

Back to the Garden
Shigeru Takato
Ramp Gallery, Hamilton
15 April – 2 May 2003

EVER SINCE RADIO WAS INVENTED, we have been emitting a variety of electromagnetic waves as a means of communication. These waves travel through space and will continue travelling forever at the speed of light. So some of the early waves have travelled about one hundred light years.

Astronomers have been looking at electromagnetic waves received from space to study other stars and possible signs of extraterrestrial activity. There might be someone out there studying our activities through our electromagnetic waves.

Nightscares of cities are small-scale analogues of what we see in the sky at night. Energy-concentrated sports stadiums or street lights parallel clusters and constellations of stars. Constantly moving car headlights are like shooting stars. Yet there seems to be enormous distance between us and space because no one replies.

Broadcasting studios are also energy-concentrated spaces (especially those which are focused on 'discussion'). Our human energy is transmitted by electromagnetic waves, which are broadcast to other parts of the world as well as to space. The studio sets resemble science fiction spacecraft control rooms, as they emit electromagnetic waves into space, trying to reach a larger audience.

The fact that the Earth abounds in elements heavier than hydrogen and helium suggests that our solar system has condensed out of interstellar material that contained the remnants of such explosions (supernovas). Thus all the elements around us – including those in our bodies – were manufactured in the interior of stars that no longer exist. As one scientist put it: "In truth, we are the children of the Universe."

(D Halliday, R Rensnick, J Walker "Fourth edition Fundamentals of Physics")

Shigeru Takato, 2003

About the work

Shigeru Takato's exhibition *Back to the Garden* at Ramp Gallery is so empty it's almost not there. Four modest lightboxes adorn the gallery walls. One of the lightboxes is a nightscape, the other three empty television news-desks. Like the popular media that most of these images represent, lightboxes are designed to seduce, to make us look. But look at *what* exactly? Our expectation is that we will see something, yet there's nothing 'happening' in the photographs.



All of Takato's work has this kind of air-sucking emptiness, like it's been produced in a vacuum. By stripping them of their functionality, he removes the 'use value' of familiar spaces we depend on for information and as a result, we're exposed to their objective ridiculousness. Stripped of journalistic banter and debate, of well-dressed news anchors, the news-desks resemble, as Takato states, 'science-fiction spacecraft control rooms', their elaborate sets saturated with bright plastics and bad veneer.

Takato writes that he's interested in energy-concentration, produced by human interaction and the transmission of information. We get this sense from the concentrated light of the nightscape. But the news-desks encapsulate this idea of energy-concentration even more, as enclosed spaces from which important events and discussions are transmitted, a transition in scale that gives those small, contained spaces an epic heroism, as electromagnetic waves head out of them and bounce from transmitter to countless receivers. So Takato's exploration of the news-desks in these terms highlights that in effect, they are 'spacecraft control rooms', their mission to spread information as far as possible.

The interesting thing about the installation of the work in Ramp is that it mimics this energy-concentration, making the work a spatial as well as visual experience. This comes about first of all from the lightboxes themselves, which project out towards us. There is also the use of the gallery lights to enhance, rather than simply illuminate the works. It's really photography as installation, the architecture of the space permeating our experience of the images. Consequently, there's a dialogue between form and content, the two linked by the artist's exploration of 'light'. All of this suggests a fundamental concern with the nature of the photographic medium.

The precision in the photographs themselves reinforces Takato's concern with his medium. He uses a large format camera, which provides acute detail. Everything about the image is predetermined, from concept through to execution. In this regard, his work shows the weighty influence of contemporary German photography and in particular the work of the Bechers and their students. Bernd and Hilla Becher began documenting industrial architecture in the fifties with a rigorous, obsessive process, stripping sites of their inhabitants in an attempt to achieve total neutrality. The images in *Back to the Garden* act as a typological exploration of news-desks, their sameness emphasised not only by their close juxtaposition in the gallery space, but also by the sameness of their execution. As a result, they need to be seen as a series rather than as individual images.

So Shigeru Takato's *Back to the Garden* is an elegant, minimal installation that plays on the relationships between light, space and the medium of photography. He transforms our experience of spaces we depend on for information by stripping them of their use value and making us think about how information, whether art or energy, is transmitted and received. But ultimately, this focus on the content of the images detracts from a more complete view of Takato's practice. The typological nature of his work emphasises a need for us as viewers to acknowledge 'form', to look at the images themselves as much as what is in them, a sophisticated and challenging position to force us into, given our more common exposure to content-driven contemporary photography.

Anthony Byrt, April 2003.

Installation, *Back to the Garden*, Ramp Gallery, 2003.

Special thanks to:
 Roger Beaumont – TV 3; Nicola Durrant – TVNZ.