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Mayumi Lake — Aether

Last Thursday, I saw a spectacular show of photographs by Mayumi Lake and had an opportunity to speak to the artist.

The photographs depict phobias, myths and stereotypes of Asian women — from the schoolgirl fantasy to the “Dragon Lady” to the submissive wife, mother and victim of war. There is a diptych based on Countess Mitsuko Coudenhove-Kalergi (nee Aoyama, 1874-1941), a Japanese woman born to wealth who married a count from a European family. Before they fell in love, her father granted the count’s request for Mitsuko to be a parlor maid; he later refused the count’s request to marry Mitsuko. They eventually married and had seven children. Mitsuko went on to manage her husband’s estates. She countered the hostility from her husband’s family by learning several languages while studying law and economics.

Ms. Lake shows this transformation beautifully. In the first photo, you see a beautiful young woman, demure with her head bowed in a gorgeous silk dress. The second photo depicts when she becomes “the Dragon Lady,” self-assured and matronly in a Victorian dress. When I saw this, I immediately thought of an Edith Wharton archetype.

We all remember the moving photograph of the young girl running from a Napalm attack or have seen images of the scarred backs of women from the wreckage of the Atomic bomb. The artist said that these images are shown repeatedly, so much so that “victim” became another stereotype. Ms. Lake re-created those images — and they are as sad as the real ones were. These are sad too but beautiful. There is a photograph of a young girl, her watery eyes wide open. One of Ms. Lake’s phobias are the big wide eyes featured on celluloid toy figures that Japan exported in the 1920s and 1930s; the artist said those images still terrify her. In addition, there is a colorful photograph of a used Pinata, some sort of figure again, featuring those wide scary eyes. My favorite image in the show is the photo of a mother and child, both very young females, resplendent in traditional kimonos.

The photographs are beautifully lighted; the background is a stark black. Most of the faces of the young girls are darkened and they are all beautifully costumed.

The show is both haunting and historical. If you wish to see it, details are below:

Miyako Yoshinaga Art Prospects
547 West 27th Street, 2nd Floor, New York, NY — 212 268 7132
Showing from October 14 to November 13

– Yvette Durant