

Romance Is Dead

BRUCE AND NORMAN YONEMOTO
"MIRROR OF DESIRE"
KUNSTVEREIN IN HAMBURG
9 JUL – 2 OCT 2022

In the films of Bruce (*1949) and Norman Yonemoto (1946–2014) art is portrayed not only as pretentious, but lame. This, perhaps, is why art's institutions and markets have not set great store by the vast oeuvre of Japanese American brothers, produced from the 1970s onwards. But this is more a testament to the well-known vanity of the scene, than to the quality of the works themselves. Across the selection of eight films that make up the exhibition at Kunstverein in Hamburg, there are cheesy car adverts mixed with poolside incest, the artist Jerry Drevva's sperm-soaked diaries, and theater icon Spalding Gray's daddy issues, not only because anything goes, but because anything contains a something that might matter.

"You people are disgusting," shouts Goldie Glitters, the drag queen protagonist of the feature-length melodrama *Garage Sale* from 1976, to the attendees of a gallery opening. The final straw for her is when two people dressed as a pussy and a dick rub against each other to general applause. Love and copulation are also very much the themes of Goldie's own story, but it is told without art's customary mixture of abstraction and irony. The Yonemotos subvert and manipulate the language of Hollywood with refreshing straightforwardness, and although their plots and characters very much wear their intentions and failures on their sleeves, there is a natural and generous complexity to the impression the viewer is left with. Goldie divorces her hunk husband, Hero, because she is bored of him. (He takes her to an opening in an effort to seem more interesting, and duly fails.) But what stands between the consummation of their love is not so much boredom as vanity and ambition. We can glean this from poetically isolated and incongruent clips in which, for instance, Hero follows a gardener around an industrial greenhouse as he

cuts flowers, or walks in on a music critic who had killed himself because music did not flatter him in return. The Yonemotos' characters oscillate between banality and borderline hysteria, but it is precisely in their farcical nature that we find their humanity.

An aspiring actress in *Green Card: An American Romance* (1982) insists that she makes *movies*, not films. Films, we understand, err on the side of art and thus are not worth pursuing. But what, then, is this? The Yonemotos produce a subtle sense that we are the audience of something base and deficient, which, through some miracle of courage or faith, nonetheless insists upon being in the world in a profound way. As such, the works are utterly disarming and at the same time dizzyingly meta. *Green Card* follows Sumi, a Japanese woman who marries for a visa in order to become an artist, but finds herself ironically trapped in the pursuit of freedom. Did she marry Jay, the surfer dude, or did she marry America itself? Is this her dream, or everybody else's? The work goes some way to put words to the Baudrillardian collapse so on the literati's lips in the 80s: that when



View of "Mirror of Desire," Kunstverein in Hamburg, 2022



Stills from Bruce and Norman Yonemoto
Made in Hollywood, 1990
 Color, sound, 56:12 min.

everything has turned into an image, as Sumi puts it, "you can't tell which reality is more real." She begs "help me break out of this melodrama." In the end, the answer on offer is to draw a distinction between romance and love; that is, to stop wanting, and start simply having what's already there.

In this, the Yonemotos seem to go back to romanticism and resolve some of the questions as to where its famous irony, longing, and relishing of absence should lead us, if not to modernism's chase into nothingness; signifiers detaching to the point, not only of

illegibility, but literal insignificance. Of course, Hollywood, already the receptor for Germany's post-romantic music composers and writers since the inter-war years, is the perfect place to speak from. The films are full of porn, allegory, Freudian family drama, and transgressions of primal taboos – things which have always been the stuff of art – only the structures that would hold them in place are crumbling even as one terribly acted scene turns into the next.

In *Blinky the friendly hen* (1978), the artist Jeffrey Vallance exhumes the remains of a supermarket chicken he'd

buried ten years prior and submits them for forensic examination. Where the endpoint of Andy Warhol's pursuit seemed to be that everything and nothing is art, that capitalism is banal, and so art must necessarily be the same, here, as across the Yonemotos' oeuvre, we see that the language of consumerism, advertisement, and the mainstream film industry can be utilized in art without being emptied of meaning. Of course, there is nothing to learn from the bones of Vallance's chicken, except that matter can be found where we left it.

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