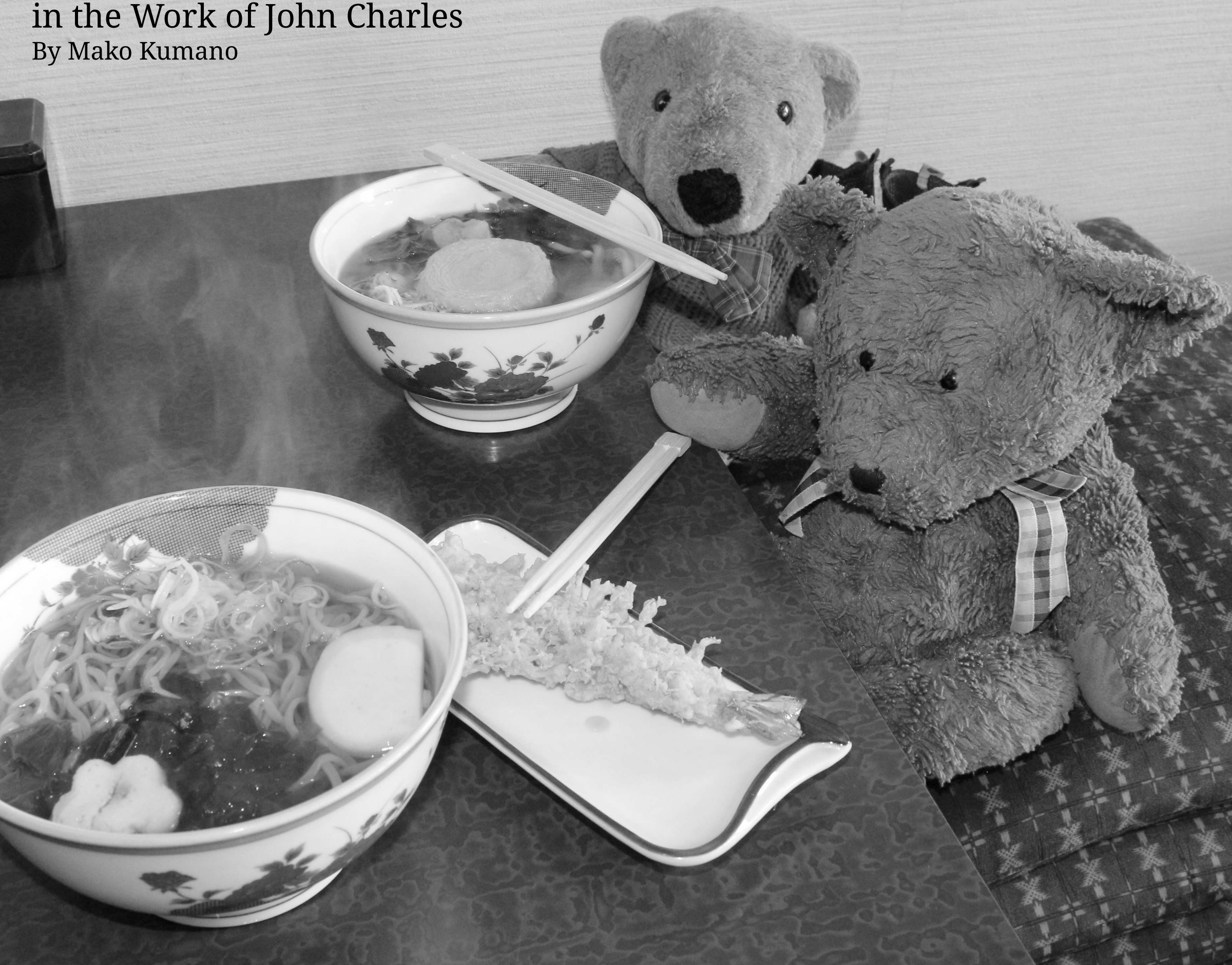


“Kuma-nication” as Artistic Intention
in the Work of John Charles
By Mako Kumano



As a Japanese gallerist familiar with the work of John Charles, I have coined the term “kuma-nication” to describe the intention implicit in his photographer-viewer relationship. “Kuma” is the Japanese word for “bear.” It combines with “communication” to create a unique hybrid word which describes how Charles uses the imagery of teddy bears to communicate with his viewers on a number of levels.

His surface level usually involves a normal-seeming, albeit sometimes ironic or humorous portrait of one or more teddy bears. They are photographed in a variety of settings, both man-made and natural. As individual photographs, they stand on their own in terms of formal composition, emotional resonance, and other attributes we seek in fine-art photography. In this sense, we are reminded of Wegman’s Weimaraners.

For most of his collecting audience, this is sufficient to justify their purchase of his limited edition prints. They are appreciative to own photography which is both fine art and enjoyable to have on display. These buyers consider Charles’ images “safe” to exhibit in a home or business. I believe this is because teddy bear images are easily “understood” by casual observers who may be unfamiliar with, and possibly hostile towards, different expressions of more conceptualized photographic art objectives.

As the publisher and art critic John O’Donnell notes elsewhere in this volume, the surface level is only the initial step in a more complete appreciation of Charles’ imagery. ¹

Graham Clarke has written,

“Whenever we look at a photographic image we engage in a series of complex readings which relate as much to the

expectations and assumptions that we bring to the image as to the photographic subject itself.”²

The issue of “expectations and assumptions that we bring to the image” is especially important in Charles’ work, inasmuch as his art consists of a duality unrecognizable to the casual viewer not already familiar with the extent of Charles’ work in his multiple media presentations.

