Bruno Quinquet ***Of Salarymen and Flowers***

Bruno Quinquet traces the origin of his "Salaryman Project" to a chance encounter:

"In October 2006, as my nephew came to visit me in Japan, both of us went on a daily excursion near mount Fuji. We were walking in the forest, enjoying the nature and occasionally bumping into other people. Suddenly, a fast paced salaryman with briefcase popped up. We were stopped in our tracks. I took a photo. He was gone. The photo was bad but this initial vision wouldn't leave me. Mount Fuji, the forest and the salaryman."

For Quinquet (France, 1964) who had been trained as an audio engineer in France but has now recently completed photographic studies at Tokyo Visual Arts, this enigmatic appearance of a salaryman complete with suitcase in the middle of a forest was a revelation. At that time Quinquet was not a photographer yet this chance encounter triggered a fascinating photography project. Situated somewhere between documentary style street photography and concept art, the "Salaryman Project" explores aspects of contemporary Japanese culture as manifest by the corporate workers in their suits with briefcases and cellphones and the Japanese love of flower viewing.

In the West, the "Salaryman," サラリーマン, or *Sararīman* has become a pitiable figure, a nameless, faceless, drone who slaves long hours for his company and receives low wages in return for lifelong employment. With their uniform appearance they resembled the bowler hatted Everyman in the paintings of Rene Magritte and Paul Delvaux.

These armies of office workers in their nearly identical dark suits were the cogs in the machinery that built Japan, Inc., in the post-war years. Time and the changes in the new economy have been as devastating to workers in Japan as they have been in the West, and the days of the "jobs for life" that justified the salaryman's sacrifice at a time of near full employment are long gone. A report in *The Economist* from 2008 described the situation thusly, "Once the cornerstone of the economy, the paternalistic relationship between Japan's companies and their salaried employees is crumbling." New jobs and new lifestyles are taking over with new consequences for Japan's salarymen. Wages have fallen by more than 10%, unemployment has breached 5.2%, and burnout on the job has become a national topic of conversation after the startling deaths in the office of several employees and senior managers, a phenomenon known as Karōshi (過労死 *karīshi*?), or "death from overwork". Conversely, social pressures on maintaining one's dignity and social function have led newly dismissed employees to pretend to their families that they are still going to work at the firm. Such ex-workers may also be seen in the parks...

Quinquet approached his project with another concern in mind as well. As a starting photographer, he was nonetheless quite aware of the movement in France to protect the rights of those photographed, the French "*droit à l'image,*" that has greatly affected street photography in the country that once defined the genre. For Quinquet, "what started as a limitation turned into a big fun challenge. And hiding the faces on purpose gives me a strange feeling of "respect" mixed with irreverence, which I find very enjoyable. Also, not focusing on the faces or emotions is a way to enhance the connection of the person with its surroundings and I'm very interested in the city at large." Unable to enter office

Opposite Above *Yamanote line*, 2009
Opposite Below *Meguro*, 2008

buildings that are the real home of the salarymen, Quinquet again turned this challenge into a game: "As a person who never worked in an office, I like to think that this apparent normality hides a fantasy world to which I have no access. All I can do is catch a glimpse of this mystery with my camera. Since I can't go into the office, I find my models at the exit of a building, in the street, in a train, a subway corridor, a park, a temple or a restaurant..."

To make the best of the situation, Quinquet embarked on his quest and photographed his quarry through flowers, through steam, through the glass panes of trains and restaurants always making certain that the salarymen's faces were obscured, rendering them anonymous. With time, the seasons changed. Flowers came and went, cherry trees, the most photogenic and most celebrated of Japanese trees blossomed, and finally leaves turned with the onset of winter. Quinquet became newly inspired and conceived the basis for his approach presenting his work. He writes, "After 2 or 3 months shooting for this project, as I was getting tired, spring came and many places I had already been shooting took a new face. This is when I got the idea for a calendar, and then a business schedule. I started to do some research about how the seasons affect social life in Japan."

