

Written by Theo Macdonald, Kōwhai Residency research artist 2024 ©

How can one describe Tokyo, a metropolitan monolith containing 23 sub-cities, except as a vast sprawl? In the late 60s, filmmakers of the *fûkeiron* movement (“landscape theory”) traveled the length of Japan’s four largest islands — Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu — to film experimental docufictions like *Boy*, *The Man Who Left His Will on Film* and *A.K.A. Serial Killer*. These filmmakers, including Masao Adachi, Nagisa Oshima and Matsuda Masao, were motivated in part by their suspicion that Tokyo would one day swallow up Japan into one giant metropolis. It hasn’t happened yet, but it is easy to forget this at level 54 of the Mori Tower in Roppongi Hills, looking out over a battlefield of skyscrapers that melts into the horizon.

In brief, *fûkeiron* was born out of the radical cinema of the student protest era — the Japanese *Nūberu bāgu* or *nouvelle vague* — and a belief that the political reality of the Japanese could not be sufficiently communicated through the stories of individual leftists. Instead, the camera must be trained on the urban landscapes everyday people inhabit, reading these offices, apartment blocks, public parks, highways, train tracks and hotels as (in the words of activist-writer Tsumara Takashi) “texts of state power”.

Although *fûkeiron* took root in the reconstruction of Japan’s cities following the Second World War, the way of looking at urban identity and political consciousness it proposes has flourished overseas, notably in the moving image practices of French artist Eric Baudelaire and Vietnamese artist Nguyen Trinh Thi.

Thanks to Auckland Festival of Photography, the Asia New Zealand Foundation and the Tokyo Institute of Photography, I am here for five weeks researching *fûkeiron* in the city where this methodology was theorised, debated and actualised. In particular, I am looking into film director Nagisa Oshima, whose films *Boy* and *The Man Who Left His Will on Film* (originally titled “Tokyo Landscape War”) pioneered this approach to landscape, and who only ever made one film outside Japan: *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*, shot in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland and Rarotonga.

Is *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* a “landscape theory” film, even if only for New Zealand viewers? On his film *A.K.A Serial Killer*, which follows the path of spree killer Norio Nagayama, director Masao Adachi said “I began to realise that Nagayama’s unique landscape and my unique landscape were part of the same landscape, in short, it wasn’t that we were seeing landscape, but rather we were being seen by the landscapes we were trying to film.” Is the same true of Oshima’s *Auckland*?

To explore these questions, I’ve spent the last two weeks in the research libraries at the National Film Archive of Japan and the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum (which last year hosted an exhibition titled *After the Landscape Theory*). With the help of Google translate, I’ve been reading essays by and on the fûkeiron filmmakers, as well as production documents about *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*.

I’ve also been visiting exhibitions around Tokyo to get a broader context for what landscape can mean in Japan’s visual culture. At the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum, I saw the exhibition *The Resonance of Seeing*, including artist Terada Mayumi, who has spent the last two decades photographing models of rooms she has constructed from paper and foam board. Mayumi writes, ...”my continued desire to own memories was in a sense satisfied by calling up the codes of memories through accessible objects and by capturing the light cast on the spaces they occupy...” I was impressed by the strength of feeling in each sensitively exposed yet mundane scene — feeling which reminded me of New Zealand photographs like Marie Shannon’s *Phone Friends* and Ronnie van Hout’s *Radioman*.

At the Setagaya Art Museum, I saw a suite of high contrast, violently abstract photographs by Kikuji Kawada, images of stains on the walls of the Hiroshima Atomic Bomb Dome that were included in his photobook *Chizu / The Map*. At the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum library, I looked through a facsimile of this book, and read Kawada’s words: “The stain on the wall is all that remains to faithfully articulate why no one is left to testify. Maybe a photograph’s imaginative power can confront an enigma that goes beyond absence.”

Other photographers and moving image artists I've especially enjoyed discovering include Takuma Nakahira, painter Suda Kunitaro, Nguyen Trinh Thi (exhibited at the Mori Art Museum), and Kota Kishi at Tokyo photographers' gallery.

Finally, despite the blistering heat, and the threat of earthquakes and typhoons, I've been walking around the city, taking photographs on my handy-but-heavy Bronica S2A, to get a sense of how Tokyo's municipal wards fit together; how residential areas bleed into commercial districts and what daily life feels like in a city this mega; and what Oshima's Tokyo might have encompassed.

I'll leave you with this exchange between Ryuichi Sakamoto and Takeshi Kitano about visiting Auckland during the production of *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*:

Sakamoto: I went to New Zealand after Rarotonga, and it's a really terrible place.

Kitano: It's dark there.

...

Sakamoto: Auckland can't be called a city. The main street is only 700 metres long [...] there's no stimulation at all. New Zealanders must have heard that Japan is amazing. They just creep up on me. They want to be friends so I avoided them and ran away [...] and you know they really asked us to come and see their plays and listen to their music.

Takeshi: Ah, right. I only stopped off in New Zealand on the way there and back, but on the plane I thought it was cold and the towns were dark. It's a poor country, after all.