

RACHEL HOPE ALLAN



*NOT JUST ANOTHER SHINJUKU
LOVE HOTEL*

**RDS Gallery
2022**

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LOVE HOTEL*

Essays on the Occasion of the Exhibition
at RDS Gallery, 6 Castle Street, Dunedin,
13 May–18 June 2022

Occasional Essays Series
Editors
Alistair Fox and Hilary Radner

RDS GALLERY

Cover Image: *Pretty on the Inside* (Rachel Hope Allan, 2020), archival print on Moab slick rock Metallic paper, 300gsm.

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Contents

A City of Contradictions

Takashi Shogimen 1

Not Just Another Travelogue: Silence, Nostalgia and
Pathos in Rachel Hope Allan's Photographs of Japan

Federico Freschi 5

Making You Making Me: Rachel Hope Allan's "Not Just
Another Shinjuku Love Hotel"

Lucian Howard 11

Artist's Statement 18

Contributors 19



Arashiyama (Rachel Hope Allan, 2021)

Archival print on Moab Entrada, 300gsm, 200 mm x 200 mm

1

A City of Contradictions

By Takashi Shogimen

Today Tokyo is known as one of the world's megacities. But perhaps it is not well known that it has been one of the largest cities in the world for nearly three centuries. Under the Tokugawa Shogun regime (1603-1867), Tokyo, which was known as Edo, grew into the largest political and economic center of Japan. The population of Edo around 1750 was approximately 550,000, comparable to Paris, the then largest European city only next to London.

Tokyo literally means the capital in the East. Until the fall of the Shogun regime and the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the capital was Kyoto in western Japan. Japan's capital is traditionally the Japanese imperial seat. The migration of the imperial residence from Kyoto to Tokyo defined the latter as the nation's capital.

Tokyo is a city of contradictions. One such contradiction is the juxtaposition of modernity and pre-modernity. The Meiji Restoration marked the beginning of Japan's modernization and Westernization. Yet, at the heart of the constitution of "modern"

Japan was the inviolable authority of Japanese emperor who claimed to have descended from the one and the same lineage from prehistoric times. The coexistence of the ancient and the modern is visually symbolized by Tokyo's landscape that centers on the imperial palace surrounded by skyscrapers. Likewise, a *Shintō* (Japan's indigenous religion) shrine is often wedged between modern office buildings. Some of Rachel Hope Allan's photographs in this exhibition—for instance, the *Shintō* priest's ride in an urban street and the juxtaposition of traditional mural and a miniature Christmas tree—capture the dissonance between the modern and the ancient.

This contradiction is amplified by the hyper-modern pursuit of efficiency and constant change. The so-called convenience stores—such as “Lawsons”—epitomize the tireless search for an efficient lifestyle at the expense of employees who must be content with the pay of what is well below New Zealand's minimum wage. The Japanese railway service's rigorous pursuit of punctuality is exemplified by the train conductor's apologies to the customers for one-minute delays. Meanwhile, Tokyo's urban landscape is ceaselessly changing. Even my friends who have lived in Tokyo for decades, lose their way if they don't visit an area for several years as they no longer recognize it. Bulldozers and cranes are ubiquitous, demolishing buildings only a few decades old and constructing new ones. Some photographs of this exhibition portray rather traditional houses, yet they are increasingly rare in Tokyo, forming sharp contrast with Kyoto, whose historic architecture is better preserved.

Behind the interminable changes of façade, however, is a persistent mode of thinking and feeling. *Wakon yōsai*—Japanese spirit and Western technology—was a national slogan when late-nineteenth-century Japan began its modernization. The Japanese were determined to remain Japanese in spirit even though they adopted a Western lifestyle, customs, and learning. This dual structure is represented by Western style food served in Japan: they may appear to be Western on the surface, but it may be made with distinctively Japanese ingredients just like the traditional Japanese sweets. Pasta dishes served in Tokyo are often unmistakably Japanese—not Italian—with Japanese ingredients and flavor.

