



Emi Anrakuji: ehagaki – picture postcard @Miyako Yoshinaga

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While not yet entirely obsolete as a form of communication, the picture postcard has certainly taken a beating in the electronic age. With any number of faster, more efficient, and less expensive options than sending a postcard now available, the once ubiquitous racks of postcards at every attraction, museum, and train station have become less present, the cards largely transformed into unmailed tourist keepsakes or nostalgic throwbacks.

But for artists in particular, picture postcards have long been a resonant source of inspiration, memory, and practical value. They have been consistently used and reinterpreted as raw material in collaged artworks, have been pasted on countless studio walls as triggers and idea generators, and have been collected in their own right as vernacular art. Many photographers have gone on to make their own versions of postcards, both to conceptually reinterpret the visual styles of the cards and to create low cost ways to share their work.

For the Japanese photographer Emi Anrakuji, the picture postcards (*ehagaki* in Japanese) collected by her grandfather at the turn of the last century have become something like family heirlooms. Her grandfather was a wine importer who traveled often to Europe, and his collection of cards somehow survived the fires in Tokyo during both the 1923 earthquake and the 1945 air raids, the magical box ultimately passing down to the artist herself. Her grandfather died long before she was born, but the cards have provided Anrakuji a strong physical and visual connection to the past, which she sensitively used as a starting point for her own artistic explorations back in the early 2000s.

Anrakuji is best known for her expressively atmospheric self-portraits. Working in both black-and white and in color, she has consistently tunneled inward, using her own body as a platform for sensual abstraction and intimate, perhaps even claustrophobic, risk taking. In many ways, photography has been a vehicle for unpacking her own psychological traumas, including a bout with cerebral cancer in the late 1980s that left her eyesight severely impaired.

All of the works on view in this show start with the vintage postcards collected by the artist's grandfather, which Anrakuji has then re-interpreted with her own self-portraits. Each card has been directly overprinted with an Anrakuji photograph (or grid of photographs in a few cases),

creating a doubled, overlaid effect that brings the two pictures (one old, one new; one public, one personal) into dialogue.

As we might have expected, many of the grandfather's cards capture standard views of European formal gardens, castles, monuments, churches, and other famous locations and buildings, providing a travelogue of places seen and visited. Anrakuji has paired these views with close-up, often difficult to recognize images of her own body, turning the layered interaction between the two images into something tactile and gestural. Hands and fingers reach down to grasp monuments or touch gardens, and other less obvious combinations of hands and arms alternately interrupt a Roman palazzo and a Parisian street scene of the Arc de Triomphe. This almost literal interaction gets more seductively sensual when Anrakuji matches fishnet stockings pulled over her hands with the gardens at Fontainebleau, the curves of her panties with the curves in a landscape, and an upside-down mirrored view of her nude body with the clumps of trees in another garden view. In each combination, we watch her try to connect the card's image with something of herself, as if to strengthen the invisible bonds that reach back through the generations and make the far away places her own. Even her toes get in on the action, with her painted toenails obscuring an image of a lighthouse, like a multi-headed monster rising out from the depths of the ocean.

Several other repeated motifs from Anrakuji's various self-portrait projects also make appearances in these postcard combinations. In a couple of works, Anrakuji captures herself holding a large white circle, which when juxtaposed with the card imagery underneath turns into a spotlight effect, like the bouncing white ball in a James Bond movie trailer; in one case, the circle focuses our attention on a tall church in a wide city vista, while in another, it draws our eyes to the windows of a building. Arrays of dark and light circles are another favorite pattern of Anrakuji's, and when used with the cards, they become the dominant design element, largely obscuring or at least veiling whatever is underneath. In still other works, simple cut paper dolls with daisy chained arms reappear, but when layered atop a dark view of Waterloo, it's hard not to see them as soldiers marching off to war (or death).

This war motif actually runs through a number of the grandfather's cards – perhaps he visited a number of World War I battlefields, or was simply interested in the trappings of ancient conflict. Anrakuji wrestles with how to engage with these scenes, often using formal echoes to make connections. She uses an array of lips and open mouths to mimic the cratered battlefield at Chemin des Dames, and adds lunch plates on a checkerboard tablecloth to a grim scene at Verdun. For more ancient fighting, she opts for formal echoes – between the rounded shapes of kernels of popcorn and an ancient Greek helmet, and between the tangled angles of her own arms and a busy painted battle scene.

Yet another group of cards features various images of gods, goddesses, and other drawn or etched deities, from Hindu, Buddhist, and other traditions. Anrakuji consistently pairs these pictures with images of mouths and teeth, some open, others blocked or interrupted (in one case by an enveloping piece of linen cloth). The message of the juxtaposition is less obvious, with spirituality seemingly being ingested or consumed, both willingly and unwillingly.

What Anrakuji is doing in these works feels altogether more personal than your typical image appropriation and recontextualization. She's wholly absorbing the postcard images and merging

them with images of herself, creating open-ended hybrids that function like puzzles to be solved. Some of the interactions are literal, others metaphorical, and a few of the combinations and interruptions feel so full that they descend into illegibility and obscurity, on the edge of chaos.

Anrakuji's efforts here to connect with the past aren't ever clever, or ironic, or flippant; instead, they have an intensity and interiority that feels very immediate, almost urgent in its need to suck meaning from the postcards. The seriousness of her engagement is obvious, and perhaps why Anrakuji was initially reluctant to show these pieces at all. They are clearly rooted in soil filled with emotions, even if the places and things the postcards depict are familiar or even anonymous. Finding a way to make these objects her own was clearly a layered journey, and her results provide a visual representation of that complexity.