

RongRong & inri-Tsumari Story

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BEIJING, 2000-2012

Prior to 2000, RongRong lived in Beijing and inri lived in Tokyo. They met in Tokyo in 1999 and inri moved to Beijing in 2000. Between 2000 and 2012 the couple lived in Beijing, inri slowly acclimatizing to a very different way of life, mastering Chinese and eventually raising a family of three boys. For a variety of reasons late in 2012 the entire family moved to Japan where they live in Yokosuka, not too far from Tokyo. Now it is RongRong who has to adapt to life in a totally different society, although in his case he needs to visit Beijing on a regular basis to deal with the responsibilities of Three Shadows Art Photography Art Centre, the ambitious cultural hub in the Caochangdi district of Beijing that they established in 2007.

Before they met, they had independent careers but since 2000 they have worked as a couple, producing a body of work in which their individual contributions can no longer readily be distinguished. In the great lyrical effusions of 2000-2001 - *In Yulongxueshan, China* series; *In Fujisan, Japan* series; *In Bad Gaisern, Austria* series; *In Helsinki, Finland* series (fig. 1-4) in which they declared their passion for each other in spectacular natural settings, it is as if the slate has been swept clean. The harshness of urban existence and its impact on the psyche that provided the subject-matter for much of their early work has been replaced by their own naked bodies in pristine landscapes.

By choosing the Great Wall of China (*In the Great Wall, China* series, 2000) (fig. 5) and Mount Fuji (*In Fujisan, Japan* series, 2001) for their self-depictions, it was almost as if they wished to emphasize their ethnic background. They went to Mount Fuji from February 13th to 15th, 2001, the coldest time of the year. inri kept a diary during the two days they were there. At 5:00 am on February 15th, she refers to “a bone-chilling cold, it started at our feet and then spread to our whole bodies... the world at fifteen degrees below zero.”¹ Later in the day at 11:45am she notes that “Facing the mountain I want to pray, maybe she has cleansed my heart. Is this a feeling only Japanese people have?” I asked RongRong. He said he had the same feeling. How is it that we could be together now? We planned it the first time we met: if we could meet again in Japan we’d go to Mt Fuji. This promise was kept. And now, all we could do was wait, but even our waiting could be seen as a kind of performance art.”²

For RongRong & inri, city dwellers accustomed to the urban chaos of Beijing and the glittering

streets of Tokyo in the 1990s, the sight of Mount Fuji in the snow seems to have awakened feelings similar to those of the Japanese *yamabusbi*, for whom fasting, meditation, long mountain walks and exposure to snow and icy mountain waterfalls were all ways to achieve enlightenment. Although there was no religious motivation in their photographs, their state of rapture with each other and with the beauty of the natural environment resulted in similar behavior.

Back in Beijing it was not possible to sustain this elevated mood in which the human being was seen as part of nature, free of clothing and all restraints. inri moved to Liulitun, the village in which RongRong settled after the demolition of the Beijing East Village, and now the focus was on the gradual disappearance of a way of life as the old buildings and entire neighborhoods were demolished to make way for the new developments. In *Liulitun, Beijing* series, 2000-2003, (fig. 6,7) their naked figures huddle together for warmth on thin mattresses in bleak interiors and as the destruction of Liulitun reaches its final phase, they don funereal clothes and offer bouquets of lilies in tribute. The claustrophobic atmosphere of the *RongRong & inri, 2005* series (fig. 8) in which their ghostly bodies virtually disappear into a fabricated environment – the opposite in all ways of the 2000-2002 series—marked a point of no return. Real life took over!

Committed photographers, both artists also felt a duty towards the development of photography as an art form and in 2007, without financial backing, established Three Shadows Art Photography Centre in a handsome building designed by their neighbor and friend, Ai Weiwei. *Three Shadows, Beijing* series, 2008 (fig. 9) traces its construction and development just as *Caochangdi, Beijing* series, 2004-2009 (fig. 10) records the growth of their family as three boys - Fengshen, Fengyi, and Fengsan - were born in rapid succession. Formally posed and hand-tinted, these photographs show RongRong & inri wearing a wide range of clothes, modern as well as traditional as in the one showing RongRong in a traditional Chinese man’s robe and inri in Japanese kimono.

