

Tokyo Story – Emily Allchurch

1. Background research

I researched as much as possible around Hiroshige's 'One Hundred Famous Views of Edo' before and during the creation of my own homage, as it is important for me to have a level of understanding and context for the works I am recreating. With this knowledge as a foundation, I then have to liberate myself somewhat from it, in order to respond to my own experience of Japan. This liberation enables my creative process of sifting through the thousands of images of source material to create my own story – which is an interpretation of Hiroshige's original, from the material/experiences I encountered on my contemporary travels to the city. It is not possible to update each element exactly with its same meaning, as often the legends and customs Hiroshige references are no longer there to encounter and have less relevance and meaning to an audience today. Rather I am interested in finding stories and narratives that might link to the original message, but move on from it to relate more to present-day experience.

All artists' use artistic license to some extent, though some more than others. Hiroshige was a master at manipulating a scene to create a beautiful, evocative composition that would be a commercial success, when the reality of the place was often far less appealing. What first drew my attention to him many years ago was his ability to produce a set of prints about a city or landscape he had never traveled to directly, but created through the study of the Meisho Zue travel guides of the time. This idea of an armchair traveler, very much appealed. Of course this was not the case for 'The One Hundred Famous Views of Edo', which is a fond farewell to his hometown, of which he had intimate knowledge.

2. Travels in Japan

I went to Tokyo with an open mind, unsure how much I would recognize of Hiroshige's vision in the city today, but curious to take up the challenge. Gathering the source material for a project is a very intensive process. I feel like a privileged observer of life. I absorb all the experiences around me to help form an impression of a place, which then gets relayed into the work during the laborious construction stage back home. It's a very intensive, reflective and solitary process, but one that is incredibly open and I feel highly sensitive to everything around me. This feeling was even more apparent to me in Japan as the culture was so alien from my own.

I made a strategic list of places to visit from Hiroshige's series. I then included landmark buildings and places of interest which would be on the list of 'famous views' if it was compiled today. My primary guide was my copy of Hiroshige's *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*. I then transferred his 'mapping' of the city on to contemporary maps and guides of Tokyo. I find that a well-illustrated guidebook is very useful for deciding which places might be useful to visit. I then plan a route for each day, but let the journey unfold very naturally as I gravitate towards things that interest me along the way. It's a very fluid and organic process and an element of luck and chance is involved; for deciding to go down one street over another means I will have a different experience, and my experience on that street is unique to that moment. I am always careful to say that the

resulting works are therefore the culmination of what I saw, what I noticed and what appealed to me in what I encountered. Another person would come back from the same trip with a very different image library to work from.

Of course much of Hiroshige's world has disappeared with the encroachment of the modern city, but some areas were remarkably close, such the temple complex at Asakusa and the moat around the Imperial Palace depicted in *#99 Kinryuzan Temple, Asakusa* and *#54 Benkei* respectively. In the end I was able to find all the components I needed to create my interpretations. I did have to search them out and find inventive ways to assemble them together into a new existence, but all was there to be found in the city today. There seems to be a certain style to Japanese contemporary design and construction that follows a traditional format in terms of ratio, proportion and colouring, that sparked recognition for me. I was certainly not disappointed by the city. In fact I was amazed by the layering and co-existence of old and new.

I also decided to expand my travels in Japan to encompass Kyoto and Nara as I felt these more traditional places would counterbalance the ultra-modern aspects of Tokyo, thus offering a fuller meditation on Japanese culture.

3. Technique

My technique of complex digital collage has been something I've developed over a number of years and satisfied my desire to spend an extended period of time working on a piece, alongside a keen interest in collage, the multiple and constructed landscape in art history. The appropriation of works from the history of art has been a common thread in post-modern practice and my own technique is definitely the result of such a dialogue.

I have developed this way of working, very naturally and intuitively. Having developed this technique for referencing old masters in Western art from a modern-day perspective, the system lent itself very well to an interpretation of Hiroshige's masterpiece.

My work is not a copy of the original, but an appropriation. This is a crucial difference. I use the framework of the original as inspiration and a starting point for my own interpretation. I pay homage to Hiroshige, informed with a level of understanding about the man and the time in which he was working. I then find my own space to respectfully update the work using my experience and imagination. There is a sense of humour in my work, just as Hiroshige's work is imbued with playfulness. However, there is a serious and respectful intention to my approach. They are a homage, not a parody. They start with the language of Hiroshige but they end with my own voice.