But what does it exactly mean to be Japanese? Japanese culture is characterized by the distinctive way in which it transforms foreign cultures it assimilates.¹ Japanese culture does not have autonomous, self-defining features; it only manifests its distinctiveness through contact with other cultures. This is best illustrated, once again, by *Shintō*. It does not have its own original doctrines; instead, it borrows doctrines from Buddhism, Confucianism, and other foreign religions. As a symbol of Japanese culture, *Shintō* is like a slow cooker. The cooker can accept any ingredients. But once the ingredients are thrown into it, it transforms them into something else. The converse of this is that Japanese culture never tolerates the alterity of assimilated foreign cultures. It “Japanizes” them without exception. Hence, “foreign bodies” to Japanese culture living in Japanese society are existentially precarious. Foreigners who deeply immerse themselves in

Japanese life would surely feel the social pressure of de-centering their cultural self, like melting ingredients in the slow cooker. However, for those who can tolerate cultural self-dislocation, Japanese culture may indeed have a dangerous attraction as they slowly blend into the juxtapositions of modern and pre-modern Japan.

¹ Takashi Shogimen, "Dialogue, Eurocentrism and Comparative Political Theory: A View from Cross-Cultural Intellectual History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 77.2 (2016), 323-345.

2

Not Just Another Travelogue: Silence, Nostalgia and Pathos in Rachel Hope Allan's Photographs of Japan

By Federico Freschi

The camera is an extension of our perception. A photograph is an extension of our memory.

Halla Beloff¹

Taken over the course of repeated visits to Tokyo and other Japanese cities, Rachel Hope Allan's photographs present a quietly compelling alternative to the conventional travelogue. While they share with all travel photography the fascination with the alluring otherness of a place and culture that is different from one's own, they do so in ways that disrupt both the touristic clichés of carefully framed landmarks and other obvious signifiers of place, and the documentary convention of an ostensibly objective record of contemporary life in a highly industrialized megacity. With their

high-contrast, saturated tones and seemingly arbitrary compositions, they have a furtive, fleeting quality that evokes both the elusiveness of the moment and the instability of memory. They are, to paraphrase Halla Beloff, at once an extension of both perception and memory.

There is a quietly contemplative quality about Allan's Japanese photographs that belies the Instagram clichés of neon-lit streets thronged with impossibly large crowds or the picturesque charm of cherry-blossoms, tiled pagodas and Mount Fuji silhouetted against cloudless skies. Rather, in their focus on aspects of Japanese city life that are mundane, marginal or of little obvious visual interest—motorcycles at an intersection of side streets (*HONDA*, 2021); a pile of paper packages spray and a spray of white phalaenopsis orchids wrapped in orange paper awaiting collection on a pavement (蘭 [orchid], 2021); a display of seafood on a bed of crushed ice (*Just Down Kuyakusho-dori*, 2021)—they show the city as at once familiar and strange: a place like any other that is quite unlike any other. As she puts it, “the quintessential Japanese photograph is around every corner, everywhere is so beautiful. But it's the unseen bits, the stuff that happens behind the huge white doors...I'm interested in what's *not* meant to be seen—there is beauty in that; it shows what a place is really like.”²

In an increasingly crowded and visually saturated world this quality of not-seeing, of not processing the redundancies of omnipresent visuality, is a necessary tactic to preserve a sense of self in the context of contemporary urban life. This must be particularly true for

a city like Tokyo, famously the world's largest metropolitan area. Yet, for all its scale, urban density, and omnipresent urban infrastructure, it is a quality of quiet introspection and of simulated calm that intrigues Allan. She describes the experience of being in huge, often subterranean, shopping or train station malls, with air “that doesn't taste like air” and the disconcerting sound of birdsong piped in to simulate the experience of being outside. “It's very unsettling,” she says. “You realize you're in a simulation designed to keep you calm and ordered because there are so many people. You need to be calm, controlled and ordered otherwise there would be absolute mayhem.”