As one observes the arc of the development during these years, it is apparent that the overwhelming presence of nature in their earlier work has begun to dwindle to the pomegranate trees and lotuses in containers in front of their house in Caochangdi. Family responsibilities and the administrative burden of Three Shadows consumed much of their time, leaving less time



fig. 1 RongRong & inri
In Yulongxueshan, China 2001 No.1



fig. 2 RongRong & inri
In Fujisan, Japan 2001 No.1



fig. 3 RongRong & inri
In Bad Gaisern, Austria 2001 No.6



fig. 4 RongRong & inri
In Helsinki, Finland 2001 No.1

for their own creative work.

Until 2012 there was no need for them to concern themselves with broader political issues and they were not bothered by the fact that, for a good part of the twentieth century, relations between China and Japan had been tense, certain issues dating from the second Sino-Japanese War still continuing to bedevil the establishment of a close relationship between the two nations. The situation worsened as disputes over Diaoyu islands (known as Senkaku to the Japanese), came to a head but above all it was for personal reasons that they made the momentous decision to move to Japan at the end of the year. Inri had lived in Beijing for twelve years but RongRong had never lived in Japan. The invitation to participate in the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale provided a wonderful opportunity to readjust the balance between their lives as artists and as administrators/entrepreneurs, creating a distance from Beijing that permitted them to concentrate once again on their first priority, photography. The feeling that they were starting again, that they were “emptying” themselves as they left China for a new life in Japan, is immediately evident in the first photographs they took in the New Year.

JAPAN, 2012 TO THE PRESENT

Now the spoken language is a problem for RongRong, although not for the three boys who have picked up the language with remarkable ease. Both artists already had close contacts in the Japanese photography world but they were no longer at the center of a complex network of professional relationships that required their constant attention. Most important they were closer to the natural environment, so readily accessible and unspoiled once outside the major cities. For example the train ride by Joetsu Shinkansen from Tokyo to Echigo-Yuzawa station followed by the Hakutaka limited express to Tokamachi station takes less than two hours, and yet one arrives in a different world, pristine and remote.

The Echigo-Tsumari region where the photographers spent a great deal of time in 2012 is the setting for Kawabata Yasunari's classic novel, *Snow Country (Yukigumi)* published in 1952. He described the sensation of arriving in the region in the opening lines of his classic novel, *Snow Country*: “The train came out of the tunnel into the snow country. The earth lay white under the night sky. The train pulled up at a signal stop.”³ His lyrical descriptions of the snow country are famous for their poetic brevity. “In this snow country, cold, cloudy

days succeed one another as the leaves fall and the winds grow chilly. Snow is in the air. The high mountains near and far become white in what the people of the country call ‘the round of the peaks.’ Along the coast the sea roars, and inland the mountains roar ‘the roaring at the center, like a distant clap of thunder. The round of the peaks and the roaring at the center announce that the snows are not far away.’⁴

He also conveys the tedium of “the long snowbound months—the months of seclusion and boredom, between October, under the old lunar calendar, when the spinning began, and mid-February of the following year, when the last bleaching was finished.”⁵

In 2012 RongRong & inri were invited to participate in the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial in Niigata Prefecture. This triennial is unique in the world of contemporary art, inviting artists from all over the world to produce site-specific works in a region of unparalleled natural beauty and to observe first-hand “*satoyama*,” the traditional lifestyle of humans in harmony with nature. When they arrived in the Tsumari region, they experienced the same shock of recognition as when they saw Mount Fuji together for the first time in 2001. They were overwhelmed by the grandeur of the mountains and the beauty of nature uncontaminated by any signs of modern life. When she returned to Japan, inri commented that it seemed as if time had stood still during the decade she had lived in Beijing but wondered how to capture these sensations in future works. RongRong was reminded of his childhood village although when he returns to visit the village where he grew up, there is nothing left. Everything he knew as a child has been destroyed.