It is fundamental to my work that I am working with photography and not painting or printing it. Each photograph I use in my compositions is a record of a real place or object as it was at that particular moment in time. In this way it still functions as a form of documentary record in the classic sense of photography, even though it is then stitched together with other elements to give it a new existence and context. It makes the work seem very real and tangible. People often say how the works look three-dimensional, as though they could simply step into the picture and wonder around.

Each composition blends up to two hundred different photographs into a seamless collage using Adobe Photoshop. These photographs would have been taken in numerous locations, and I select the part of the image I want to use and paste it into the main

composition. In this way, aspects/details from as many as 50 different locations could be depicted in the final piece.

The series is a reflection on elements of Japanese culture, as I saw it, from a Western standpoint. I soon realized that there was little point referencing a particular temple or bridge as Hiroshige had done, as no one location from the original existed enough today to have a dedicated update. On each of the present day locations of Hiroshige's *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* I might find one or two elements to photograph: a temple outbuilding, the shape of a tree, a sign or architectural detail. These amassed into a huge image library of over 6000 photographs, which I classified into headings such as 'temple', 'shrine' and 'bridge'. I knew that I would only be able to make a limited number of re-creations from Hiroshige's series as each image takes me up to four weeks to assemble. It therefore made sense to demonstrate the themes that categorize Hiroshige's series, such as: temples, shrines, bridges, cherry blossom viewing, gardens, views by night, riverside settings etc, and make one generic image to represent each theme. This use of generic themes, rather than specific locations is reinforced in the simple titling of the works.

4. Meanings and examples

I would say that people from a Western culture, unless specifically versed in Japanese heritage, appreciate the Japanese woodblock print primarily for its formal qualities: its daring compositions, brevity of line, luminous colors and virtuoso printing techniques. A great deal of the narrative is actually lost to the Western viewer, unable to decipher the codes and references. However, this has never compromised their appreciation for the genre.

My work most definitely works with these formal qualities, which were the initial appeal to the series. However, once I had an understanding of deeper the nuances and meanings in the works, I did take great care to place an appropriate narrative in each image, in order to build up a story for the work. Thus, I do feel there is a logical link to the original image, however far removed it might appear at first.

Tokyo Story 1: Lotus Garden (after Hiroshige) replaces Hiroshige's Iris Garden for Lotus flowers. In Hiroshige's #64 *Horikiri Iris Garden*, women are depicted picking the irises for commercial sale. In none of my travels in Tokyo did I see women employed in this way. On the contrary, green spaces in the city today are associated with leisure and so in my interpretation a woman is engrossed in the very 21st century pursuit of flower photography. For me this is a more honest way for me to update the original, as this is what I witnessed.

Tokyo Story 2: Bridge (after Hiroshige) is a generic bridge for Japan, although the cartouche in the top right corner is a detail from the 19th century Nihonbashi (Bridge of Japan). The actual bridge I used was at Wadakura Fountain Park, near the Imperial Palace and the site where Hiroshige lived. The bridge appears frequently in the series as a means to connect the past and present.

Tokyo Story 3: Night Harbour (after Hiroshige) celebrates summer evenings and fireworks. The boy and girl are from a mural design and the graffiti – a rare occurrence in Japan, is by a well-known international graffiti artist (so I've been informed).

Tokyo Story 4: Interior (after Hiroshige) has a more personal connection in that the Kimono and personal artifacts in the room belong to a lovely Japanese woman whom I met on the flight over to Tokyo, and who subsequently invited me to her home.

Tokyo Story 5: Cherry Blossom (after Hiroshige) is a story about good / versus bad fortune. The cherry blossom is a popular symbol for the beauty and transience of life. The fortune telling papers are tied to the branch of the tree to avert the bad fortune predicted. The homeless man, fallen on hard times, eats his lonely meal with such dignity, whilst the banner on the left denotes the name of a generous donor to the temple.

Tokyo Story 6: Shrine (after Hiroshige) is a generic shrine: an amalgamation of all the shrine culture I encountered. On my travels through Tokyo, Kyoto and Nara I became aware of the customs, rituals and superstitions connected to worship at shrines and how people of all ages showed a willingness and/or desire to participate to varying degrees. It's still such a significant part of the culture and therefore I felt warranted a work dedicated to it in my series. Here are some significant aspects depicted such as the 'Ema' wooden prayer tablets, the peace garland (with origami cranes) and 'Mizuko Kuyo' fetus memorial. I was constantly amazed by the care and attention to detail such as the wrapping of the central tree's trunk to protect it against the heat of the summer. I also liked the polite notice 'no scribbling here'!