The sense of simulated experience is further conveyed in the animal cafes and themed clubs that proliferate in the big cities. In the former patrons can see and interact with various animals—from obviously domesticated creatures like cats and dogs, to unlikelier candidates like snakes, hedgehogs, and owls. In the latter, visitors can get to experience a variety of manufactured thrills, including being scared; being fed by a nurse; having a boyfriend for an hour; being cuddled for an hour. *Fukuro no Su Café* (2021) is a glimpse into an owl café, with three owls huddled in the shallow space of shop window, their stuffed-toy avatars perched mockingly on a shelf above them. And like the stuffed toys, these animals are both a form of entertainment and comfort as well as being disposable. Allan describes them as being “drugged and dosed so that people can sit and have their experience with them. I find it quite challenging. I remember sitting in a capybara café; the capybara coming up and having snuggles, owls flapping around...just an

absolute horror show. I realized that this is going to happen for them again and again every day and there's no end."³ In *alcatraz* (2021), taken in a mental asylum-themed club, a young woman with a with short bob dressed in a nurse's uniform leans into the picture frame, as if about to administer a treatment to an out-of-frame patient: "They tie you up and syringe feed you while you're in a cell. The food was revolting; the nurses are hilarious and funny...you have lots of these very weird experiences."

There is both pathos and irony in seeking comfort and connection with complaisant animals or seeking out vicarious abjection in a city whose greater metropolitan area has a population of over 37 million. These qualities of pathos and irony infuse Allan's work and allow us to see that photography is indeed, as Susan Sontag memorably argued, "an elegiac art, a twilight art" that enables us "to participate in another person's (or things') mortality, vulnerability, mutability."⁴ Inasmuch as her work offers an insight into contemporary Japanese life, these are offered without judgment: "None of the work has ever been a comment on social issues in Japan, or 'this way is right, this way is wrong'; it has never been that, rather, it has always about enjoying being there, enjoying the silence, the colors, the light, the architecture, everything that is Tokyo."

Above all—and again somewhat ironically given the scale and bustle of the city—it is a sense of silence that Allan finds most compelling about her experience of Japan and that infuses her photographs. In this context the experience of public transport

holds a particular fascination for her. *pastries & beer* (2021) takes us into the dimly lit interior of a tram car, the figure of an elderly female passenger partially silhouetted against the drawn blinds. For Allan the picture conjured by the light falling on the orange seats and reflecting off the chrome and paintwork was both “pristine and beautiful,” but also somehow out of time, an image that could have come from any era. It is the sense of suspended animation, of the necessary yielding to the moment entailed by the omnipresent experience of public transport in Japan that fascinates her; a sense of “weird peacefulness with everyone completely calm and quiet, people often sleeping between stops.” In *Silence* (2015) we see two schoolboys in quaintly anachronistic black uniforms seated in a train carriage, their wide-brimmed bowler hats and white spread collars contrasting compellingly with the bright orange seat and chrome fittings of the train. While this image may, as Allan freely acknowledges, problematically suggest a sense of “othering,” it is more the sense of composure and being authentically in the moment that attracted her attention: “These boys would sit in the same space every day at that time, as if everyone acknowledged that it was *their* seat. They had this sense of being themselves in a world that was so busy, it was a beautiful thing to behold. And the quiet, so quiet....”

Although, like many a traveling photographer before her, she seeks out and brings to us new experiences from a strange place for their own sake, Allan's images of Japan are certainly no ordinary travelogue. To some extent they share the Westerner's enduring fascination with Japan, what Rutherford Alcock⁵ described in 1863

as “a country of paradoxes and anomalies, where all—even familiar things—put on new faces, and are curiously reversed.”⁶ But in her work this fascination is tempered by a quality of gentle incisiveness; the photographs have a sense, not so much of being a “sliver of time preserved,”⁷ as of a veil lifted fleetingly on an elusive sense of nostalgia, for places unseen and lives unknown.

¹ Halla Beloff, *Camera Culture* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1985), 9.

² This and subsequent quotes from the photographer Rachel Hope Allan in conversation with Federico Freschi, 18 April 2022.

³ Capybara are considered “the largest rodent on earth...and are closely related to guinea pigs.” <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/facts/cabybara-facts>, consulted 2 May 2022.

