

Manon Slome, Anonda Bell

Miwa Yanagi: *Where do you go to my lovely...?*

Miwa Yanagi's two bodies of photographs, *Elevator Girls* (1993 to 1999) and *My Grandmothers* (ongoing from 1999), stand like bookends, framing a spectrum of feminist discourse and feminine experience. *Fairy Tale*, a third series of work (discussed in Anne Tucker's essay), is tellingly sometimes referred to by Yanagi as "...*fairy tales- the darkness of girlhood and the lightness of aging.*"¹ This title is an unusual inversion of Western popular (marketing) values where the power and predominance of "youth culture" have tended to push women "beyond a certain age" into obscurity, if not into the clutches of plastic surgeons in attempts to freeze frame their faces and their bodies. Yanagi, however, focuses on the entrapment of young women within the confines of traditional Japanese society. Referring to the world of Takarazuka theater to which she was introduced as a child, a theatrical tradition performed exclusively by little girls (performers had to be unmarried), Yanagi has commented, "*The construction of 'little girls' protected in the world of Takarazuka, is in fact based on female ideals created by Japanese men of the past: women who are loyal to their men and educated as a 'good wife, wise mother' ... The contorted reality of Takarazuka contributes to the complexity of feminist discourse in Japan.*"² A further source of entrapment seems to dominate the *Elevator Girls* series: the prison of consumerism. Yanagi is fairly contemptuous of women who devote their lives to the accumulation of designer goods, automatons who worship at high-end malls, the temples of Prada and Hermès, linking their worth and status to the bags they carry. Their shared consumer dreams render them clone-like, brainwashed by a collective media/fashion/corporate master who has conditioned them from birth in the contrary roles of desire and submission.

Elevator girls were once synonymous with Japanese department stores. Their presence was expected to such a great extent that when attempts were made to introduce self-service elevators, signs had to be placed to remind people to push the buttons themselves. Elevator girls are, by design, without

¹ The name of a 2004 Yanagi exhibition: *Darkness of Girlhood and Lightness of Aging*, Marugame Genichiro-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art, Marugame, Japan.

² Dominique Gonzales-Foerster, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Miwa Yanagi, Interview, Miwa Yanagi, Exhibition catalogue, Deutsche Bank Art, 2004, p. 42

their own identity, as neutral as the spaces they occupy. Clad in corporate uniforms, their personality has been erased to reflect the branding of the store or space within which they exist. As such they become a *tabula rasa* onto which others may project their own thoughts and fantasies. Their role is not dissimilar from women in pornography – a surface fantasy, presented to stimulate desire which (the location suggests) can only be satisfied through consumption. In common with pornography, there are unwritten but endorsed codes of conduct for people in these confined structures, many of them involving a vigorous attempt to maintain a semblance of personal space even when jostling bodies with a stranger. Indeed, in one image in the series, the girls are displayed behind store windows, for every bit on sale, it would seem, as if in a red light district.³

The faces of the elevator girls do not reflect the angst or the boredom that would inevitably ensue from the nature of their work. Their daily routine, the repetitive chore of self-cancellation of the psyche in the interests of servitude and femininity, renders them rather numb or frozen. The highly artificial light of the images and locations further drains their faces of individuality, turning them into cosmetic masks with uber-bright red lips. What you are buying, after all, is a brand, not a detail. The girls symbolize consumerism – the promised utopia of a better life through spending money and acquiring goods and services. It is not an easy burden to carry, and in *White Casket* (1998) we literally see the breakdown of these women: within the tiny space of the elevator, three girls dissolve into an ambiguous pool, which may be blood or just the melted (probably synthetic) fabric of their uniforms.

In Yanagi's underground malls, there is an illusion of activity, but no progress, no escape from the vertical and horizontal axes of the elevators, which lead only to another level of the mall, a closed circuit where movement or even escape is simply an illusion. As Yanagi describes it in a text for *Cities on the Move*, "*My dream experiences are often of these types of spaces: the women in my work are stopped in them, they cannot leave the passing scenes, terrifying – the postures, they have already seen these places of consumption and underground malls, these aquariums with no exit...*"⁴

³ See the art house film *Elevator Girls in Bondage* (1972, USA), directed by Michael Kalmen, which looks at issues of constructed identity, sexuality, and self perception.