Tokyo Story 7: Nightfall (after Hiroshige) really represents the fusion of old and new Japan which comes alive at night. The backstreets are from traditional Kyoto and are dotted with modern day LED displays advertising beer, a karaoke bar, shopping mart, Metro etc. etc. The beauty of the cherry trees and the topiary shrubs lie next to the ultra efficient vending machine, and the Sumo wrestler and Geisha girl face each other in apparent dialogue at the gateway to what was in Hiroshige's original the Yoshiwara District.

Tokyo Story 8: Temple (after Hiroshige) shares much with the original print (#99 *Kinryuzan Temple, Asakusa*): the same Thunder gate and lantern to form the key components of the composition. I then added specific references to temple culture, such as the *Shimenawa* straw rope with its zigzag paper (*gohei*), which marks the boundary to something sacred. To the left as we enter the scene, an artists' easel and canvas is visible as he paints the pagoda before him. Two women in the distance are walking to pray at the main shrine whilst all around are the commercial and entertainment aspects of temple culture: note the stalls of tourist gifts and the roller-coaster ride in the far distance.

Tokyo Story 9: Bankside (after Hiroshige) is a mixture of Tokyo and Kyoto. The distant riverbank is the Kamo riverbank in the Pontocho district of Kyoto, where young lovers like to congregate on hot summer evenings. In fact most things come in pairs in this piece including the turtles in the mid ground and the basketball and water bottle in the foreground.

Tokyo Story 10: Willow Landscape (after Hiroshige) again uses the physical device of the bridge to link the past with the present. It is also homage to Fuji-san, which revealed itself to me on my last day.

5. Interest in Japanese Graphic Art

I have been interested in Japanese prints for a long time. As a child my parents had a reproduction print of Hokusai's 'Great Wave' on the staircase so I would pass it many times a day. I was fascinated by this terrifying depiction of nature's monumental force and power over man, which was portrayed in such a beautiful, arresting image. This pull and push of beauty and fear has been something that has interested me in my own work.

I became acquainted with Hiroshige's work whilst studying for my MA at the Royal College of Art in 1997-99. I was interested in the sense of journeying he created in a series such as the *53 Stations of the Tokaido Road*. Created whilst a young fire-warden to the Shogun's Palace, Hiroshige had escorted the Emperor along the Tokaido Road from Edo to Kyoto. This series was therefore the result of first hand knowledge and experience and I was drawn in to the people he depicted on their arduous pilgrimage, as well as the changing landscape on route. There is a filmic sense of narration and progression as the images proceed forwards in sequence. The fact that you can still identify the specific stations on the map and in theory stand on the same spot today and follow the route really appeals to my sensibility as an artist. I am a keen walker and my work has always involved walking within it. Whilst collating my image library for any new series of works, the process involves many days of traveling by foot. This is my preferred means of getting around the city so that I can connect with it, as it slowly reveals itself to me. It's fascinating what you discover by chance when at a pedestrian pace from one place to another.

The One Hundred Famous Views of Edo really is a masterpiece, produced at the very end of his life, but at the peak of his ability (he was only 62 when he died of Cholera). I find it a very intimate portrait of his hometown. I love the combination of major sites in Edo, alongside very ordinary scenes of daily life, way beyond the tourist trail. I think a major appeal to me is their portrait format. I enjoy this idea of a 'portrait' of a place, and the striking compositions it enforces, owing to so much middle ground to fill. There is a playfulness, experimentation and daring to his compositions. They often seem cropped in awkward, unharmonious ways in much the same way as objects and people can be unceremoniously sliced off at the edges of a photograph. Hiroshige died a few years before the Shogun's rule ended in 1868, when Japan opened up to the West and photography was officially introduced. However, you do have to wonder if Hiroshige had somehow managed to see examples of the new invention. Either way the daring compositions, remarkable draftsmanship and printing techniques he demonstrates in the *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* had an almighty influence on Western artists when trade was reopened.

They hold a similar appeal to me today. I was fascinated by this comprehensive portrait of a city, captured at a very specific moment in its history and wondered what I would find of it today. Hiroshige was pushing to the limit the techniques available to him through the wood-block printing process. With advances in digital photography and post-production I am able to push a technique of collage today, where the seamlessness enables a believable, yet totally fabricated scene to be created. My previous series *Urban Chiaroscuro* a homage to Piranesi's dark and sinister *Carcere d'invenzione (Imaginary Prisons)* was an exploration of highly complex, labyrinth spaces reflecting the modern European psyche. In stark contrast, I was drawn to the simplified formal qualities of Hiroshige's technique and wanted to transpose this into the use of photography and to reflect upon a culture very different from my own.