

Yoshiko Shimada, workshop on “Bones in Tansu - family secrets”

Thursday, August 21, 13:00-15:00 or longer. Room 27.0.60

Reading

Yoshiko Shimada will bring samples from over 2.000 secrets she gathered in Asia in connection to her “Bones in Tansu – family secrets” project (see description below). Participants can read through this pile and choose one which interests them the most.

Reciting

Participants recite the secrets they have chosen in anyway they want to.

Discussion

Participants discuss why those particular secrets interest them the most, and discuss the social/cultural background of the secrets etc.

Making the secrets into public property

Participants use means they choose (art, writing, public performance) to make the secrets they chose public. They will be asked not to use cyber-based methods to publicize the secrets. The interaction between the personal and the public using these secrets must be physical. For example, it can be knotted letters in the tree, flag, t-shirt, whispering into strangers’ ears, shouting, painting on the wall, body performance, etc. but not posting it on an internet site.

This workshop aims to make the participants feel the pain of others transcending national, cultural and geographical borderlines, and then tries to make the personal pain into public pain through art and other means.

“Bones in Tansu: Family Secrets”

Every family conceals at least one or two “secrets” from the world; and although secrets can be exhilarating, they can also, when held too tightly, be very destructive. Yoshiko Shimada’s “Bones in Tansu: Family Secrets” (2004) is an exhibition – in fact, an ongoing project – that probes the most personal, the most “secret” aspects of our lives. It examines those facets of our existence that we keep hidden from society.

It has been suggested that few Japanese look critically at their historical roots. It is in this climate that Shimada finds herself, working among a handful of other Japanese artists, actively challenging national myths and symbols, and mounting a dynamic historical and political critique in the process. Shimada’s work in particular represents a bold and fearless deconstruction of Japanese identity. Her current exhibit, “Bones in Tansu,” has a certain affinity with Shimada’s earlier video and photo-based works, in which she addressed women’s issues, violence, nationalism, and the repression of historical recollection, making a deliberate effort to awaken the audiences’ dormant memories.

The installation consists of an antique nine-drawer chest, called *tansu* in Japanese. As viewers open the drawers of the *tansu* one by one, they find photographs and prints, cast mostly in reddish and brownish hues, arranged in beautiful collages and accompanied by messages written in Japanese and English. One such drawer, for example, held prints on top of which were carefully placed seven small, round photo frames containing pictures of young couples, and fragments of written memories. On top of the prints and photographs lie translucent acetates on which the “secrets” are written. The “secrets” touch on issues such as bulimia, incest, homosexuality, and identity crises (both personal and historical). Some of the “secrets” are sad, some are shocking, and others are quite disturbing: “committed suicide;” “my aunt supported our family as a military prostitute after the war;” “my grandfather is said to have killed a lot of people;” and, “I’d like my husband to die.” The installation requires a certain complicity from the viewer, who must actively pull open the drawers of the *tansu* one by one in order to see the “secrets” hidden within.

After looking at these “secrets,” they may then enter a small enclosure in the corner of the room, concealed behind a curtain. Within is a desk at which they can write their own “secrets” on a piece of paper, and place that message in a locked box on the desk. Shimada collects these anonymous “secrets” and translates them into visual form, periodically replacing the contents of the drawers. She rewrites the “secrets” herself so that personal information, or derogatory remarks about any individual, is removed. No clue remains of the authors’ identities, not even their handwriting.

“Family Secrets: Bones in Tansu” is an intimate and compelling piece. It provokes conflicting feelings in viewers who will, on the one hand, feel the urge to open one more drawer, see one more “secret;” and on the other, to stop and walk away. Perhaps more importantly, with “Bones in Tansu” the viewer is not a passive spectator looking at a static piece of artwork, but an active participant in an evolving work. As such, the exhibit says as much about the audience as it does about those who have placed their “secrets” in the drawers.

“Bones in Tansu” will be exhibited in Copenhagen at **Gallery Christina Wilson**, Esplanaden 8B, from 6 September - 18 October 2008.