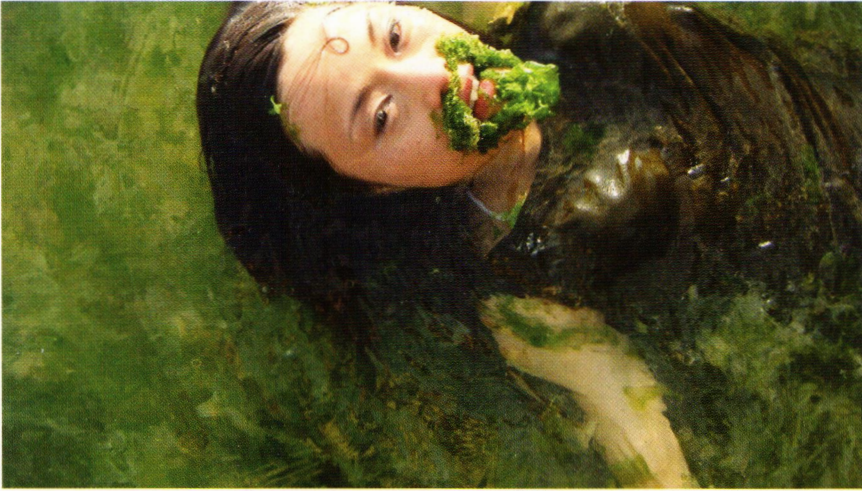


# CHIKAKO YAMASHIRO

SHAPESHIFTER



After closing its doors in June 2017, White Rainbow has returned to its old location on London's Mortimer Street with a new program of exhibitions and projects. For its inaugural event, it welcomed Chikako Yamashiro—the award-winning performance and video artist—to mount an exhibition that made optimal use of the modest, yet multifaceted space.

In the gallery's main room were three monitor-bearing podiums for *Okinawa Tourist* (2004). Each of the videos in the three-part work considers how a place can lose the essence of its image. Here, it is the image of Okinawa imposed by its tourist industry that obscures its multilayered history, ranging from the island's indigenous culture to its continued subjection to a United States military presence. In *Trip to Japan*, one of the three videos, Yamashiro stands outside the National Diet Building in Tokyo, holding up a picture of Okinawa's unique *kikkobaka* ("turtle shell") tombstones while shouting touristic platitudes and trivia about the island, conveying a sense that the only value of the place and its voice to the eyes and ears of mainland Japan is as a destination that produces neat, touristic narratives. There is a touch of despair to the work, which is sharply contrasted with the acerbic subtext of the adjacent *I Like Okinawa Sweet*, in which Yamashiro stands in front of the wire fence of a US military base in Okinawa, devouring ice creams as they are handed to her while a soundtrack of elevator music and fragments of American radio commentary plays. Toward the end of the seven-minute video, Yamashiro appears to struggle, rolling her head and sweating, before smiling exaggeratedly as another ice cream is passed to her and the screen fades to black. The impression is that too many sweet things, including glossed-over narratives about a place, can make you sick. *Okinawa Tourist* effectively constitutes a parody and critique. However, as a welcome rarity, the artist also

explores solutions. In *The Graveyard Eisa*, the artist takes the traditional *Eisa* dance of Okinawa—meant to commemorate the dead but absorbed recently by the tourist industry as a colorful spectacle—and has it performed with simple costumes and paper bags over the dancers' heads, extracting the essence from something glamorized and feared lost.

Sharing the main room was *Seaweed Woman* (2008), a selection of photographs showing Yamashiro covered by seaweed and in varying stages of submersion in the sea off the coast of Henoko, where another American base was built in 1959 despite almost universal local opposition. The photographs are accompanied by a hanging projection screen on which underwater footage plays at an angle that makes the piece—though simple—strangely immersive, with sounds of heavy breathing denoting both physical and metaphorical suffocation.

Elsewhere, in White Rainbow's new cinema space, the exhibition included a work from 2016, and Yamashiro's first to feature a male protagonist: *Mud Man*. In this loosely narrative 25-minute video filmed in Okinawa and South Korea's Jeju Island, the eponymous Mud Man leaves a small community of other "mud people" who appear to live in a barren Okinawan field, and falls into a tunnel that leads him to a dreamlike battlefield where crawling soldiers bear machine guns. To an intense, apparently beat-boxed soundtrack, footage from the Korean War—during which the US used Okinawa as a launch pad for its offensives—is spliced into the film and also witnessed by the Mud Man and his companions, evidenced by projections of the scenes on their faces as they gaze up open-mouthed. The film ends with an uncanny and beautiful scene: a lily field from which the muddied hands of many people emerge, in time clapping, and a final shot of bare, spindling roots in the field where the piece began. The work is not easily decoded, but the intensity and contrast of its flesh, flowers, mud and militarism, as well as that between the landscapes of Okinawa and Jeju, provide an intuitive metaphor for local history that is nonetheless keenly felt.

NED CARTER MILES

#### Opposite page

#### ZHANG DALI

*The First Sports Meeting of the National Army 1952*  
2005  
Gelatin silver print, photomechanical reproduction and typewritten text, 112 x 60 cm.  
Courtesy the artist.

#### This page

#### CHIKAKO YAMASHIRO

*Seaweed Woman*  
2008  
Set of eight Lambda prints, 28 x 50 each, and video with color: 7 min 15 sec.  
Copyright the artist.  
Courtesy Yumiko Chiba Associates, Tokyo.