

The journey has just begun

It - the Iron Curtain - has left traces behind in people's heads but hardly any at all in the European landscape that it once divided. And unlike the Great Wall of China, the few visible material remnants of the Curtain hardly give one any sense of its once powerful presence. Yet even when this boundary served to divide a continent, it was always more a phenomenon of reality than of evidence, a trauma that overshadowed everyday life with long enduring effects. Seiichi Furuya was one of the very few artists who visually explored this reality, which all residents were so acutely aware of.

For his work "Staatsgrenze" [National Border] (1981-83) Furuya traveled along the border that separated Austria from Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Yugoslavia. A map in the portfolio indicates the locations where photographs were taken. The artist examined the various manners in which these barriers look and function not only by photographing watch towers and blown up bridges, border stops and warning signs, but also by attempting to reveal traces of the border (and of the highly dangerous venture of crossing over it) in the thoughts and actions of residents. ("This is where the free western world ends, and it only begins again in Japan." Schattendorf, 1981.) This he does by combining photography with words and sentences jotted down in the course of his research - a technique that sets this project apart from the rest of his work. The political situation and mental barriers manifest themselves in the incidental comments that testify to the indifferenciability of human behavior on both sides of such an artificial fault line: "On warm days fit for swimming, the Hungarian border guard spends a long time just watching our sun-bathing lawn through his telescope." Loipersbach im Burgenland, 1981.

Just a few years earlier, in February 1978, Seiichi Furuya had photographed Christine Gössler for the first time. From this point forwards he would take pictures of her virtually every day. In 1979 these portraits were presented for the first time in an exhibition. Back then Furuya was already aware of the inescapable urgency of the project: "In her, I can see the woman that passes in front of my eyes, I can see the model, sometimes the woman I love, and at other times the shape of the woman inside me. I feel that it is my duty to keep on photographing the woman who has so many meanings for me." Included in the text published with the first photographs, this statement ends: "If to take photographs is in a sense to stop time and space, then, for me it is very thrilling to record the life of one human being through this process. By facing her, by photographing her, and then by seeing her in the photographs, it is like seeing myself at the same time, discovering myself."

In 1985 Christine Gössler-Furuya took her own life after struggling for years with a chronic illness. Her passing neither alleviated Seiichi Furuya's sense of "obligation" nor exhausted his ability to find himself through this form of dialogue. "Time and space" were fixed in the thousands of images created in the course of these seven years. Allowing these documents (and through them Christine) to speak for themselves and for others and thus preventing his counterpart from vanishing - this was Furuya's new challenge.

In 1989 and 1995 Furuya presented his first attempts to order or arrange the images. He put together both a book and an exhibition under the title "Mémoires", bringing together pictures taken during their years together as well as photographs connected to the events and emotions of those years through retrospection. The light-hearted first months of their time together, the birth of their son Komyo-Klaus, the illness and suicide of his partner are intricately connected to Furuya's attempts to visually and thus spiritually and intellectually capture a foreign European culture. For this reason selected images from the projects "Staatsgrenze" or "Limes" (1985-87: the Berlin Wall seen from East Berlin, where Furuya lived at the time) were - together with the portraits - part of a movement that defies chronology and topography.

In 1997 Furuya began presenting the pictures of Christine chronologically. In 2000 followed the series presented here, from which all traces of narrative and all incidental references have been removed and focus is placed on Christine's face alone. What emerges here touches and shocks one far more than the photographer's visual mourning seen in the earlier works. Through the photographs, shown only with the date and location, the personality of the model - the person being looked at and spoken with - can be seen to change before the viewer's very eyes. This change may have its roots in the illness, but only the disturbing repercussions for the individual taking the photographs lends it such intensity in the pictures themselves.

Monika Faber

Works in the exhibition

“Staatsgrenze“ (1981-83)

Series of 24 photographs

Gelatin Silver prints (1983)

61 x 50 cm

“Portrait“ (1978-85)

-Selection-

Gelatin Silver prints, C-Prints

49.5 x 36.7 cm

Seiichi Furuya

born in 1950 in Izu, Japan, lives in Graz

Since 1975 Furuya has had numerous exhibitions both in Europe and overseas at such venues as Forum Stadtpark and Camera Austria (Graz); Fotomuseum Winterthur; Albertina (Vienna); Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum (Shizuoka, Japan); Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photograph; and Museum für Photographie Braunschweig.

Furuya's works are included in the collections of various museums, including the Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam); Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography; Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig (Vienna); Museum of Modern Art (New York); and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York). The Heidelberger Kunstverein will present a solo exhibition by Seiichi Furuya in Summer 2014.

Furuya has published several photo books featuring Christine, starting with his “Mémoires 1978-1988” (Camera Austria, 1989) and continuing with “Mémoires 1995” (Scalo Books, 1995), “Christine Furuya-Gössler, Mémoires 1978-1985” (Korinsha Press, 1997), “Portrait” (Fotohof, 2000), “Last Trip to Venice” (self-published, 2002), “Mémoires 1983” (Akaaka Art Publishing, 2006) and “Mémoires. 1984-1987” (Izu Photo Museum and Camera Austria, 2010) with a text by Einar Schleeff. Furuya's book “Staatsgrenze” is scheduled to be published in Summer 2014 from Spectorbooks.

Seiichi Furuya was one of the founders and editors of the photography magazine “Camera Austria”, and has also curated exhibitions introducing Japanese photographers to Europe, such as Daido Moriyama, Shomei Tomatsu, Nobuyoshi Araki, a.o.

Galerie Thomas Fischer

Potsdamer Str. 77-87, Haus H

10785 Berlin +49 30 74 78 03 85

mail@galeriethomasfischer.de