⁴ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, Penguin, 1979), 15.

⁵ Sir John Rutherford Alcock (1809-97), the first British diplomatic representative to live in Japan.

⁶ Quoted by Lorraine Sterry, *Victorian Women Travelers in Meiji Japan* (Leiden: Brill Publishing, 2009), 42.

⁷ Beloff, *Camera Culture*, 9

3

Making You Making Me: Rachel Hope Allan's “Not Just Another Shinjuku Love Hotel”

By Lucian Howard

...I bought you mail order
My plain wrapper baby
Your skin is like vinyl
The perfect companion...
Inflatable doll
Lover ungrateful
I blew up your body
But you blew my mind...

Roxy Music, “In Every Dream Home a Heartache”¹

Photography is almost invariably autobiographical. Closed circuit television and camera traps aside, physical reality demands it. Someone must frame the subject. Someone must press the shutter button. American historian Alan Trachtenberg has observed that “as a general rule, we choose to see a photograph either as a mechanical transcription of a field of light with randomly disposed objects, or as an intentional reordering of that field into a deliberate meaning.”² Importantly, these two modes of seeing need not exist in opposition. Although photographs are arguably objective records, they are records directed by the subjectivity of the photographer, who must be co-present with what is represented at the initial moment of creation. A photograph may be “a mechanical transcription,” but it is also a photographer’s story—both their life and the evidence of their life.

If most photographs are autobiographical, then the photographs that make up “Not Just Another Shinjuku Love Hotel” are more autobiographical than most. Drawn from series of images created between 2013 and 2019 by artist and educator Rachel Hope Allan, “Not Just Another Shinjuku Love Hotel” is an unabashed (but not uncritical) love letter to Tokyo—the megalopolis Allan regards as her second home. Though the images in the ongoing series were created throughout Tokyo (and indeed Japan more broadly), Shinjuku acts as the emotional nexus of the work, with a number of the images being made in, or in response to, the special ward.

Shinjuku is my kind of place. A little bit dirty and a little bit dangerous.

Rachel Hope Allan³

Described by celebrated Japanese photographer Daidō Moriyama as “an overcrowded stadium of people’s desires where jumbled thoughts whirl,” Shinjuku is home to both the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex and Tokyo’s notorious entertainment and red-light district, Kabukichō.⁴ A barely decent cornucopia of temptation, commerce, and consumption, Shinjuku is riddled with unexpected juxtapositions and expected danger. For Allan it’s an easy place to love—beautiful and grimy, traditional and modern, unbearably loud and shockingly silent.⁵ As of 2022, the population density of Shinjuku is 18,727 per square kilometer (for comparison the population density of urban Auckland is around 2,500 per square kilometer), yet despite the intensity, the sheer number of bodies, the images that comprise “Not Just Another Shinjuku Love Hotel” have a calmness to them, a stillness, even an emptiness.

The exhibition consists of seventeen images of various sizes printed on various papers. Sixteen of the images are in color, while one, a large triptych, is in black and white. For Allan the printing is as much a part of the creative process as capturing the image—every choice carries meaning. Take *Pretty on the Inside* (2020), for example. It is the largest of the color images, almost life-size, and is printed on a metallic paper that reflects the viewer, making them a part of the work. The image itself is shot through a glazed window,

and includes reflections of its own, enhancing the translocative effect of the print. Depending on where the image is viewed from, the viewer becomes the photographer, the photographer's companion, or perhaps just a passer-by out on a cool Tokyo evening. Allan's story is momentarily the viewer's story, her subjectivity the viewer's subjectivity. In contrast, the smaller works distance the viewer from the place and time of capture, even as they invite the viewer in. These images are heavily vignetted, and the blacks, supported by a matte paper, are dark enough to get lost in. Yet the closer we come to these intimately sized prints the further away we find ourselves. As we peer through a shadowed tunnel, our attention attracted to the light at the center of the frame, we are acutely aware that we are looking through someone else's eyes, through someone else's memory.

