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Art Unlimited Artist Spotlight: Shimabuku "Fish and Chips" at Art 43 Basel

by Yanyan Huang



Shimabuku's Fish and Chips, 2006/2008. Air de Paris.

Neon sign and 8mm film and miniDV transferred to Blu-ray

"Fish and Potatoes, a meeting of the sea and the land.

Fish and Chips signs are all over the place in English towns.

To me, it's like the towns are brimming with simple and beautiful poetry.

One day I wanted to make my own version of Fish and Chips.

So, in Liverpool, I made a film about a potato swimming to meet a fish."

Fully imagining a kitsch restaurant set-up from the neon "Fish and Chips" sign outside, my expectations were thankfully thwarted when I entered the small viewing room. On the screen, a small yellow object bobs around, floating in what seems to be pond-like water. It's difficult to pinpoint just what it is, as debris floats by from time to time and the picture quality is humble at best. And quite suddenly, one realizes it's a potato. A lone potato floating in a pond. A few fish whiz past this foreign object, having no interest in being coupled in the deep fat fryer above water. It's the pre-pre-fish and chips in their unaltered and purest state. The most pleasant melody fills the room, a couple of repeating verses on a guitar, acting as a gentle lullaby.

One can't help but identify with the potato, which remains strangely stationary as it bobs around, carried to and fro by the currents of fish passing by. Eventually, one passes through the initial displacement of expectation and into a purer state of contemplation. Perhaps it was a projection of feelings that had pooled together after hours of viewing art, but questions bubbled up as I tried to place myself in this microcosm of potato and fish. Am I the potato? Am I just floating aimlessly while faster fish pass me by? Am I compelled to move only when currents from passing fish are strong enough to change my direction? Do I (as the potato, bare with me) know what fate awaits me after the film ends? Will I meet my maker in the deep fat fryer or float forever in a watery limbo, starch draining out of my body moment by moment?

To be honest, I never liked the British specialty. I much prefer fish lightly steamed and served with light seasoning, a bit of oil and salt. Potatoes I've stopped eating altogether in exchange for a slimmer waistline. I never really understood the compulsion people had to batter and fry perfectly good fish, or potatoes for that matter – often wondering people had to dress up food to make it unrecognizable, crunchy and crispy, when the natural thing was so much purer, simpler, and delicious already. In food as in art, are people still open to nourishment without the deep-fat fried ideas and overgenerous portions, all dressed up in catchy phrases?

Such a deceptively simple concept and lo-fi delivery would never be the headliner of a major museum retrospective, but it's quiet and ambiguous work like Fish and Chips that carry the most impact: full of whimsy, conjuring up ideas of nature out of balance, our relationship to nourishment and direction in life. Slippery ideas indeed.

Image: Still from video by Marco Annunziata

www.shimabuku.net

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