

THE PROCESS

IN WHICH AN ARTIST DISCUSSES MAKING A PARTICULAR WORK

Jimmy Robert, *Reprise*



Like many contemporary artists, Jimmy Robert moves easily between photography, film, sculpture, collaborative performance, and dance. Where he's unusual is in his singular fixation on paper. Rarely does paper hang flush and unobtrusive in his works. Instead, Robert exploits paper's physical qualities: crumpling it, hanging it in unframed images curling off the wall, crushing or folding it into frames or other

restraints, casting it in plaster (sometimes painfully affixed to his body). Paper made visible and haptic gives Robert the scope to explore his favorite themes: the chasm between a live act and its documentation, how representation is impossible (but interestingly doomed), how images transmogrify across media, the brinksmanship of words and art both. We spoke via Skype, from my home in Chicago and his home in Berlin. —Jude Stewart

THE BELIEVER: What was the starting point for this piece?

JIMMY ROBERT: The beginning of *Reprise* is two images, a print by [painter Katsushika] Hokusai, *Travellers Caught in a Sudden Breeze at Ejiri*, and an interpretation of that print, called *A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai)*, by Jeff Wall, who used this image as a reference to make a light-box. All of this was activated by a monthlong residency I had in Japan, at Kitakyushu, in 2009. I was intrigued by *butoh*, this Japanese style of dance that's very slow, static, and contemplative. I had met [Kitakyushu curator] Akiko Miyake previously at the Yokohama Triennale, in 2008, where I saw Min Tanaka—one of the fathers of *butoh*—perform. Akiko put me in touch with one of Min Tanaka's apprentices, Shiho Ishihara. That's who you see in *Reprise*.

When I first interviewed Shiho, I had lots of questions. I'm not a trained dancer, but I've always been curious about dance and movement. I was wondering if there was a way to take the spirit of both the Hokusai image and that of Jeff Wall and have it animated by a dancer. My task was to make her inhabit not only the wind that carries along the flying papers in this image, but also pushes through the characters, the trees, as a natural force that can be fought against. Shiho performed for me in a field [near Kitakyushu], and I took hundreds of photographs. From these I selected five.

BLVR: How much direction did you give her as to how to represent these characters?

JR: I didn't posit much to her. I didn't know how this type of dance operates. The point was to just let her give her own interpretation of the image.

BLVR: Are there any classic gestures of *butoh* that you felt you *had* to capture?

JR: I was starting as a total neophyte. To me, everything she was doing was *butoh*. There weren't elements that were more *butoh* than others. For me, it was about the forces of nature, and the wind: how she was subjected to it or inhibiting it. Most of the time she had her eyes closed, as if in a trance. I selected the photos I found most expressive or intense. I also want to mention: when Shiho performed,

she wore a dress that belonged to Tatsumi Hijikata, another founder of *butoh*. I found it really touching that she wore that dress. That was a very interesting twist, too; mostly it's men wearing dresses dancing *butoh*, and now here's this woman dancing *butoh* for me in what had been a man's costume.

BLVR: When I first saw *Reprise*, the photos looked like a freeze-frame film. I thought of her as moving from one pose to the next.

JR: Yes, I took shots quite fast. We made a publication as part of this residency. It wasn't bound, just a little box with prints inside on the super thinnest paper you can imagine, like Bible paper, and thicker white papers in between. If you flicked through them rapidly, it would give you the illusion of movement. But I wasn't interested in that so much. I wanted to make this book that wouldn't hold together, that would fall apart just as the paper falls apart in the landscape. I was also thinking about how Jeff Wall translated the Hokusai image into a light-box, something dimensional. I'm often interested in how an image gets represented into a form, into a word, into an object.

BLVR: So the photographs came first for you, not the table. How did the table come into the work?

JR: I had this table made by carpenters in Japan. I wanted to have the prints going in and out of it, as if she was performing on the table as a stage. This style of printing by Hokusai came about in a time known as "the floating world." I wanted to show how the images are fragile, ephemeral, a very thin support for representation. Representation is a concept that's bound to a sense of fragility. It's always only an attempt: representation keeps failing somehow. That's why a lot of my images are falling from the wall, or turning into objects.

