Photographic interpretation through slippage

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Abstract

This research asks the question; can photography provide a framework to be both understood and be formed through a series of cultural and linguistic misinterpretations?

Through the creation and development of two distinct methodologies of practice - functional parallelism and formation through dislocation - three bodies of work were created. Each body of work centers on a recognition of cultural and linguistic slippage that I have experience as a Japanese person living in Australia that alerted me to a possible way of reinterpreting and subsequently making photographs. It is what I have come to term a ‘roundabout way’ of interacting with the image where the viewer to see the state of the photograph occurring from the relationship among subjects as images.

This thesis is accompanied by demonstrations of photographic works and interpretations forming in each stage through the slippage.
Declaration

This is to certify that

(i) \textit{the thesis comprises only my original work towards the masters except where indicated in the Preface*},

(ii) \textit{due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used},

(iii) \textit{the thesis is 10,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices OR the thesis is 9,808 words as approved by the RHD Committee.}

Akihiro Okumura 2016
Acknowledgements

This research has been a great opportunity for me to rethink my own point of view as a Japanese artist for the last two years in Japan and Australia. During the research, there has been a lot of meetings with new people to share opinions when I have had chances to absorb their new ideas.

I would first like to thank Dr Stephen Haley, Senior Lecturer and Graduate Research Coordinator, Master of Fine Arts (Visual Arts) of the Victorian College of the Arts at University of Melbourne for helping me with my initial application. He has given me many special considerations to take this study opportunity at Victorian College of the Arts. My own family and I are eternally grateful to his help.

I would most like to thank Dr Kiron Robinson, Lecturer of the Victorian College of the Arts at University of Melbourne for supporting me to develop my own idea of artwork with new ideas that I have had as well as for leading my research and thesis in the right direction. Consistently, he has a keen understanding what I am trying to say about my artworks and ideas in this research.

I would also like to thank the experts who were involved in investigations and interviews in Japan and Australia for this research project: Dr Linda Dennis, Associate Professor of Joshibi University of Art and Design, Japan. Her real-life experience in Japan has become comparative data with experience that I have had in Melbourne. The data obtained from an interview with Linda has been used for this research and making my photographs. Furthermore, Mr Lindsay Dugan, who is currently completing a PhD in Ethnomusicology at University of Melbourne as a Shakuhachi player. His opinions about Japanese way of looking at things that have contributed to recognise distinctions of ways of thinking between Japanese people and Australian people. These findings have kept the research dispassionate.

Lastly, I must express my deepest gratitude to both sets of my parents Yoshihiro and Motoko as well as Yoshiro and Mitsue, and my own family, wife and children, Ayano and Arisu, Akari and Ayumu for providing me with unfailing support and constant encouragement.
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Source: Ordinary Picture, p 114 © Leslie Hewitt
Introduction

The subject of my research is the interpretation of cultural and linguistic differences as a framework for understanding photographs. The research has been conducted through my own experiences of the cultural and linguistic agreements between Japan and Australia. I have used my experiences of these agreements to propose a methodology for the preparation of photographs based on the differing interpretations that arise from the act of viewing.

In my research, my photography has developed through three stages (first, second and third). At each stage, the principal concept in my photography has been the functional parallelism that is constructed from language and the photograph. I believe that I have found in functional parallelism two parallel results from my comparison of the linguistic functions of the Japanese and English languages and an analysis of the functions of photographs. Such functional parallelism operates as a guideline for interpreting and understanding the photographs put forward in my research. I have aimed at employing functional parallelism to establish a methodology and framework for both making photographs and for interpreting photographs.

In chapter one, I will offer my observations on cultural and linguistic differences between Japan and Australia. I will describe the functional parallelism which has been the framework of my work through my own experience of photography. This experiential photography forms my first body of work. I will go on to describe specifically the artists who have been affected by such construction of a framework and their work, and offer some observations on the Japanese haiku. In the former case, I analyse how artists use the functions of their photographs (as a medium for visual relaying and communication) to convey their intents to the observer. In the latter case, the haiku is a traditional Japanese form of verse in which the representation in words of the discovery of the everyday is sublimated. I offer my observations on the technique and viewpoint, and discuss the possibility of elements of it developing in my own work.

