

“Shadow Play: Self-Portraiture in Kioto Aoki’s *Studio Sunrise*”

by George Crosthwait

The Tate Modern’s 2018 abstract photography exhibition, “The Shape of Light”, shows how photographers ranging from Paul Strand and Alfred Stieglitz to Maya Rochat and Daisuke Yokoda find expressive potential in buildings, the human body, by distorting photographic paper, and in the very light used to capture these images. This focus on the raw materials and tools of photography resonates with Kioto Aoki’s evaluation of her own practice. She describes her filmmaking and photography as “a return to fundamentals” which “acknowledges and accentuates the fundamental elements of time, space, form, light and movement within the mundane”.

So it proves to be in *Studio Sunrise*. Aoki films her feet, walking. Intermittently, the camera pans up to look directly into the blazing sun. The low-gauge camera struggles to capture the light, either that burning directly down, or the blinding reflection from the concrete path. Cast into a visual white-out, the viewer can only orientate themselves by the presence of shoes or sun. The disorientating pans which whirl up and down further disengage our sense of verticality. The sun’s halo (caused by lens flare) criss-crosses what appear to be power lines. Now Aoki’s body casts a shadow in front of her shoes. A mirror glides into frame, repeatedly catching the sun’s glint and vanishing. Finally, the mirror shows Aoki in its reflection—her face obscured by her camera. She reaches forward and removes the mirror, ending the film at this point.

Whilst this sunny stroll and glance at a mirror is certainly an adventure in Aoki’s “mundane”, the reflective space she creates is anything but. The experience of watching *Studio Sunrise* is meditative yet disorientating, pictorial yet blinding, and reveals whilst frustrating. Aoki challenges us to let go of simple definitions: up and down, sky and ground, self and reflection, and space and outline. If we are willing to relax our desire to make sense of the image, then we might find something else on this short walk. In the true spirit of abstract art, we might attempt to decipher new images and patterns in the manner of a Rorschach test. Even better, perhaps, would be to simply experience *Studio Sunrise* as showing the “fundamental” building blocks of film: light, space, and shadow. Do not worry about making sense or form of these; just let them be as individual elements.