

Tsumari Story/Gelatin-Silver Story

Tokihiro SATO

'Tsumari' is old name of the Tokamachi district of Niigata Prefecture. Surrounded on all four sides by mountains, the name is said to be derived from the Japanese expression, *todo no tsumari*, which means 'to come to the end' but although similar phonetically, the Chinese characters used to write it mean 'there is a wife', conjuring romantic connotations in our imaginations. RongRong & inri's *Tsumari Story* is a work of great imagination that was clearly inspired by this name. It features the first encounter of a man and a woman, following them as they form a family, creating a story that is both true and fiction, set against the background of a traditional Japanese house, standing in a snow-filled landscape of beautiful terraced rice fields, hot springs, etc.

Trees, fields and rice fields; all turn white as the snow settles. It is a silver world where the only sounds are the rustling of the snow and the sighing of the wind, but it overflows with light. Furthermore, the domestic space trapped within the deep snow, brims with familial love. We experience the tense atmosphere, when hands and feet that are numb with the cold, as they trudge back towards the warmth of home. Moving from picture to picture, we are able to discover memories of the snow country. What they present is not so much reality as an imaginary world set within distant memories. It is not only the situations and contents of the pictures that evoke these feelings, it is the soft texture of the prints, resembling down, floating in the air.

This spring I saw the printing facilities in the darkroom attached to their studio at the Three Shadows Photography Art Centre in Beijing. These include a huge horizontal enlarger enshrined in concrete room. It is quite old and used to belong to a commercial laboratory, but the projector is still in good condition. Today, demand for this type of equipment is gradually decreasing but in the art world, gelatin-silver prints remain extremely highly valued. This enlarger can be used to produce huge gelatin-silver prints. The plumbing in the darkroom is also easy to use. While we were there, inri told me an interesting story. She was talking about the way that the silver in gelatin-silver prints tends to become more prominent over the passage of time and she said that they aimed to purposely recreate this kind of effect in their prints. The discoloration of the photograph causes the silver appear to stand out, and thinking back, I remembered the old commemorative photographs that had hung on the walls or were placed in the special alcove of the main room in my parents' home had all yellowed and the silver in them seemed to gleam. I do not know when these pictures were taken, but they were family portraits of my ancestors. We see any number of photographs like this in museums and galleries and the effect is also apparent in the photographs that are sometimes seen for sale in European street markets. Even among my own works, I am sometimes able to see it in prints that have become faded. It is what allows our imaginations recognize the passage of time.

The time that is trapped within a photograph, the event that could only have ever happened at that particular time, is sealed within it like a specimen. Relations between individual items within a photograph present a relationship disconnected from the viewer's time. Imaginative power gives rise to the resurrection of a space in a graphic manner. It has already surpassed the flat world, becoming free even from time and space.

Fourteen years have passed since we entered the twenty-first century and the twentieth century has become recognized as the age of the gelatin-silver photograph. The nineteenth century saw the invention of photography with the daguerreotype, followed shortly afterwards by the Calotype, then came the wet collodion process before it reached its peak with gelatin-silver

photography. Negatives evolved from dry glass plates to film. It can be said that vast archives of the twentieth century, when images can be said to have come of age, consist almost entirely of gelatin-silver prints and gelatin-silver film. Today the photographic world has been swept by the wave of digital technology and industrially speaking, digital photography now represents the mainstream. In China, the high-street photo studios, which have been in business since before the Communist revolution, still preserve gelatin-silver technology but generally speaking, digital photography has served as the main medium throughout the current period of economic prosperity. For this reason, RongRong & inri's decision to employ gelatin-silver photography is quite significant.

In gelatin-silver photography, light passes through a lens to produce an image that is captured in light and shade as a result of a reaction with the silver salts in the emulsion. A light is then passed through this image and projected onto photographic paper that is then developed to produce a print. It is a very simple process, very material and one that has been achieved technical perfection but today it has fallen into decline as an industrial system. As a result, gelatin-silver prints now possess a nostalgic aura. The latest technology in which ink is placed on paper, and that in which the blacks gradually rise up out of the paper may appear the same at first glance, but the feeling cannot help but be completely different. This skin-like texture of the image is something that these photographic prints have preserved.

In this *Tsumari Story* series, the peaceful snow landscapes create a powerful impression, but eventually winter ends and spring comes to the mountain village, the rich streams of snowmelt giving rise to bounty and allowing countless plants prosper. Summer is then followed by autumn, in the ever-repeating cycle of nature, and human lives reflect this. A man and woman meet, a child is born, creating a family. An image of love and birth, life, death and rebirth. The twentieth century technology of gelatin-silver photography is used boldly to express familial love, the cycle of life and the mutability of the world.

There are two ways in which we, living in the contemporary world, may orient ourselves towards the future. One is to always use the newest things and think of the newest trends. The other is the opposite—to look to the past and revive it. 'Learning from the past' may be a rather classic expression, but it is also a method of looking to the future. In this way, the words of the *Tsumari Story* are supported by the *Gelatin-Silver Story*.

[Photographer, Artist, Professor of Tokyo University of the Arts]