In chapter two, I will discuss analogy (the term advocated by the theoretician Kaja Silverman), which is an important concept in my research. I will show that the discovery of the functionally parallel relationship between photographs and the Japanese language in my research is an important concept. I will elucidate differences between the Japanese and English languages and propose how misunderstandings arise between them, in order to understand this functionally parallel relationship. I will then describe why I changed modes of production from digital to analogue photography and the effects of the change on both my methods of producing my photographs and interpreting my photography.
In chapter three, I will discuss my works *Kitchen towel, Green with red* and *Diamond*. I will explain how I applied functional parallelism to my photographs in my second body of research. I will tell how, as someone from Japan, the cultural and linguistic differences I feel are reflected in my selection of subjects, and how that appears in the intent of my works. In this chapter, I will then explain the results of my life in Australia for a certain time and the resulting changes in my cultural sense, and how this has formed a significant stage in my research.

In chapter four, I will examine how the idea of cultural slippage has spread in photography, and describe it through my third body of work, *A place on a tea towel (parents’ house)* and *Into skyscape (Australian sky)*. At this stage, functional parallelism has affected the concepts of time and place in my photography. At the same time, I have improved on parallelism through the development of the concept. I then describe how photographic interpretation through slippage is realised in my photographs, and how it functions as a framework for interpretation by the observer.

How to embody functional parallelism and how to embody its interpretation in my photographs is an important concept in my research. At the same time, such parallelism functions as a reference point for the cultural and linguistic differences based on the purely personal and subjective, while maintaining objectivity. This research forms a framework for the interpretation of my photographs through the differences in culture and language.
Chapter 1: Language and photograph – The first body of work

This chapter will explore the method by which slippage is found in language and the correlation between it and the photograph, which subjectively raises a slippery contextual play between the image and its referent in real life.¹ This idea is embodied in parallel with observations about the functions of language and the photograph using digital photography. These are tested as methods for making artwork and will be discussed by referring to my perception of languages - English and Japanese - and through the work of Annette Kelm and Sharon Lockhart.

On the evening of Tuesday the 26 March 2013, I arrived by plane at Melbourne Airport (Fig.1). It was the first time I had been in Australia, and some lines from the beginning of Snow Country the novel by Yasunari Kawabata came to mind.

‘The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country. The earth lay white under the night sky. The train pulled up at a signal stop.’²

They relate to how the leading character in the novel imagined the new world he was encountering. Just like that character in the novel, I had decided to put myself in a new world. That day, I began to understand the differences in culture and language. These cultural and linguistic differences are the central concept in my work. It is this research that I have pursued and which is reflected in my photographic works filtered through my individual experiences coming from a one cultural and linguistic background to another.

Figure 1: A page of Akihiro Okumura’s passport, ARRIVED 26 MAR 2013

I encountered many cultural and linguistic differences living in Australia: I began to understand that they were not simple talking at cross-purposes or misunderstandings, but could be captured as ‘different interpretations.’ As far as different interpretations are concerned, people would see things from a different angle and perhaps use words in a different way from their original meanings. For example, when I said ‘Can I borrow your toilet?’ in Australian friends’ homes, they would joke ‘What? Where are you taking it to? You cannot take it anywhere.’ Here, the slip was caused by my translating the question directly from Japanese. This was a mistranslation: what I should have said was ‘Can I use your toilet?’ This was a different interpretation, due to a slippage of culture and language. I believe there are cultural differences as well in the verbal interpretation of the visual. For example, ‘a woman with long black hair wearing a white kimono, and moving in the twilight over a snowy field.’ If Australians and people from other non-Japanese cultures heard this description, some of them probably feel that the woman was beautiful. However, when Japanese people hear such a description, many of them will conjure up in their minds an image of ‘Yuki-Onna’ (雪女 = Snow Woman) (Fig. 2) - a Japanese ghost in folklore. The image would cause fear and disgust.

Figure 2: Masaki Kobayashi, Kwaidan = Ghost stories, 1964, film, color/sound, 183 minutes

I believe that the slippage and misinterpretation brought about by differences in culture and language can perhaps lie in the interpretation of things. I have produced a number of experimental works in trying to capture this concept in my photographic works.

My first experiment used a methodology of production of photographs based on cultural misinterpretations of objects in Australia by Japanese. This was titled As Japanese as, 2015 (Fig. 3). My objective was to render cultural misinterpretations visually as photographs. In this photographic practice, my focus was on the slippage in cultural interpretations that arise in everyday life. This slippage was to be observed in how a Japanese woman used the Australian Hills’ hoist: In the image the Japanese woman used it in a mixed way, neither

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Japanese nor Australian. This made me feel uncomfortable. The fusion of the Japanese and Australian styles she had produced was at the same time a cultural misinterpretation and also an alternative interpretation.