However, the situation is not as idyllic as it seems owing to natural disasters such as the Chuetsu earthquake of October, 2004 and the depopulation that affects all remote areas as young people move away to big cities to look for work and entertainment. For the most part, only old people remain. Abandoned buildings are common, among them the 200 year old traditional wooden house used by RongRong & inri in many of the photographs of interiors taken during their stay in the region. The *Shedding House*, as it is known, was modified by Kurakake Junichi and a group of Nihon University College of Art Sculpture students, 3000 in all, and first exhibited at the 2009 Triennial. Over an extended period, these volunteers etched notches in the wooden structure in order to reveal the natural color of the wood that had turned black from fumes emitted by the stove over a period of two centuries or more.



fig. 5 RongRong & inri
In the Great Wall, China 2000 No.1



fig. 6 RongRong & inri
Liutitun, Beijing No.13 2002



fig. 7 RongRong & inri
Liutitun, Beijing No.1 2003



fig. 8 RongRong & inri
2005 No.1

It provided the perfect setting for RongRong, inri and the three boys to shed their urban ways and return to a more traditional way of life, an extended refashioning of their unique fusion of life and photography recorded so memorably in the 300 or more photographs they took intermittently over a period of two years. The body of work may be described as a reverie on family ties, the relationship of human beings to each other and to nature, away from the distractions of fast-paced urban living. While the human content is provided exclusively by the photographers and their three sons, more often than not they strive for a distancing effect in which they are both the photographers we know and socialize with and immaterial presences which turn away from the camera.

Modern dress was first to disappear. The Niigata area is famous for its kimonos and the famous *chijimi* linen so memorably described by Kawabata. RongRong & inri found old kimonos, including a particularly tattered one which appealed to RongRong and which he wears in many of the photographs. The two artists can be seen in the formal kneeling position in two photographs but in many others the mood is far less decorous, even anguished. RongRong can be seen lying in an abandoned pose on the floor of the room, grasping a pillar in a desperate embrace. inri lies on the wooden floor, oblivious of the snow-laden trees and the cold outside. The kimonos drop to the floor, the camera moves in on their heads which, with the exception of their eyes, are covered by their luxuriant hair.

In complete contrast is a beautiful sequence of photographs in which the figures, adults and children, turn away from the camera and view the landscape from indoors-inri in kimono, seated on tatami with the three boys framed by shoji screens, RongRong & inri seen only as dark silhouettes and a related photograph in which the three boys take center stage. We know exactly who they are but there is a timeless quality that the photographers achieve through the formal qualities of the composition and the printing process they adopt which reduces contrasts and emphasizes subtle tonal effects.

They stayed in the region long enough to experience all four seasons, a temporal experience that is crucial to so much Japanese art. In a rare exception inri and the three boys, who wear clothes that she designed herself, face the camera and join hands in a gesture of exultation seemingly occasioned by the pleasures of early spring. The boys wade through a pond and play in the melting snow, one of the few photographs in which there is a glimpse of one of

the sparsely populated villages in the region. For the children, this was bliss and the parents have described how they were warmly accepted by the few remaining elderly villagers who welcomed the arrival of children to enliven their solitude.

Photographs such as these are greatly outnumbered by spectacular landscapes in which diminutive human figures are seen from the rear, seemingly transfixed by the beauty of nature. In one memorable image RongRong holds the hand of one of his sons, gazing at a timeless vista of rice paddies unmarred by any sign of modern life. In another RongRong and inri photograph the three boys standing still in the middle distance, surrounded by rice paddies.

Unconsciously, it seems, RongRong & inri have adopted a motif - the Rückenfigur (a person seen from behind) - that appears in many paintings by the great German Romantic landscape painter, Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840). In paintings such as *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818)^(fig. 11), Kunsthalle Hamburg and *The Stages of Life* (1835), Museum der Bildende Künste, Leipzig, the viewer is encouraged to place himself in the position of the Rückenfigur who is seemingly transfixed by the sublime vision in front of him. As early as 1997 in *The Wedding Dress* series^(fig. 12) and related works, the existence of a strongly romantic streak in RongRong's oeuvre began to emerge, becoming even more apparent in the *Bad Goserz* series (2001). The return to the Tsumari region seems only to have strengthened this tendency.

