

SinArts

space for

Naoki Fuku

Je Suis La Pipe

03.02.-10.03.2018

Korte Vijverberg 2, 2513AB, Den Haag
thu-sat, 13:00-19:00
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NAOKI FUKU -When politics become personal and the personal becomes political

-Mette Samkalden

I first came across the works of Naoki Fuku in Basel. It was a warm and sunny afternoon in June 2012. While Art Basel was taking place and thousands of people straddled over Messeplatz, Fuku brought me to a quiet but stylish café opposite the Messe. He passionately directed my gaze to a series of paintings. The works were bold and colorful, an almost rhythmic collage of different painting techniques. Amongst them was a simplified image of a pharmacy featuring a man in pain. A pastel yellow canvas with cranes lifting a pop-art banana and Ronald Macdonald as well as a hanging corpse.

In these works, Fuku combined an abstract almost impressionist painting style with detailed elements and Japanese scribbles. The paintings were vibrant, popped of the wall. Still, they felt out of place in their surroundings; the works deserved space to breathe, room for contemplation because there was much more to them than a well-chosen color palette or a fine mix of techniques.

The paintings *-Darling, what shall we eat tonight?* amongst them – carried meaning that stretched far beyond a pretty picture. In a manner that is still very typical for the artist, Fuku combined a certain lightness and humor with a strong political message. *Darling, what shall we eat tonight?* reminded me of the historic moment in which Saddam Hussein's statue was moved of its base and the images of public hangings in Irak. Fuku, who I later found out never attended art school but studied traditional painting techniques as a child and later on with the contemporary artist Naoko Yanase, refers to contemporary masters such as Warhol and Duchamp. The iconic political images form a stark contrast with the bright symbols of western culture and affluence.

My first introduction to Naoki Fuku's work was one that formed the basis for both a friendship and professional relationship. I witnessed how Fuku's career developed – his works moved from informal exhibition venues to biennales, art galleries and established art fairs – and how his work progressed as well. Over time Fuku has developed a body of work that combines the personal and political, the emotional and the social. Whereas his earlier works predominantly were critiques on global politics or manifestations of the discrepancy between the West and the rest of the world, his more recent pieces are thematically more diverse and have the capacity to make the personal political and the political personal.

Among his newer works are the potentially autobiographical portraits he creates using ink and a bamboo stick. His *Studies of the Human Mind* are expressive and personal works. These black and white pieces, equally contemporary and classical, are attractive works. At the same time they are painful to look at. Different from his paintings on canvas the bamboo stick leaves no room for correction. These works echo his state of mind at the moment of creation and are a deep reflection of the artist's character. Through these pieces he allows the audience insight in his emotions; his love, his envy, his regrets, his hate and his fears. In doing so his personal life, for a long time dominated by depression and anxiety, suddenly enters the public domain.

The work *Portrait (Me & Francis Bacon)* and the more recent self-portraits on canvas included in the exhibition are a continuation of this series. The viewer is left wondering if he is staring at the artist's self-portraits or at a reflection of universal emotions.

Much like the *Studies of the Human Mind*, Fuku hints at his emotional well-being in the series *Hope is Always a Good Thing*. The latter are works in which Fuku uses his rather dark sense of humor to create a

series of conceptual works around the title phrase often used in situations that are clearly hopeless, shifts back and forth between his personal life and the political. On white panels reading the phrase the artist has created hopeless scenes: a tap that will never run, a light that will never switch on.

The works *Do Not Kill* and *Je Suis la Pipe*, both included in this exhibition, seem a continuation of these series. The paintings not only have a similar esthetic to the panels, but also share the irony of the *Hope is Always a Good Thing* series. The works, paintings of white butterflies on a grey background, read phrases in a bold font that are metaphorical for Fuku's aversion to western culture. Both also refer directly to contemporary masterpieces. *Do Not Kill* looks at an expression that is simple and obvious but seems to have lost much of its meaning over time. Exemplary for this observation Fuku refers to the 9000 butterflies that died during the 23-week long retrospective of Damien Hirst at the Tate Modern in 2012. The butterflies are also part of the work *Je Suis La Pipe*, which gives this exhibition its title. The work also refers to Magritte's iconic *Ceci n'est pas une Pipe* and merges Fuku's humor and social commentary in one.

For his first solo show in the Netherlands, SinArts Gallery brings together Naoki Fuku's most recent works with some of the key pieces the artist made over the past five years. The result is an exhibition that shows the diversity and the cohesion of Fuku's oeuvre to date. And that shows Fuku's remarkable capacity to make politics personal and the personal political.

Amsterdam, January 2018