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Foreign Affairs: Dealing with a Lack of Permanence

Stepping into the Hampden Gallery, a viewer is presented with an array of mediums and themes are initially presented. In some corners, television screens present video installations on a loop. In other areas, more basic black and white photographs are hung neatly on the wall. Despite the seemingly unrelated subject matter and use of mediums, the artists are all able to deal with the idea that nothing is permanent: collapsed buildings can be rebuilt; death somewhere brings life somewhere else; and the water levels will go back down after a tsunami. In the show *Foreign Affairs* featuring Izuru Mizutani, Masahiro Amano, Yoshiaki Kita and TANJC, these artists establish, through the use of different subjects and mediums, a universal theme about a lack of permanence. However, they are able to create this idea with a grain of optimism, hinting at a yin and a yang, that with the arrival of new bad things comes the arrival of good as well.

In *Collapse*, Izuru Mizutani takes a national crisis and embodies the essence of it in the depiction of glass breaking in a video. The video plays on a loop: first a glass set to a stark black background crashes to the ground. Then, once it has completely shattered, the tape plays in reverse, showing the shards recollect, just to shatter once again. The glass breaking is representative of the recent earthquake and tsunami that occurred in Japan in 2011, which resulted in a major nuclear crisis. However, it can really be expanded to relate to the downfall of anything, "like the mind of a human being, family relationships, the economy, and social issues" as

Mizutani writes in his Artist Statement. However, the most important aspect of the work is when the glass comes back together again. This really ties to the theme of the show as a whole. It shows that even after a major collapse-- regardless of what type- things are still able to come back together again. This piece embodies the idea that nothing is permanent, even bad things, or, in the words of Mizutani, "everything has ambivalence. And everything is changing."

Although exploring the concept in a different way, Masahiro Amano's photography series *87th and Lexington, Snow* also exemplifies ideas of transience and impermanence. Where most of the other artists' work deals with life coming back together after major tragedy, Amano takes a more poignant, subtle approach. In his series of fifteen photographs, Amano depicts the same New York City street corner in the middle of winter at different points in a day. In every photograph, different people appear: no one really aware of the camera and instead everyone is just going about their day. In some photographs, the people even appear translucent, with the buildings behind them showing through their flesh as if they were ghosts. This idea of a constant movement communicates the lack of permanence that the show embodies. The fact that many of the people depicted appear as if they are not even there really makes that idea more prominent.

Initially, Yoshiaki Kita's photographs *Primal Memento Series* seem like sets of unrelated images. The first set, entitled *Eyes* is six images of young children. The photographs are almost entirely black, with just a few highlights to make out a face, and crisp, glowing white of the children's' eyes. The next four, *Tsunami*, are also dimly lit but depict damage done to cars, homes and railways by a recent tsunami in

Japan. Despite the fact that they seem carelessly strewn together at first glance, in reality they are carefully chosen and arranged. Young children are generally thought of as representative of the future, and in this case that is especially true because of their glowing white eyes, lacking impurities but full of hope. At the same time, the images of the tsunami aftermath are the opposite-- they are depressing and feel hopeless. However, by placing them alongside each other, Kita is able to come back to this idea of the future and that the damage done by the tsunami will not last forever. This is true not only because there is always a new generation moving forward, but because the world is always moving forward and progressing.

In a similar way to Kita's work, on the surface TANJC's video *Kegare* appears as a continuous loop of unrelated scenes. However, once it is explored further, the relationship between the funeral scenes, cremations, and documentation of a woman during pregnancy becomes clear. Like of Mizutani, TANJC begins his video with a tragedy, in this case, a funeral. Then, as the video continues, the ritualistic catharsis of a cremation is shown-- followed by a woman discovering she is pregnant. Very much the same way that Mizutani displays this healing, TANJC shows death as more than just a negative experience. Instead, the juxtaposition of the death as compared to the pregnancy conjures ideas of a give and take. Instead of death being a total loss, something is lost but something is also gained. Additionally, due to the cremation scenes, the idea of the impermanence of death is established as well. Whereas the video could have ended with the funeral scene, it instead went ahead to deal with the cremation and all the different ways the body changes after death. Parts of it become ashes, and the rest are just bones being sorted on a table.

Also shown in this exhibition was another piece by Izuru Mizutani titled *Tears of the Sky*. Additionally, Yoshiaki Kita displayed a third set of photographs in his series entitled *Animals*, and artist Yuriko Yamamoto presented a two-part, interactive, maze-like piece entitled *I Dropped Something*, one part taking place directly in the gallery and the other section isolated directly outside the studio in Hampden's incubator space.

Whether the artists are using photography or video to emphasize their point, Mizutani, Amano, Kita and TANJC all establish clear themes of transience and harmony in their work. Although seemingly united by a superficial regional closeness, all of the artists showing work in *Foreign Affairs* truly do share a universal belief system in the purpose of tragedy, crisis and death as a part of existence. It is not viewed as a negative so much as a necessity of life; it brings change and hope for the future.

Foreign Affairs: Five Artists From Japan
September 8th- October 7th
Hampden Gallery
University of Massachusetts Amherst