I had been dreaming about this place since I was 14.

Rachel Hope Alan⁶

Jennifer Green-Lewis has argued that the places we build for ourselves define who we are, and that it is the desire for identity, rather than identity itself, that fuels our desire for a place we can feel at home.⁷ So how does Allan place herself? What tools does she use? Much of Allan's past work has been made using her beloved 1940s Linhof press camera. However, for "Not Just Another Shinjuku Love Hotel," Allan reached for her iPhone. In part, this was surely a practical decision: when travelling a large camera can get in the way of being present; it can draw unwanted attention and

create unwanted expectations. An iPhone, in contrast, goes unnoticed (perhaps even by the photographer herself). But the use of an iPhone provides distinct artistic opportunities as well. Nostalgia and authenticity immediately present themselves as concerns as pre-enabled film/lens/flash simulations become a possibility. Meanwhile, the miniature image sensor and artificially intelligent processing of the iPhone create a subtly synthetic rendering of the world. Every image contains an unavoidable oscillation of objectivity as digital noise-reduction smooths out detail and turns skin to vinyl. Where noise remains, it exists as digital grime—micro-glitches that subvert transmission. This combination of homogeneity and disruption mirrors the complex and multifaceted character of Tokyo (and indeed Japan) itself.

Another mirror (and disruption) can be found in the almost nuclear glow that permeates many of the works. Allan calls it her “Tokyo green.”⁸ For Allan the green is simultaneously one of generation and contamination; it is the beautiful but sinister shading that Tokyo has had for her since reading Ryū Murakami’s dystopian cyberpunk novel *Coin Locker Babies*. Fabricated through the use of Hipstermatic’s film/lens/flash simulation software (Allan was involved in the original testing of the application), the green glow is retro-futurist—simultaneously nostalgic and forward-looking—a juxtaposition that seems to echo Japan’s own tangled relationship with tradition and technology.

I never meant to fall in love with Japan.

Rachel Hope Allan⁹

Chieko Iwashita argues that our understanding of the world is heavily influenced by the media we consume; that media representations, both visual and textual, mediate our experiences of real places.¹⁰ This seems right to me, and it's an argument that Allan's work substantiates. Photography, as an action, is a meaning-making process. It is a way of entering into dialogue with the world, understanding it, and locating ourselves within it. Occasionally though, it is something else as well. It is a way of creating the world. Looking at Allan's images we are reminded that "Not Just Another Shinjuku Love Hotel" is a love letter, and that love is directed from within. The internal overlays the external, not the other way around. As the images ask questions about objective and the subjective, the real and the synthetic, they simultaneously portray a particular vision of Tokyo that Allan has fallen in love with. A vision that has become her home. In every dream home a heartache

¹ Roxy Music, "In Every Dream Home a Heartache," side 1 track 5 on *For Your Pleasure*, Associated Independent Recording, 1973, vinyl record.

² Alan Trachtenberg, "Through a Glass Darkly: Photography and Cultural Memory," *Social Research* 75, no. 1 (2008): 122.

³ Rachel Allan "Not Just Another Shinjuku Love Hotel." *Scope: Contemporary Research Topics (Art and Design)* 22, (2021): 120.

⁴ Daidō Moriyama, "Artist Daido Moriyama—In Pictures | Tate," TATESHOTS, 11 October 2012, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/daido-moriyama-11595/daido-moriyama-pictures> accessed 7 May 2022.

⁵ Allan, 19-20.

⁶ Allan, 17.

⁷ Jennifer Green-Lewis, "At Home in the Nineteenth Century: Photography, Nostalgia, and the Will to Authenticity," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 22, no. 1 (2000): 70.

⁸ Rachel Allan, conversation with author, 6 April 2022. All information not explicitly cited is taken from this conversation.

⁹ Rachel Allan, "Not Just Another Shinjuku Love Hotel," 20.

¹⁰ Chieko Iwashita, "Media Representation of the UK as a Destination for Japanese Tourists: Popular Culture and Tourism," *Tourist Studies* 6, no. 1 (2006): 59-62.

