prior work. Shot in black-and-white, they are at times violent and creepy. In *Snow White*, the girl and the witch are the same because Yanagi employs a mirror. Snow White hands herself the

poisoned apple (which would be similar to the self-laid traps in Abe's novels). There are no happily-ever-after endings in these tales, no smiling release from danger and travail. In *Little Red Riding Hood*, the bloody escape when the wolf is killed is frightening and exhausting, not miraculous. Men do not release the princesses from danger. No princes appear except those transformed by the witch into animals. In fact, animals in the form of white doves are the only saviors. These fairy-tale heroines are poles apart from the too-perfect young elevator girls and the wise women in *My Grandmothers*. The elevator girls are trapped; the grandmothers do not expect to be. The fairy-tale heroines are cunning, but few seem wise. Having escaped magic and the clarity of stereotypes, the girls in these obviously staged environments nevertheless maintain an element of flesh-and-blood vulnerability and complexity.

In a fictitious interview with herself, Yanagi fears the fixation of always returning to the place from which one started. She creates a powerful image of herself as a ship that continually washes up on the same dark shores. She sees herself as stuck in a repeating cycle, but her art encourages viewers to break free from traditionally assigned roles and perceptions. I wonder if a future Yanagi series will deal with the middle of life, that time when the protagonists are no longer innocent and neither old nor young. Will Yanagi find magic in lives full of daily chores, such as the lives of mothers? Will she continue to create contemporary morality tales, challenging the blind alley of stereotypes and the tragedy of proscribed dreams?

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<sup>1</sup> To shoot actual locations that are later merged into fabricated environments, she had to work at night. This required permissions that were difficult to get and considerable directorial skill, which she has continued to employ and develop. Careful drawings precede photographs.

<sup>2</sup> Okabe Aomi "A Fabricated Modernism – Miwa Yanagi's Critical Vision," *White Casket*, Nazraeli Press, Tucson, Arizona, 2004, unpaginated.

<sup>3</sup> Interview between Miwa Yanagi and curators of the exhibition *The History of Japanese Photography* in 2001.

<sup>4</sup> "Cinderella" was published by the Brothers Grimm but had appeared much earlier in France as a folk tale.

<sup>5</sup> Kobo Abe, *Suna no Onna* [Woman in the Dunes] 1962, trans. Dale Saunders (New York, Vintage, 1972).

<sup>6</sup> Fictionalized interview written by Yanagi for "Fairy Tale" published by SEIGENSHA, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> This title was inspired by García Márquez's story *The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother*.