

## **Tokyo Story,**

by Emily Allchurch

Francis Hodgson for Manchester Art Gallery, March 2015

In her re-makes of landscapes by the nineteenth century woodblock master Hiroshige, the British artist Emily Allchurch has pulled off a remarkable tribute.

Hiroshige is too easily misremembered as somehow 'traditional'. Because he became one of the artists of the Ukiyo-e who most visibly influenced the Impressionists, we think of him as 'old' to their 'radical'. Van Gogh owned Hiroshige prints, and copied him verbatim. Ukiyo-e is normally translated as the 'floating world' (as in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel) but it really means the temporary, the urban. A phrase such as 'pop culture' or 'street life' comes pretty close. Hiroshige was working at a time when the hesitant opening of Japan to outside influences was straining established social customs and his prints are at least as much to do with rapid change as they are to do with slow tradition. The series upon which Allchurch has based her own, *A Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, was made in 1856-1858, a troubled period of flux just a handful of years before the Meiji Restoration signalled the end of the Shogunate of Edo (modern Tokyo).

It is this aspect of Hiroshige that Allchurch has seized upon. Her Tokyo contains homeless people sleeping rough and a recurring pair of graffiti-ed teenagers, as well as the modern neon skyline of constant corporate branding. It is an uncomfortable city, in which the skies take on lurid colours and small details can be strident. A puddle reflects electric green light, apparently from nowhere, and a very proper catfish swims in a pond under a jettisoned tin can. Allchurch is asking us to see that Tokyo, for so long the epitome of the successful adoption of ( some ) Western values in the East, looked under terrific stress, even before the financial collapse and the disasters consequent upon the great East Japan earthquake of 2011.

Old against new, selfish individual against disciplined mass. There's a security camera in one of these pictures which asks a question: didn't we used to think of Tokyo as a place of such order that a security camera was unthinkable?

Yet all of this serious enquiry is presented in an utterly charming way. These are light pictures which treat of serious matters, a happy reverse of so much contemporary art which is ponderous only to treat of trivia. Allchurch keeps Hiroshige's delightful framing, where a large object in the near foreground may well not have any particular significance. It is good to look at the new versions next to the originals. In *Tokyo Story* the artist changes many things: her versions are neither slavish nor loose. The standard cartouches bearing the signature or the title in a wood-block print are reworked as various banners or signs in Allchurch's. A Hiroshige plantation of irises becomes a lotus garden, for example. But always she keeps the mood of Hiroshige's originals. These pictures are sharp and telling in their parts, but serene overall. It is always worth taking those two views of these pictures. You need to get really close and to peer, because there are details everywhere to read. But you also need to stand at the back of the room and gaze, because mood and atmosphere and air are not in the details alone.

As physical pictures, they are certainly not what they seem from a distance. Allchurch has made herself a specialist in a kind of extreme collage. Each picture is digitally manipulated from dozens if not hundreds of originals that she took in a remarkably brief visit to Tokyo. So the view they add up to is not of Tokyo as it is now, but a view of how Tokyo would have been had it kept the proportions of the mid-nineteenth century. It's a series of fictions. The real high-rises have obscured lines of sight which existed then, so Allchurch restores them. By dexterously and digitally rebuilding the city as a might-have-been or could-have been, Allchurch allows us constantly to compare it to how it once was. In *Tokyo Story No. 4*, she expressly alerts us to this need to keep comparing by including the catalogue of the Hiroshige prints, open at the view upon which this very picture is based.

Allchurch's mastery of this new technology reminds us that in its day, the woodblock itself was a new communication technology, achieving undreamed possibilities of reproduction and distribution. As the woodblock carvers and colourers achieved their miracles of detail, so Emily Allchurch achieves a smoothness of transition that is itself almost incredible. She can make dozens of pictures of the surface of water, for example, look like a seamless view, and never once does the angle of the waves or a shift in scale betray her process. Each individual component photograph becomes a pixel in the finished work; the new digital processes of selection and recombination are more important than the old photographic mantras of taking correctly. Yet always her pictures feel close to the illustrations that gave rise to them. She is not an artist you can 'catch out' for eureka moments of insight into her process. I looked for a little signature, sneaked in somewhere and recurring, but if there is one, I never found it. There are little jokes all over, but always jokes in Hiroshige's character, not jokes at his expense.

Allchurch has made these works both as transparencies mounted in light boxes and as prints. They are thoughtful, elegant, sometimes funny reflections on a country in which the balance between the utmost modernity and deep respect for tradition is a fine and precarious one. By anchoring her pictures in a very well known set from the past and yet making them with fluid mastery of the very latest technology, Allchurch neatly completes the circle by perfectly suiting her medium to her message.

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