

Artist of the week 137: Shimabuku

This Japanese artist's fishy sense of humour makes us see, with fresh-water eyes, just how deeply weird the world can be



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Slow encounters ... image from Shimabuku's My Teacher Tortoise, 2011. Photograph: courtesy of the artist and Wilkinson Gallery

Shimabuku makes art about the little things in life: cooking, fruit and veg, fishing and cardboard boxes have all been subjects in his performances, films and interactive works. The results can be beautiful, like his grainy 8mm films capturing sunrises and sea creatures. Yet he's as much a surrealist trickster as a poet of the everyday. His absurdist skits have included taking an octopus on a tour of Tokyo's star attractions and getting gallery-goers to try and manoeuvre their bodies through tiny elastic bands.

At the heart of the Berlin-based, Japanese artist's work is a knack for making the familiar strange. Like the small-town octopus on a day out in the big city, a mismatch of culture or perception often underpins his projects. In the lengthily titled 2006 performance-video, *Asking the Repentistas – Peneira & Sonhador – to Remix My Octopus Works*, the artist gets two [Brazilian folk musicians](#) to interpret an earlier video of him fishing for octopus in Japan. The result is a bizarre busking session on the streets of São Paulo where the duo sing of the great octopus-catching man they'd like to introduce their sister to. "What's an octopus?" someone asks, as they finish their set.

There's a similarly strange encounter in the film *Sunrise at Mt Artsonje*, from 2007: a man stands on a rooftop in Korea, holding a silvery fish aloft during a lovely dawn, reflecting rays off its glinting skin to the unknown, and unknowing, city dwellers below. Behind him a crowd has gathered to witness this peculiar ceremony. But rather than being passing observers of some ancient rite, they're the [Artsonje Centre's](#) gallery staff, assembled by Shimabuku on the tower's forgotten rooftop to eat breakfast and witness the dawn.

Whether drawing attention to overlooked spaces or using, sometimes literal, fish-out-of-water comedy, Shimabuku invites us to consider with fresh eyes just how deeply weird the world can be.

Why we like him: Shimabuku's *Fish and Chips* video stages an encounter between the double act that makes up our national dish. In hazy shades of aqua, the film tracks a mottled potato making its slow way to the bottom of the sea where limber translucent white fish glide by. An odder couple it's hard to imagine, but Shimabuku's lingering camera simply asks us to consider the strange alchemy of their forms.

A poet and you don't know it: For Shimabuku, "fish and chips" is the most poetic word combination in English.

Where can I see him? Shimabuku's solo exhibition, *My Teacher Tortoise*, is at [Wilkinson Gallery](#), London to 5 June.