

**Lieko Shiga**

*RASEN KAIGAN: The Spiral Shore*

11 October – 17 November 2013

The Physics Room

# **RASEN KAIGAN 2008-2013**

## **Laura Preston**

In 2008, Lieko Shiga took up residence in Kitakama, a small coastal village in the Miyagi prefecture of North East Japan. She had recently returned from studying photography abroad and on entering this community was given the role of village photographer, tasked with documenting and archiving the life and spaces of the area as a project distinct from her own art practice. In 2011, soon after the second major earthquake in Christchurch, the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami swept everything away to sea. In its aftermath, Shiga focused on gathering, preserving and returning over 30,000 photographs of the Kitakama community as they gradually washed up on the shore, treating the photographic paper as a form of evidence to the devastating events. Shiga acknowledged, ‘The value of a photograph keeps changing. Photographs can resist everything, but they can also become anything’.

In the exhibition *RASEN KAIGAN: The Spiral Shore*, there was both sensitivity to the physical materiality of a photograph as well as reflection on the space within the images that eludes this materiality, or even time itself. The act of taking a photograph captures a moment of stationary time, something the artist considers akin to a prayer, a fleeting pause in the passage of time. For Shiga, time is never settled: ‘Taking a photograph is making a space that is no-time—not the past, not the present, not the future. The process of making this no-time space is like a ceremony for me. But I also know that I am courting time; I cannot run away from time. That's my life, my destiny’.

The exhibition *RASEN KAIGAN* took into account Shiga’s role as both village photographer–community historian and archivist–and artist. Photographic works by the artist accompanied a series of lectures and a book that ventured beyond her story, or even that of the village, towards a more expansive understanding of photography as a space of ritual.

## A book review

If the book is held to the chest, it almost fits the same proportions. Turning its pages is like inhaling and exhaling a world of repeated forms and stark-lit colourations. Saturated. The book begins with one of the rocks that artist and author Lieko Shiga painted, made up, for the shoot. It floats on a background of inky darkness—the page is gathering dust. The next is a spread of black, widescreen, although a tint of blue seems to arise out of the print depending on the way the reading light strikes. Another page turn delivers a brief inscription (memorial) in Japanese, reproduced as though photocopied, roughly sampled from elsewhere. This and a list of works at the back are the only text.

Further page turns and the images continue, full bleed, full page, fragments of figures composed in the landscape, caught as unusual scenarios, performing out-of-place gestures, indeterminate rituals, yet all seemingly paying tribute to the pine tree lined Kitakama: Holes in the sand filled with fabric, figures holding hands traversing swamps, pine needles vitrined in cabinets keeping forever green; streams of silver plastic caught in a windswept tree, and again caught in a windswept tree; an over-the-top cake fashioned as a sugar gorgeous grotesque just manageable; the portrait of the artist drawn for her mock funeral propped up among enshrined plants, other plants gather as a collection filling up a kitchen sink, and again on asphalt at night allowing water to leak in monstrous lines; the community gathers as a ceremonial showing of palms.

The intertidal space of the shoreline is a gifted metaphor—by the artist herself—for thinking about a photographic practice that gives access to a reality that is more real than real. She stages her work in the very space of the shoreline, and in orchestrating scenes for the camera tracks between documenting moments of action and elaborating on the fiction of photography to capture a real time and place.

There are loosely three sections in the book: a three-act structure. The first break from the shoreline shows a line up of those stones again dusted in white powder, as though face-painted to perform. The second rupture is the presence of an archival document, sepia toned. It presents a gathering of men posing for the camera, those who are known to have forested the area by pulling out the pine roots. Shiga, later in the book, called on a grandson of one of the figures to dig up a root and have his image taken with the dead tree suspended and appearing to pierce through the body as though an extraterrestrial limb, poltergeist.

The dynamics of the group portrait is felt in Shiga's book too, sometimes the communion occurs as a singular portrait made twice. Such as the strangeness of the man standing inside a demarcated garden mapped by polyurethane and planted with small potent flowering trees piercing the night, repeated and keeping himself

company; or the other man, unusually suited amongst the pines, holding two egg-like white forms, one in each hand, who is doubly featured.

The repetition, the doubling, an implied if not enacted mirroring, invites a reading of the image as portal, toward a non-sequential working of time and into that other space of the in-between; visualising the mental images of an afterlife or pre-incarnated life, or, as Shiga has written, the inverse state of not wanting the fear of normality to fade after having experienced trauma. The very real situation from which these playful scenes explode with colour—light phosphorescence, pre-destined patina—sits close in the book. Just when you feel enwrapped by their surreal quality another image appears more referential, pulling you back to the recent state of affairs: the sand swamped image interior of a car; the tarpaulin blue lit room of the community centre in which tables upon tables hold the gathering of washed up photographs, salvaged after the tsunami. Subsequently, the images of holes in the sand are given another charge.

---

**Laura Preston's** writing practice relates to her role as an art critic and curator. She has contributed to *Artforum* and *May* contemporary art journal, Paris; and the programmes at Portikus, Frankfurt am Main; Adam Art Gallery, Victoria University of Wellington; Witte de With, Rotterdam; and Artspace, Auckland.