The “teddy bear” imagery is what initially attracts attention when his large-scale prints are exhibited in a gallery. The gallery environment, however, fails (and this is deliberate on Charles’ part) to fully contextualize the individual prints. When seen in the greater aggregate of both print and electronic formats, we begin to comprehend Charles’ larger, more encompassing world view. This world view is simultaneously optimistic (the redemptive expression) and dystopian (Charles’ radical political expression). As an Asian brought up in a Buddhist and Shinto religious setting, I can empathize with this “yin-yang” duality quite easily, although for many Westerners, it may not be as clearly recognizable.³

So, what are the “expectations and assumptions” which are most often brought to bear on Charles’ art?⁴ For those new to his oeuvre, there are very few. They see the image, they usually smile or make a joke, and then they ask “who is this photographer?” After I explain Charles’ three decade career as a “world renowned teddy bear photographer,” his rather reclusive and non-publicized lifestyle, and the extremely limited availability of his prints (only one to five prints are ever made for a particular image), they usually become intrigued, ask more about his work, and most often end up a Charles fan.

Those who wish to learn more about his work leave with the

knowledge that each image, simple enough in its own right, is part of a larger portfolio representing a compelling economic, political and artistic philosophy developed by Charles and presented through his teddy bear imagery. Only those who are willing to ask or to take the time to discern these interpretations on their own, which are clearly lying underneath the surface level image, begin to grasp the complexity of Charles' work. As the artist, Charles is satisfied whether they just leave with a smile on their face from the surface image, or whether they join that small coterie of cognoscenti which has developed over the years, who truly grasp his intended purpose.⁵

For those of us more familiar with Charles' approach, we await each newest portfolio with interest, to see if we can discern how the disparate motifs of his world view become apparent via the totality of imagery in each of his series, and how this totality sheds light on the individual images themselves, as stand-alone statements of intent. It becomes an intellectual game, as we vie among ourselves to recognize recurring themes, identify new insinuations and piece together additional data points to see what he is trying to "kuma-nicate" to us this time.

In this photobook, Charles has restricted himself to images of two of his most well exposed bears, TA and Wally.^{6,7} To newcomers, only the surface image will be accessible, while the rest of us know to look for deeper meanings.

As an example, consider the photograph entitled, "*Wally wonders if he should have ordered tempura soba instead of yuba udon,*" from Charles' TA and Wally in Japan portfolio.

I laughed when I first saw this, because it so perfectly expresses the individual personalities of the two bears, TA and Wally. I am well aware that any person encountering these bears for the first time will have no way of knowing



Wally wonders if he should have ordered tempura soba instead of yuba udon

why I laughed, although they themselves may well smile at the generically humorous scene of Wally (in the rear) looking somewhat enviously at TA as he is about to dig into his meal.

I don't need to detail here the intricate underlying backstories of each bear, nor their previous and subsequent adventures in Japan, to make the point that what a newcomer sees in this image, and what the experienced Charles aficionado can appreciate, exist on separate and well-coordinated substrata of meaning. I return again to the word, "kuma-nication" to express this coordinated duality of meaning in Charles' work: as he speaks to us on the surface level, he also informs this level with subsurface information requiring the "mining" of image data to achieve complete understanding of his message. To the extent one wishes to

mine the image for increased richness, one is additionally rewarded, but one does not suffer for lack of making the effort, because the immediate impression is also so clearly rewarding.

With this artist photobook, I am happy to know that others will be able to meet TA and Wally as signifiers within the Charles gestalt. We hope this allows Charles to "kumunicate" with a much wider audience, as his imagery and artistic vision so justifiably deserve.

1 - O'Donnell, John, "A Photographic Vision of 'Deep Superficiality'," TA and Wally Wander About, Atelier VGI, 2016

2 - Clark, Graham, The Photograph, Oxford University Press, 1997.

3 - (other than Libras, of course)

4 - (Sorry, but I had to include at least one bad pun)

5 - Including some of Japan's most senior industrialists and international architects, who own works by Charles in their private collections.

6 - TA is pronounced "Tea-A," and rhymes with the Canadian phrase, "Bee, eh?" His full name is "TA from PA," because his home town is Barkeyville, PA (exit 29 on I-80), according to the historiography of the Charles canon, which notes that Barkeyville is a borough in Venango County, PA with a population of 237 as of the 2000 census, one reason why TA approaches the world with such a friendly, unsophisticated and trusting demeanor.

7 - For examples of other Charles bear images, n.b. the O'Donnell article cited above.

Mako Kumano was born in Niigata Prefecture, Japan, and has spent her professional career in Tokyo and New York. Ms. Kumano has collaborated with John Charles in the exhibition of his work in locations in Tokyo, Komatsu and Utsunomiya, Japan, as well as Jiangxi, China; Azoguez, Ecuador; and institutions in New York, Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit and Santa Barbara. She also assists Mr. Charles in his philanthropic activities, which have supported children's health issues, women's rights and endangered animal species. In August, 2015, Ms. Kumano produced a performance of Yoko Ono's "Bag Piece" with two of Mr. Charles' teddy bears at New York's Museum of Modern Art.