In big cities snow does not linger very long, if at all. In the Tsumari region, however, cold winds from Siberia blow clouds from the Sea of Japan onto the central mountain ranges. Snowfalls of three to four meters are not uncommon, covering houses and causing life to slow down almost completely until it thaws. Some of the most dramatic photographs in the *Tsumari* series emphasize simultaneously the frailty of human life when confronted with the forces of nature and its resilience. Still wearing the tattered kimono, bare legs exposed, RongRong struggles to climb over a massive snow drift or trudges through the snow in a particularly mysterious image in the direction of a mountain peak in the far distance. Her kimono in disarray, inri lies partially exposed on a rock, seemingly oblivious to the melting snow and ice surrounding her. RongRong helps inri clamber over a rock or they stand side by side, deep snow drifts reaching the level of their shoulders.



fig. 9 RongRong & inri
Three Shadows, Beijing 2008 No.20-3



fig. 10 RongRong & inri
Caochangdi, Beijing 2007 No.1



fig. 11 Caspar David Friedrich
Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (1818), Kunsthalle Hamburg.

With their acute awareness of the different characteristics of the four seasons, it was inevitable that Japanese artists would respond to snow-covered landscapes. In the winter landscapes of Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858) diminutive human figures struggle to reach their destination and at times can hardly be seen at all as in *Mountain and river on the Kiso road (Kisoji no sansei)*, 1857^(fig. 13). The heavy snowfall evoked a similar response in RongRong & inri, culminating in the dreamlike photograph in which driving snow and fierce winds drain the figure of all substance as it trudges through the snow.

In a limited number of photographs there is no human presence at all; as in the mysterious view of a path cleared through massive banks of snow and another of the encircling mountains, Kawabata's "the round of peaks," seen across a wide expanse of pristine snow. Here they have returned to the vision of the majesty of nature that the sight of Mount Fuji first evoked in them in 2001.

In *Tsumari Story* RongRong & inri continue the unprecedented experiment they embarked upon in 2000, the recording of their life together not as documentary but as spiritual saga. In successive stages they appear in their photographs as lovers, as forlorn city dwellers whose surroundings are being torn down around them, as cultural entrepreneurs in the development of Three Shadows, and as proud parents while three sons are born in rapid succession. Since 2012 they have changed the focus of their photographic self-portrait and have begun to chronicle the development of their life together as a family in relation to nature, a deeply felt allegory which frequently echoes themes explored in older art with which they are not necessarily familiar.

For these two remarkable artists, the camera is less a tool for recording surface appearances than for seeking deeper meanings through the creative use of their own persona in settings that suggest but do not narrowly define multiple associations and mysterious tales or stories. In *Tsumari Story*, RongRong, inri and their three boys are seen in landscapes in which water, snow and ice mark the passing of the seasons and the crucial role that water plays in human life and the universe. Without eliciting any obvious parallels, the photographs convey a strong sense of the parallels between the cycles of life and nature.

It is in the studio, however, and through a variety of means that this mysterious aura is

accomplished. In a number prints double-exposure is used to suggest the uncertainty of memory or the creative aspects of fantasy. In others, rice paper is applied to the surface of the negative in order to establish a pale, blanching tonality that can suggest blinding light, the steam rising from an *onsen* or, possibly, the fading of memory as time passes. In keeping with the intense romanticism of the series was their decision to print the images on old sheets of photographic paper, often yellowed around the edges, which they had been keeping for ten years or more until they were able to match it with appropriate imagery.

"When we travel to a new location," they have said, "it is not only what we see with our eyes that registers. We also smell the air, feel the humidity and the temperature. This is what we attempt to convey, as well as a temporal dimension that situates the apparent subject-matter in a realm beyond time."

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fig. 12 RongRong
1997 No.3 (1) Beijing

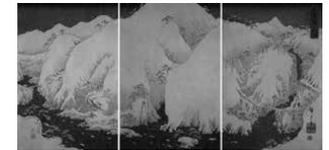


fig. 13 Utagawa Hiroshige
The Kiso road (Kisoji no sansei), 1857.

Notes:

1. Wu Hung, *RongRong & inri – Tai Transfiguration*, Beijing, 2004, pp. 212-213
2. *Ibid.*, p. 213
3. Yasunari Kawabata (Trans. Edward G. Seidensticker), *Snow Country*, New York, 1996, p. 3
4. *Ibid.*, p. 158-9
5. *Ibid.*, p. 151