Miho Sato

Initially trained as a graphic designer in Nagoya, Japan, Miho Sato has established herself in London as a painter. Along with other artists such as Jun Hasegawa, her work provides an insight into the curious crossover between Japanese and Weatern cutlures. The fact that she has trained and lived in London for some time has brought a wide range of influences to bear upon her work. It has taken a noticeably different direction from the work of some of her Japanese popular culture. London has brought a high degree of cosmopolitanism to her work and has strongly influenced her choice of imagery.

Sato maintains an ongoing collection of images that are originally sourced from magazines, postcards, or reproductions of other artworks. This apparent hoarding provides a constant reservoir of source material that can be drawn upon at a later date. Probably at a point when something within a given image will perhaps relate back to the recolection of a childhood memory, or will provide the basis upon which she can create a new image that will then go on to exist in its own right. In a quite dense and getural manner, the selected image is then re-worked quickly in acrylic. Emphasis is placed upon a specific element, with the background detail being more or less removed, or at least strongly marginalised, giving the sense of an isolated and at times free-floating entity. The works concentrate primarily on representations of people, such as Justin Timberlake or David Bowie, or sometimes fictional charcters such as Moomins, or The Lone Ranger (only occasionally veering from this in the form of animals or flowers). Alongside such figures of popular contemporary culture, she also establishes relationships with the history of Weatern Painting by referncing historical portraiture. In fact, Miho Sato has said that during her time at the Royal Academy she would often look at 19th century English painting such as Gainsborough. This is something that she shares with some other contemporary artists from Japan - Miran Fukada, for example who quotes and represents art historical works in her paintings. The fact that Sato makes no deliberate differentiation between refe-rencing images from both high and low culture makes her choices all the more curious. It directs the work away from making any overtly political statement about the condition of culture, but instead establishes it as more of a personal and emotional response to imagery and image-making.

There is clarity of image and simplicity of form in the paintings, which give them a quiet stillness and haunting resonance. The subdued palette is reminiscent of other European painters such as Luc Tuymans and Michael Raedecker, however there are still strong suggestions of Japanese culture (specifically interiors and early watercolours from the 18th and 19th century). Sato concentrates on a central singular firgure or pairs of figures that inhabit an undefined space. These figures do not seem to belong within a particular context, but to exist as isolated beings within their own individual reality. The story of their existence and meaning becomes concentrated into one single captured moment. Some characters are caught mid-movement, appearing frozen, held by unseen confines within their own nether world. What makes these images and characters so interesting is the place they occupy. Far removed from their source, they inhabit somewhere that exists neither within reality nor fantasy - they occupy a parallel world of memory and distant recollections, recounting dreamlike visions where identity is unclear. They are ghostly imprints of a retrieved image, a kind of haunting perceptual afterimage. They mimic the mind’s own hazy and incomplete method of recalling an image, by condensing it to its core elements of form, and by omitting the one element that gives it the reassurance of recognition - the face.

The omission of the face has a powerful effect on the viewer, who is denied the usual initial point of contact when looking at representations of a figure. A

sense of unease and discomfort may arise as the viewer is left with the task of relying upon a past memory store of retained images to complete the likeness. The absence of a face is often seen as the stuff of nightmares,a denial of that which is deemed most human, it abates the ability to read another person, thereby hindering the establishment of some kinf of dialogue between the viewer and the viewed. The depiction of a figure without a face can be seen in some way as a denial of the ‘soul’, a stripping away of the very means by which a figure can declare it true nature and identity.

For these reasons, it is possible that Miho Sato’s depictions and reworkings of these photographs and paintings could be seen as cold and disconnected. However, this is not the case. The images are often reassuringly familiar and endearing, with the ability to tap into much shared memory. Apparently simplistic rendering provides a basic and immediate reference point, by which the viewer can gain access and consider the position and function of these images within cultural histories. An interesting and curious contradiction is brought about, between the sometimes light-hearted and fleeting nature of the source-image from which the painting originates, and the dark and brooding presence it has become. There is much smile-inducing humour inherent within these incongruous associations between the source material and the final realisation of the works, through which they harness and capture considerable soul and humanity.

Ros Carter

New British Painting, John Hansard Gallery, Southampton, January 2003