On the table you see several slits: those represent the characters in the images. In the Jeff Wall, there are five characters; in the Hokusai, there are seven. I went with five. So I made four slots, and the fifth image is resting on the table at the corner, dangling as if it was about to fall. That's true of the rest of the images, too: they feel as if they have weight, that they're subjected to gravity as an object. It oscillates between image and sculpture.

BLVR: Given that Japanese carpenters made the tables, not you, did you run into any problems of translation along the way?

JR: No, but after the Japan show they weren't happy that I wanted to show the work again elsewhere. They thought this was an object produced in, and funded by, Japan; it should stay in Japan. So I remade it. In Japan the work was actually three tables.

BLVR: The photos are printed on heavy paper, and the flying paper looks like quotidian office paper. Why did you do that?

JR: I use a lot of A4 in my work. It's an index of something domestic, regular, not precious. It always refers to writing. I like that it's an accepted, or an embodied, measure. You may not know the number of centimeters, but you recognize its measurements exactly.

BLVR: I've seen several instances of *Reprise*, and it looks like it's not planned where the loose-leaf paper is going to fall. Do you actually throw the paper?

JR: Oh, no, it's very carefully arranged. It follows the arc of flying paper in the sky, but it's flat on the ground. It has to support the images; it's like a protection for them. If it's not under the images then it doesn't really have a point in the installation.

BLVR: You use paper constantly in your work. Not just photographs curling off the walls, but real paper scattered around, or stuff that looks like paper but that is rendered as solid. Were you drawn to the Hokusai or Jeff Wall because of the presence of paper?

JR: Yes, totally. Paper to me is always a support: to represent, to write, to project, for utterance. It's very interesting when suddenly it comes out of its function of representing and becomes an object of its own. Paper has become a conceptual frame in which I can operate, too—if there's paper present somewhere, or something that could be transformed into paper.

BLVR: Writers are definitely sympathetic to the love of paper. Paper is even more physical now in a virtual world: if you print something out, you've consciously made an object.

JR: That interests me, too. I started as an artist by looking at the works of Marguerite Duras, Maurice Blanchot, writers of the nouveau roman movement. The way they used characters, the narrativity of form and of content—it very much informed how I played with images and representation.

BLVR: Lastly, let's discuss the title, *Reprise*. Why didn't you specifically reference Hokusai or Jeff Wall? That's a choice: not to give the viewer that lifeline, if you will.

JR: If people want to go beyond the surface, they'll ask themselves, What is it a reprise of? That's what the word means in theater: something that's done again. I've relied on the audience's curiosity, I guess. The *New York Times* review of my show at the Japan Society said that very often the works are trying to imitate some of the prints. It was interesting to be suddenly taxed with imitation. With imitation, people think, This is just a rendering of another image. Well, no. It's more a narrative of an image being almost independent, not needing its frame or support to exist, even though that's impossible. That goes back to what I was saying about representation failing: it's never really accurate or faithful to reality; it just keeps on failing. That failure is interesting. Just because a work has failed doesn't make it the end of everything. ★

**COMPREHENSIVE ACCOUNT
OF ANIMALS KILLED
IN THE FEATURE FILMS
OF MICHAEL HANEKE**

- ★ goldfish (tank smashed)
- ★ pig (shot with a bolt gun)
- ★ German shepherd named Rolfi (struck with a golf club)
- ★ sixteen cows (shot with a bolt gun)
- ★ ten horses (three shot and stabbed, one killed by impact, details of other deaths unclear)
- ★ two parakeets (one accidentally suffocated, one crucified with scissors)
- ★ three goats (two eaten by wild dogs, one stabbed)
- ★ dog (struck by a van, as related in a dinnertime story)
- ★ chicken (beheaded by a child with an axe, in a dream)

—list compiled by Reid Van Mouwerik