

## **Looking & Finding**

Exactly what it was I was looking for is difficult to say. What I found is somewhere in these photographs.

Earlier this year a friend, whose taste I implicitly trust, passed on a short novel by Tomoka Shibasaki called *Spring Garden*. The friend told me that I would find it useful, she was right; it came to be a guiding light of sorts for this project. Set in a slated-for-redevelopment Tokyo apartment block, *Spring Garden* explores architectural obsession through the weave of memory and its relation to a collection of photographs. It does this with a barely submerged sense of melancholy, conjuring an ‘inbetweenness’ of space and time as each slips from its characters’ grasp:

“He even felt a bit sorry for the building, being knocked down like that, when it was younger than he himself was.”

The photographs that make up this exhibition were taken during two trips to Japan that I made in January and May of this year. Since jacking in my long-time job as a lecturer at a university art school a couple years back I have been, for various reasons, drawn to Japan and its unique environments. For me the country, and Tokyo in particular, seemed a natural fit to the sense of reinvention and questioning that accompanied such an existential shift. In short, it is the perfect place to get lost in.

I am acutely aware that this is a well-worn path. For the best part of two centuries Japan has existed as a site of intense fascination for Western artistic and philosophical enquiry. A fascination that following World War II took shape in the prevailing idea of Japan as a place of seemingly contradictory extremes. A place where the guiding principles of Zen informed minimalism co-exist with a finely tuned consumerist society defined by technological advancement and an overwhelming sense of material abundance. However, it is the space between these two extremes that is of interest here. Alongside the impossibly dense and often indecipherable visual ecology of the Japanese metropolis exists another, no less easy to define, sense of space.

It was this sense of a ‘space between’ that was on my mind when I set out to make this body of photographs. I was interested in recording sites that in some way resonated beyond themselves, that pointed towards what philosopher Roland Barthes saw in Japan as a “special organization of space”. For the most part the sites I have chosen to photograph are possessed by a peculiarly modern visual sensibility, an aesthetic borne as much of happenstance as of design. These are spaces that clicked for me and that spoke to each other. They are spaces that are on the edge of the scene, of time and of usefulness. In a very real sense photography became a way of mapping this terrain and of locating myself within it. Central to this process was the use of a small, single lensed film-based camera. By employing such a reductive and singular model of photographic production, I forced on myself a way of looking that was at once more invested in time and, dare I say, more meditative. Rarely did I take a second image.

**Ryszard Dabek, October 2019.**

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Tomoka Shibasaki, *Spring Garden*, (translated by Polly Barton), Pushkin Press, London, 2014.

Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, (translated by Richard Howard), Hill and Wang, New York, 1983.