

Noh Mask in Human Drama: Hiroshi Watanabe

Take a first glimpse at the a productive collection of photos of Kabuki ~ Noh mask and Ningyō jōruri puppets, it' s natural for us to relate Hiroshi Watanabe with a photographer who is fond of traditional Japanese culture. Then fix our eyes upon these images again. This time, a sense of distance is caught in our heart when we realize that these images were taken by a cool onlooker, and apparently it' s not the cheerful affection he was attached to. He chose spot focus, shallow depth of field and dark background to highlight these haunting images of creepy stage make-up and dramatic facial expressions on the mask. They look as chilling as the museum archives, and on the other hand as spooky as the spirits appearing during twilight which are often described in popular urban legends.



The sense of distance and discipline in Watanabe' s photos is perhaps the result of his own life experience that he has been living away from home for quite a long time. Born in 1951, Hiroshi Watanabe often felt in prison when he was young because he did not fancy studying in school but his parents insisted that he must to. At that time he had a friend who liked to draw pictures which appeared to him a good chance to avoid dull schooling but eventually still get a diploma his parents had been expecting. The only problem was, he lacked the talent as his friend had and it came to him the

alternative of photography, so that's what he ended up majoring Photography in the university. In the beginning he had no idea what and how to deal with his subject in the university, he simply wanted to enjoy the freedom as a university student. However, he gradually changed his negative attitude as he began to fish up something positive out in class. After graduated, he moved to Los Angeles to work for a Japanese commercial filming company. At first he planned to stay in the company 1 to 2 years only to earn his bread unambitiously. But his senior colleague encouraged him that commercial photography and film production can promise him a prosperous future that fine art photography can not, plus Watanabe was getting more responsible for his marriage and family. So he settled to work and eventually started to run his own film production company as well as getting a MBA in the University of California. He had been living a quite smooth life until one day, he suddenly made up his mind to pick up his old interest, or, to be precise, to catch up the real dream that had been long suspend, at the age of 44. And he even closed his business 5 years after in order to pursue the career of fine art photographing with all his heart.



Living abroad long in California has influenced Watanabe a lot as well as his home country, Japan. Experiencing mixed cultures grants him unique perspective and opportunity in creative works. For instance, he was designated by San Jose Museum of Art to shoot one of the only three Japantowns remained in the U.S., San Jose Japantown. During the late 19th century, a lot of Japanese immigrated to America due to the increasing population and the slow development of industry. They thrived for better lives despite the fact that they had to confront strong racism. Japanese or Japanese American were strictly watched, restricted or confined during the World War II. In order to survive the harsh time, they picked the shells hidden under the dried out river bed, surrounding stones and wood to make handicrafts. These little objects witnessed the hard time when one generation of the Japanese immigrants had been gone through. The first time when Watanabe visited San Jose Japantown, he neither shot the streets, the Japanese style buildings nor the local people, but the objects

slept in paper boxes stocked in the storeroom. This implies that the essential part of a culture always lies deeply under somewhere we can hardly discover.







Going away from mainstream and seeking for details that are easily ignored by public is the Watanabe style. The Kabuki actors shot in his works were not necessarily members of the box office hit, but the amateur performers in the countryside. They revealed their backstage anxiety once putting on layers and layers of brilliant stage make-up before the curtain rose. They were concentrating on reciting lines and movements as if the photographer was absent, but sometimes they could be easy or shy facing the camera. Once, Watanabe visited the countryside in Japan and took a photo for a bar named "Love Point" and later realised that there's another place with identical name which provided special sex services with both female prostitutes and sex dolls for men. Inspired by this, Watanabe then shot a series of photos of sex dolls and real models. In his B&W work, there is a sweet Lolita girl dressed up with revealing outfit whose skin bizarrely shines silicon glaze,

showing an innocent and sensual contradictory. Unlike Helmut Newton who took sexy photos of tight skirts, bare legs, garters and horny postures, or Nobuyoshi Araki who presented the extreme images of nudity and unexpected perspective to emphasize the dark desire, Watanabe always shoot the sex mate of vraisemblance from predictable angles. However, this design especially discloses the immoral sin and accuses the camera holder' s hypocrisy and provokes his lust.





Though digital technique helps in creating vivid effect, Watanabe still insists on preserving the films and the art of developing films. No matter how photogenic a photographer tries to reach in his works, the camera he uses still has its limitation to seamlessly frame the reality. A photograph is usually to the best a creative result of compromise, technically and mechanically. Watanabe accepts the fact while at the same time keeps going along with it; and that makes him especially distinct from other photographers.