He photographed not just the traditional holidays such as April's famous cherry blossom festival, or *Hanami*, when families and corporations gather to view the gorgeous blossoms but also occasions like eel season when Japanese flock to restaurants to celebrate "*doyo no ushinohi*" during the summer between mid-July and early August. Then there is October's *Taiiku No Hi*, or Health and Sports Day, which commemorates the Tokyo Summer Olympics of 1964.

Quinquet combined his images of salarymen with flowers or other graphic signs in a series of diptychs that build a narrative in flowers and social customs of the symbolic life of Japan. The repetition of themes and variations that this entailed was familiar to him from his career as an audio engineer. He writes, "This recombination of images in a narrative series is close to musical or sound composition and appears to me as a natural development. What is interesting is that just like humans, just like sounds, some photos are 'open' and other are 'closed' to communication and association." The diptychs built upon themselves in graphic patterns that ebbed and flowed with the rhythm of the seasons. "From a purely graphic point of view, I like the wide sense of space, the panoramic-like feel of the diptychs. From an early stage, I've had a photo book in mind, and I like to imagine a book that will, on every double page, offer me a feeling of stability. The photos are part of a repetitive system, just like a working day is part of a working week is part of a working year. This is the conservative frame in which I can enjoy freedom and experimentation."

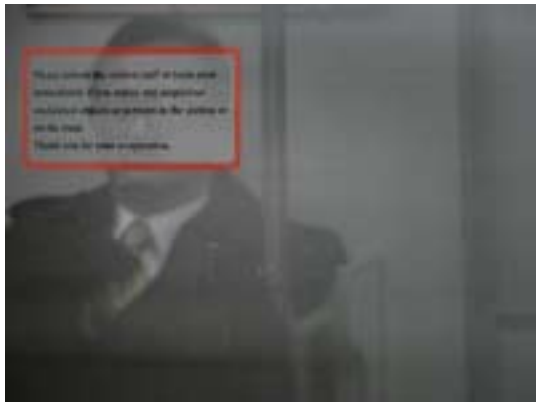
With his interest in the seasons and the salarymen, Quinquet came to the natural mode of presentation that allows him to combine both interests in a single vehicle. He chose to present the diptychs in the form of a B5 sized, 52 week business calendar of the sort that could be found in every stationer.

Bruno Quinquet's view of Japan, of its salarymen and its flowers, is that of an outsider, or Gaijin 外人, who has lived in the country for several years and learned the language. After that chance encounter in 2006 with the sudden, enigmatic appearance of a salaryman in a forest, Quinquet has found an artistic device that lets him explore on one level the world of the salarymen, and through the changes of the seasons as manifest in flowers and foliage, the customs and mores of Japan. His images are simple and graphically compelling, paired as diptychs and assembled in a business planner they chart the year and aesthetically combine two of the mainstreams of Japanese society, the contemporary corporate world of the salarymen, now under great economic pressure, and traditional love for the impermanence of fleeting beauty in the form of those flowers that are here today and gone tomorrow.

It remains to be seen in the next years whether the way of the salaryman will go the same way as last month's flowers, blown away by October's winds. *The Economist* takes a pessimistic view, "Nobu, the young salaryman [interviewed for the article], likes his job but plans to start his own business one day. The older men in his office struck compromises that he is not prepared to endure. 'After 1945, we were left with nothing, so we had to work together, with the same goal and as one team. We were a success, and Japan grew,' he says. 'But this organization doesn't work any more. It has stayed the same for too long. The system has rusted.'"

However the economic winds may blow through Japan, we can at least hope that Bruno Quinquet will be there to make sense of it with his photographs. With this in mind, we should say, "Thank You", or "どうもありがと", "Dōmo arigatō", or "Merci beaucoup!" BILL KOUWENHOVEN

For more information on Bruno Quinquet and the Salaryman project, see **www.brunoquinquet.com**



Clockwise From Top Left *Akihabara*, 2009; *Kasumigaseki*, 2009; *Gotanda*, 2008; *Chuo line*, 2008; *Oedo line*, 2008; *Nishi Shimbashi*, 2008