⁴ Op.cit p. 47

The rails, low-lying ceilings, grids, and vanishing points which suggest only endless repetition and infinite expanse of the scene before us all contribute to this sense of confinement. The scale of the photographs, some up to sixty-one feet in length, mirror too this sense of an endless subterranean tunnel as in *Midnight Awakening Dream*. In this image, the girls are anticipating the start of the day, with the bars of the closed shops behind their svelte young figures reminiscent of the confines of a prison. They, like the shopping day to come, are poised on the cusp of their lives, seemingly longing for a future that extends beyond the confines of the shopping center. In addition to the spatial sense of confinement, the very atmosphere of these images is claustrophobic. No air other than mechanical stirs these spaces, whose standardized temperature and artificial light only allow for seasons in the changing of the clothes on display, just as opening and closing of the stores marks the passage of time.

In contrast to the constrictive banality and confinement of *Elevator Girls*, *My Grandmothers* radiates both the serenity and joy of individuality, offering an expansive sense of freedom as the works represent orchestrated fantasies about age and the aging process. Traditionally in Japan, aging was perceived as a positive development rather than a regression into obscurity, as it is so often experienced in the West. It was anticipated with dignity and quiet delight, a time in life when great knowledge and experience had been accumulated, the tedium of day-to-day jobs was dispensed with and the delight of raising a family had been realized. Liberated from these duties, old age was a privileged time in life, one that provided opportunities for guilt-free enjoyment. In this ongoing series, *My Grandmothers*, Yanagi may well be presenting the projected fantasies of the elevator girls, their dreams utilized as a way to pass time in the monotony of the everyday. Yanagi says of the women who posed in the *Elevator Girls* series, “*They want something for their future. But they have a hard time expressing what they want as if their desires were subdued or locked inside.*”⁵

In *My Grandmothers*, Yanagi developed a close rapport with her models and through ongoing conversations, she teased out of them buried childhood dreams. With encouragement, these were worked into imaginary scenarios, fantasies of how they saw themselves and the lives they might lead in fifty years. Using a combination of aging software, prosthetic devices, makeup,

⁵ Interview with the Artist, Yanagi Studio, Kyoto, Japan, August 19, 2001, as cited in the *Journal of Contemporary Art*, 2001.

set design and computer imaging, Yanagi visualizes their future selves, merging their imaginings with “*my own fictitious grandmothers, for they also stand as collaborative portraits of the ideal elderly woman.*”⁶

Although these are just fantasies of aging, the potential vitality and lack of “wistfulness” is rare in the depiction of the aged and aging⁷. Perhaps with the knowledge that masks can be removed and the roles reversed, stereotypes are thrown to the wind. The grandmothers in Yanagi’s series are far from stay-at-home-rocking-chair grandmas. They travel (Sachiko and Mineko), some still work (Minami), and they are representative of women all over the world. Regina lives in a house with her husband near the beach in Ipanema, while Regine and Yoko live as a gay couple in Germany. Akiyo, Mai, Hitomi, and Noriko are geishas who live together in one house. From an elegant, red-hot diva strutting on a white marble catwalk of a tombstone (Eriko), to the demure, lute-playing, traditionally dressed and coiffed muse (Misako), Yanagi presents every permutation of womanhood, revering not only the good, but the potential for the Other, which exists in all of us. Yuka’s whipping red hair in the wind and the wide open mouth in what seems like a whooping banshee laugh, along with the cigarette in her hand and the young man riding the motorbike next to her, corroborate a version of the grandmother as wild woman. The corresponding texts enhance the visual narrative and open up new vistas for interpretation of the work. Yuka’s story, inspirational as it is, captures the wanderlust of a woman determined to live every day to the fullest.

Yanagi places her grandmothers against a background rich in color, in vivid natural scenery and enchanting indoor environments, full of the “stuff” of a lived life. In these often-fantastical scenes, creations of a future life, Yanagi’s grandmothers have the opportunity to live lives that perhaps our own grandmothers had been denied. As Yanagi has said, “*I bless all the grandmothers of the future.*”⁸ Often the grandmothers interact with young people from another generation, like Ai and Miwa, passing on their wisdom and “experience” (even if it be that of a connoisseur dominatrix) to the next generation, perhaps with a sense of warning that youth should not be “wasted on the young.” Indeed, Miwa’s own *Grandmother* projection could

⁶ [Miwa Yanagi, artist’s website](#)

⁷ An exception would be Dutch Artist, Erwin Olaf in his Mature Series (1999)

⁸ [ibid.](#)

stand for the willfully imagined future of her own works, her “children” in the world:

At eighty

The long journeys across many mountains and rivers have become difficult

Still, I keep going

With the thought

That my children will exist

In the farthest reaches of this earth

Manon Slome, Chief Curator, Chelsea Art Museum,
Anonda Bell, Assistant Curator, Chelsea Art Museum