

Hitoshi Fugo: Watchers @Miyako Yoshinaga

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When we think critically about formal photographic portraiture, we almost always start by trying to understand the central relationship between the photographer and the sitter. The nature of the exchange that is taking place can tell us plenty about both sides of the visual transaction, and the relative level of trust and intimacy that forms can often define just how open (or guarded) a subject might end up being. When the sitter faces the camera, she generally knows she is being photographed, and consents (at least at some level) to that activity, and the resulting picture is a reflection of what the photographer documented (and what the sitter revealed) at that particular moment. And when we as viewers later look at the resulting portrait, we essentially “stand” where the photographer (and the tripod/camera) stood, looking over his or her shoulder at the subject.

But something altogether different happens when the subject has his or her back turned to us – the usual parameters and emotional connections of the portraiture process are frustrated. Suddenly, we don’t have a face on which to center our attention – thereby potentially making the person anonymous – and so we therefore likely try to gather narrative clues from what we are provided in the picture. Perhaps the clothing, the hairstyle, or the way the person is standing can tell us something about who they are, but in a sense, such a picture is a rejection, a deliberate closing off of the communication and identity building we have come to expect from a portrait. More broadly, the agency of the interaction has been dramatically changed, and the sitter is far more in control. The turning away also renegotiates the layers of seeing and watching taking place, as now the sitter himself may be intently watching something unseen to us, which the photographer and then the viewer are then also indirectly watching in telescoping succession.

While photographic portraits made from behind aren’t new (Dorothea Lange and Robert Frank made superlative mid-century examples, and Malick Sidibé made a whole series of studio portraits of backs more recently), a handful of photographers have serendipitously located this from-the-back portraiture structure at various tourist sites around the globe, where visitors make their own snapshots of the grand vistas and famous scenes (or of their families posing in front of such landmarks and landscapes) while the photographers catch them in the act. Both Marcia Resnick (in the 1970s) and later Martin Parr discovered the eccentric visual humor in such situations, playing with the conceptual nesting of one camera/photographer documenting another, with the watching organized into three or even four layers (i.e. the viewer watching the photographer watching the visitor watching the landscape).

Hitoshi Fugo’s project “Watchers” continues this progression, aiming less for the inherent absurdity of the mannered watching situation than for its more introspective possibilities. In 1994, Fugo began making images of people watching waterfalls, in particular the Kegon Falls in Japan (which were named after a Buddhist sutra), his head and shoulders portraits from the back capturing both the visitor and the blurred falls in the background, and quietly exploring the elusive nature of the mystical or spiritual connection taking place. Soon afterward, he composed

similar images at Niagara Falls in the United States, widening the potential cultural context, and then he ultimately made pairings of his “Watchers”, each diptych consisting of one waterfall watcher in Japan and one in America.

Given how tightly cropped Fugo’s portraits are, his options for making his juxtapositions and pairings are somewhat limited, and as a result, many of his choices are decently literal: as seen here, both wearing red clothes, both with wavy grey hair, and both with closely cropped older man hair. Especially with the older visitors in both locations, the anonymous back views imply a lingering sense of watchful or knowing wistfulness when faced with the awe inspiring majesty of nature. Some of Fugo’s other pairings find additional veins of emotion and possibilities for inversion, from sensitive pairings of fathers with young children, to those of men in black hats and turbans, perhaps implying different versions of spiritual insight or reverence.

A little more than a decade later, and in the years after the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York, Fugo reprised his “Watcher” series, this time with views of cities, taken respectively in the Roppongi Hills in Tokyo and from the Empire State Building in New York. His closely framed aesthetic formula was essentially the same, with diptychs of paired watchers from both locations, the city views turned to blurred mist in the distance. And again, Fugo’s formal echoes often connect the pairings, like hair blowing in the wind (with similar black bag straps over the shoulder.) Other diptychs from the series offer more of a chance for intentional contrast, with men and women from American and Japan dressed noticeably differently (or with different levels of formality), and a few Muslim watchers (in a skullcap and a headscarf) alluding to the cultural tensions of that particular moment in history. But in the end, Fugo seems to reach for universality, his choices bringing us back to the shared experience of looking at the incomprehensible vastness of a major city and feeling the smallness of being a single individual, whomever you might be.

Had Fugo photographed his anonymous subjects set against a flat blank backdrop, we would have been forced into a detailed examination of the textures of hair, skin, and body, perhaps in search of overly-easy matching patterns. But instead, by offering us the sweep of a waterfall or a city as context, he has provided us with a more open-ended experience, where we are extrapolating hidden reactions and impressions from the available visual evidence. In this way, while his process is inherently reductive, he’s left us an opening, which gives the portraits some running room. Of course, they show us surfaces, but they also offer us an invitation to broader interpretation, and that “what if” quality gives the diptychs just enough nuanced richness to keep us wondering.