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To the city and beyond ...

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To The City and Beyond ...

Book Review: *A Song for Windows* and *The Narcissistic City* by Takashi Homma

Walk into a second hand bookshop in Japan and inquire about Takashi Homma's classic photobook *Tokyo Suburbia* to get a sense how revered his work is in certain circles. The front cover is carefully wrapped in archival acid free paper and customers are asked to put on white cotton gloves to even get near the book. After receiving the Kimura Ihei Award for this book in 1999, Homma's work became synonymous with the art of the photobook in Japan. In this context, a new publication by Takashi Homma is usually an eagerly anticipated event celebrated amongst photobook connoisseurs across the world.

In contrast to the urban landscape images of densely populated Tokyo that he is best known for, Homma's most recent photobook *A Song for Windows* depicts a tiny island called Klovharun in the Finnish Pellinki archipelago. For nearly thirty years the island was the summer home for the Swedish-speaking Finnish author Tove Jansson (1914 – 2001) and it was the inspiration for her 1972 novel *The Summer Book*. Homma pays homage to Jansson's work in a series of quiet and sober photographic observations of her summer house and the rugged landscape it is situated in. Each of the 22 chapters of *The Summer Book* is represented through a single representative passage which in turn is juxtaposed against Homma's photographs. It is as much a photographic as a literary journey that is captured in this body of work.

Jansson's presence is alluded to in a number of images that depict her personal belongings, some of her books, the kitchen and so forth. Even though public access to the private island is highly regulated (visitors are only permitted during one week in the summer) it appears from the photographs that Homma actually lived in the house for the duration of this photo project: two chopsticks neatly placed in parallel on top of an empty bowl provide a quasi signature that Homma, too, is present in this otherwise deserted space. Other than these rare exceptions, Homma's images of this space – both exterior and interior – transport the viewer into a world where time has largely stood still. The frequent inclusion of window frames and reflections function as a metaphor for the past. The thickness, the size and the rounded edges of the book – similar to *Tokyo Suburbia* – are clearly referencing Homma's own past body of work. Designed by Paris and Stockholm based photobook designers Libraryman, this is a clever attribute.

In *The Narcissistic City* published by Mack, Homma returns to a subject matter he is better known for. In contrast to the crisp and sharp photographs of *A Song for Windows* however, Homma has shifted towards experimental monochromatic photography. Some images appear to show landmarks in New York and Los Angeles while others look like Tokyo. Homma heavily crops, fragments, distorts and stretches the city in these images. The viewer starts to get lost, confused and disorientated. Some images are shown upside down or sideways. Rather than turning the book accordingly, the viewer starts to get used to this new reality where the city is visually represented as an abstraction. The experimental

style of Homma's photographs also has a homogenising effect: Homma depicts the city not as a specific architectural, cultural or political entity, but rather, he treats it like a system which exists physically as much as it exists psychologically.

Like many of Mack's books, *The Narcissistic City* needs to be appreciated on more than just a visual level. The feel of the paper, quality of the print, the fact that most pages are actually foldout pages – these are all aspects that feed into a very tactile experience of the book. In this way the experimental approach chosen by Homma is further signified by the style of the book design itself.

This is a radically new approach for Homma whose work has tended to be associated with the cold, observational and documentary style of the New Topographics such as Lewis Baltz or Stephen Shore. In *The Narcissistic City* Homma appears to explore *are, bure, boke*, or the 'rough, blurry, out-of-focus' style of photography that made Daido Moriyama well known in the 1970s. It also makes *A Song for Windows* and *The Narcissistic City* two photobooks that could not be more different from one another: not merely with regards to subject matter but also in terms of photographic methodologies and book design. This is testament to Homma's adaptability as photographer, working in a differing set of circumstances. Yet both books have in common that they are about a place: one that can be pinpointed on Google Maps, while the other exists largely in the imagination.

Marco Bohr