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Japanese photographers' images try to look beneath the surface

By Dan R. Goddard - Express-News Staff Writer Photography has an unmatched ability to reproduce reality, but for artists, the challenge is always to go beyond reality, to reveal what can't be seen.

Curator Yuri Mitsuda of the Shoto Museum of Art in Japan has assembled a group of photographers who are primarily concerned with revealing the spirit in things and people for "Counter-Photography: Japan's Artists Today," a FOTOSEPTIEMBRE USA exhibit on view through Oct. 19 at Blue Star Contemporary Art Center.

"The works in this exhibit are not intended to serve as documentary evidence for any particular reality," Mitsuda writes in his catalog essay. "Rather, they are intended to reveal an aspect of reality that has become invisible, namely, 'spirit.' These works constitute an attempt to present new realities and alternative ways of looking at the world."

Mitsuda divides the work into two sections. In "To Distill: Another ? Appearance," the artists attempt to extract the essential spirit of inanimate objects, while in "To Reverse: Another Relationship," the emphasis is more on an exploration of the self in relation to others. And generally, the works that try to depict psychological and emotional states are the more successful.

Using Japanese scroll paintings in a museum as a backdrop, Tomoaki Ishihara opens his mouth and screams in a self-portrait reminiscent of Edvard Munch's famous painting. He strikes a more meditative pose in another self-portrait in front of European religious paintings. While museums are usually quiet and calm, Ishihara's images suggest the wide range of emotions that can pass between a viewer and a work of art.

Kazuo Katase, who lived in Germany for 30 years, attempts to locate the essence of Japan in ghostly images of the gate of the country's main Shinto shrine, sacred Mount Fuji and a tea-ceremony bowl. He prints the "reversed" image, which has a quality somewhat like X-rays of the lost heart of the culture. Katase questions why these icons are so prevalent in Japan when the values they represent are being swamped by global consumer culture.

The most chilling images are the bars across the windows on top of the light boxes in the installation by Hiroko Inoue, titled "Absence." She took the images from inside mental institutions, seeing through her eyes what the patients see, although her photographs can't reproduce their inner thoughts and feelings. However, the bleak window views are spread across a grid of lighted boxes, elegantly conveying the alienation that must be common in the warehouses for society's outcasts.

Working in black and white, Eikoh Hosoe created the funniest series, recording the interaction between dancer Tatsumi Hijikata, the originator of Butoh, and the people living in his hometown, Akita. An odd, elfin-looking man, Hijikata comes across as something of a trickster, leaping at a group of children like a ghost and running through the streets draped in a flag.

Treating the human body as an element of formal design, Hosoe explores the interaction of male and female forms in the series "Embrace," emphasizing the sensuous interplay of arms and hips like the lines of a modern

sculpture.

Trying to capture the hidden life of plants and other objects is much more difficult. Chie Yasuda takes color images of old botanical gardens and museums, focusing on lonely doorways, the red tights on an exhibit mannequin, climbing vines, elegant china in glass cases and an old pillow with a floral design. Like the faded and torn wallpaper photographs by Tomoko Yoneda, the absence of people is felt more than the less-tangible qualities of the objects.

Akiko Sugiyama's crisp color photographs of objects she has crafted are the most formally satisfying. Working with modernistic curves and planes of pure color, she evokes a fantastic world of clean, clearly defined geometric order. By contrast, Miho Akioka's color photographs of a swaying tree create wispy white lines that seem to capture ghosts in mid-flight.

"Counter-Photography" illustrates how Japanese artists attempt to show what photography can't, the inner life of human beings and the spiritual essence of objects. Their success often depends on what the images make the viewer feel, creating an individual experience for every person who sees the show.

"Counter-Photography: Japan's Artists Today" runs through Oct. 19 at the Blue Star Contemporary Art Center, 116 Blue Star, (210) 227-6960, www.bluestarart.org.

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