4

Artist's Statement

by Rachel Hope Allan

“Not Just Another Shinjuku Love Hotel” is a love letter of sorts. A glimpse into my now, not-so-secret love affair. I never meant to fall in love with Japan. With the order, the crows and the neatly piled up rubbish. I do see the women who quietly weep on the trains, the inequity, ingrained misogyny, the size shaming and excessive drinking. I see the Animal Rights abuse, abandonment of elders and disabled people and the excessive demands placed on salarymen who are literally worked to death. But I love the light, the order, the extremes, the tradition, the innovations, the toilets, the trains, the ceremony, the smells, the precision, the honor, and of course, the egg sandwiches. It is a country of contradictions: empty baseball fields and overstuffed trains, coin locker babies and Ramen Kings. As I write this it has been too many days since I was last in Japan. I closely guard my incense that was created for the Emperor. I dream of the ground floor of Takashimaya, the insanity of Don Quixote and the ecstasy of finding the Higashi-Shinjuku exit at rush hour. I long for the taste of tsukemono and the unexplainable silence.¹

¹ A longer version of this statement was originally published in Rachel Hope Allan, “Not Just Another Shinjuku Love Hotel,” *Scope (Art and Design)* 22 (2021): 16–22.

Contributors

Rachel Hope Allan

As a darkroom alchemist, an appographer, a collector and a purveyor of snippets of light, I engage with different modes of image production while acknowledging and subverting their associated values. My complicated relationship with photography has had me hiding from mountain lions, X-raying New Zealand's most critically endangered native wildlife and developing tintypes in the basements of historic houses. I have transformed myself into a knitted toy, blown up Rescue Annie Dolls and turned men into birds.

My wide-ranging practice is embedded within a contemporary dialogue that examines the ritualistic act of photography in itself, and extends from first generation, traditional, darkroom-based processes through to digital and hybridized liquid photography. I am fascinated by the notions of the authentic and the replicant; my work incessantly scratches at the surface of reality and investigates the notion of loss and fetishization of objects, animals, and process.

Rachel Hope Allan is an artist, educator and writer from New Zealand currently based in Ōtepoti | Dunedin. She received an MFA with Distinction (2013) from the Dunedin School of Art, where she is now a principal lecturer and studio coordinator in photography. Rachel exhibits nationally and internationally most recently at The Auckland Festival of Photography in 2021.

Federico Freschi

Federico Freschi (PhD, University of the Witwatersrand, 2006) was appointed Professor and Head of College of Te Maru Pūmanawa | Creative Practice & Enterprise at the Otago Polytechnic in October 2019. The bulk of his scholarly work explores the ways in which nationalism, politics and identity are imbricated in art, architecture, and design, with a specific focus on South Africa and other settler-colonial contexts. Recent publications include two co-edited, peer-reviewed books, *Troubling Images: The Visual Culture of Afrikaner Nationalism* (Wits University Press, 2020) and *The Politics of Design: Privilege and Prejudice in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia and South Africa* (Otago Polytechnic Press, 2021).

Lucian Howard

Lucian Howard is a visual artist based in Ōtepoti | Dunedin. He holds a MPhil (2015) from the Australian National University, and a Graduate Diploma in Visual Arts with Distinction from Otago Polytechnic (2020). He is interested in areas of intersection and emptiness.

Takashi Shogimen

Takashi Shogimen (PhD, University of Sheffield, 1998) is Professor of History at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. Before coming to New Zealand, he was Research Fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge, and Research Associate for the Medieval Texts Editorial Committee at the British Academy.

Takashi's research interests encompass the history of medieval European political thought, comparative history of political thought focusing on Western Europe and East Asia and modern Japanese intellectual history. Author of over five monographs in English and Japanese, Takashi's recent books in Japanese explore the history and theory of patriotism in Western Europe and Japan. He has also published numerous articles in English and Japanese on medieval European political thought, comparative political thought, and modern Japanese political thought, while actively contributing to national media in Japan commenting on current affairs, especially nationalism.

