Takashi Arai, ‘Here and There’: too far, too close to Fukushima

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Produced in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami that hit Japan on the 11th of March 2011, Takashi Arai’s photographic series ‘Here and There’ focuses on communities that are struggling to cope with the fallout of the nuclear disaster in Fukushima. By using a plate camera and developing the images with the daguerreotype process, at first sight the photographs appear to represent scenes from a bygone era – perhaps to a time when Japan began to open its closed borders to the West in the mid-19th century. Yet the beauty and nostalgia evoked by the daguerreotypes is quickly overshadowed by the realization that Arai’s work also alludes to an uncertain and perhaps even hostile future as the land he photographed is poisoned for many more decades to come.

Arai belongs to a growing number of Japanese artists whose work represents the social, emotional and psychological effects of the triple disaster commonly referred to in Japan as 3.11. Photographers in particular tend to focus on the large-scale destruction that was caused by the tsunami on the Pacific coast of Tōhoku. Arai’s work stands out for a number of reasons. By using the comparatively slow daguerreotype process Arai’s work creates a complete contrast to photojournalistic impressions of post-tsunami landscapes. More specifically, Arai’s work focuses less on the visible signifiers of destruction, but rather, it attempts to represent something altogether more invisible – nuclear radiation.

In his work Arai appears to focus on subjects that are directly affected by radiation: persimmon trees whose fruits have now become highly toxic or local residents going through the painstaking process of removing soil that has become nuclear waste. The image of a bunch of sunflowers creates a dichotomy that is replicated in the series as a whole: an object once tactile and beautiful has now, quite literally, become untouchable. In the context of 3.11, Arai’s image of a cherry blossom tree – a bitter-sweet symbol for the fragility of life in Japanese visual culture – now alludes to the destructiveness of the disaster.

One of the characteristics of the daguerreotype is that it requires mercury vapors to process the image. It is a highly toxic process that has cost the lives of a number of photographers in the early history of photography. Arai thus depicts the dangers of nuclear radiation with the very method of representation chosen for this project. In this context, the daguerreotypes emphasize the term ‘exposure’ as a double entendre: photographic exposure as well as a state of having no protection from something harmful.

The chemical imperfections in Arai’s daguerreotypes visually support the narrative of nuclear contamination. Like the landscape that is forever scarred and affected by the fallout from the nuclear disaster, Arai’s images are full with imperfections, scratches and dust specks. Marks appearing on the surface of the daguerreotypes are akin to dark cancerous growths on an x-ray image. In this work it quickly becomes clear that Arai is not just dealing with a destroyed landscape, but he is representing deep anxieties embodied by those he photographed.

Arai’s photographs feed into a larger discourse of nuclear anxieties that dates back to the atomic bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The 1954 film Godzilla for instance
alludes to the fears of another nuclear fallout through the metaphor of a monster that has gone out of control. In spite of strong concerns for health and safety amongst the wider population, Japan’s political elite embraced nuclear technology culminating in the first plant being commissioned in 1966. The subsequent rise in nuclear technology as a cheap source of energy for Japan’s booming economy was underpinned by a media campaign that sought to boost public confidence in the technology.

The historical experience of the atomic bomb on one hand, and media propaganda on the other hand created a deeply ambiguous attitude towards nuclear technology in Japan. While politicians and corporations seek to promote nuclear energy, a growing minority has become increasingly skeptical about the true safety record of Japan’s 54 nuclear power plants. A series of scandals, nearly catastrophic accidents as well as cover-ups in the 1990s compounded concerns about the true state of the nuclear industry. The ongoing disaster at Fukushima has now turned those concerns that existed ever since the introduction of nuclear technology into a nightmarish reality.

Takashi Arai’s photographs from Fukushima allude to the notion that ever-increasing economic expansion comes at a cost. In the most abstract terms, in our late capitalist system this cost usually comes with an increased exposure to risk. In the case of Fukushima, the risk of building a nuclear plant in one of the most active earthquake areas in the world was outweighed by the pursuit of cheap energy. As long as neoliberal ideology promotes economic growth at all cost, such risks will continue to be taken. Perhaps Arai’s daguerreotypes allude to the desire to return to a more simple past, yet untainted by a disaster created by man. Or perhaps they function as a warning for the future, that risk is not just an abstract concept, but that it can turn into a reality affecting our globe.

Marco Bohr