Figure 3: Akihiro Okumura, *As Japanese as*, 2015, Archival inkjet print, 33.3 x 41.7 cm

Moreover, the mode adopted by the woman was parallel to both the Japanese and Australian modes. Such parallel relationships are associated with the construct of functional parallelism which will be described subsequently in words and photographs, and will be gradually developed in my second body and third body of work.

A work that clearly embodies the sense of oddness the combination of photographs I used in *As Japanese as* (the Hills’ hoist and Japanese hangers in *As Japanese as*) is Annette Kelm’s work *Untitled (Rider)*, 2005 (Fig. 4). In her work, a man who appears to be a cowboy is on a horse and holding a folding fan in his right hand. The cowboy can be seen as a metaphor for Western male culture, but the fan can be seen as a metaphor for female Asian culture.

Figure 4: Annette Kelm, *Untitled (Rider)*, 2005, C-print, 31 1/2 x 39 1/4 in (80 x 100 cm)
I developed a sense of oddness for ‘the cowboy and the folding fan’ because such a combination offered me room to think about why Kelm used them in her photograph. It relates to the concept of various interpretations of *As Japanese as*. It is a reasonable assumption that the purpose of her work is to request the viewer to deliberate on how interpretations can behave through the combination of objects which seemingly only are connected through the proximity of the image. Kelm herself acknowledges this in an interview with the online magazine, *db artnag*, saying ‘I think the picture is open to different possible interpretations.’ I think that photographic interpretation occurs through the relationship between the photograph and the audience rather than being defined by the photographer.

The sense of oddness at the combination of two photographs of different cultural backgrounds is obvious in Kelm’s photograph. However, the sense of oddness accompanying the combination of photographs form an important starting point for the observer in fathoming the intent of the photographer. I have attempted to use this method (combining photographic subjects) in my work.

I began by experimenting with making clear to the observer how to understand the photographic image. In this case, one photograph from one culture has been selected in order to reflect the difference in cultures though a combination of photographs. In *As Japanese as*, I selected the Hills’ hoist from Australian culture and everyday life from Japanese culture as a contrast in the photograph.

Kelm’s contextual logic shows the analogy to Matsuo Bashō’s *Haiku* (俳句), which is an extremely short form of Japanese poetry. Matsuo Bashō (松尾芭蕉 1644 to 1694) invented *Haiku* (at that time called *hokku*) and its form consisted of a 5-7-5 string of sound units. The analogy between Kelm and Bashō is that both consider images for their works in objects common to everyday lives, but the subjective materials are keenly selected and depicted as plainly as possible although they emerge as euphemisms, hidden meanings and occasionally odd blends. These must be comprehended though the observer’s eyes because the subjects in Kelm and Bashō have a correlation with their lives.

I would like to mention a widely known Bashō haiku to demonstrate how combinations of odd words are instilled in his haiku. One haiku describes the daily sight in summer of people with such contradictory words as ‘stillness’ and ‘piercing’. This combination has been problematic for many readers because they have proposed that neither expression is

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correct, or either of the words may be right. However, this sort of wordplay might broaden the capacity of the imagination as it relates to Bashō’s works.

’such stillness piercing the rock a cicada’s voice’ (1689)

‘shizukasa ya / iwa ni shimi iru / semi no koe’ = 閑さや岩にしみ入る蟬の声

In Bashō’s manner, the writer of the haiku through strictly representing things from everyday life in a remarkably short verse, provides a platform for the reader to interpret and expand the words. This forms a type of interactive communication between the writer and the reader. This parallels the idea of representation within the photographic.

In my work, A bird, 2015 (Fig. 5), an everyday object is employed as a photographic subject to emphasise a sense of transformation from the objective to the subjective through photography. Starting with a clearly understood subject, ‘a bird’, and utilising circle editing, a multi-layered and low-resolution process, a surprising and fresh question is raised around assumptions of a supposedly clearly understood subject. A bird is rooted in my sense of assuming, misunderstanding and losing within translation between Japanese and English. It highlights an assumption about how the world is experienced via the individual vernacular. In this respect, I can incorporate my own subjectivity as a part of the process into a parallelism between cultures to focus more directly on the slippage.

Figure 5: Akihiro Okumura, A bird, 2015, Archival inkjet print, 41.7 x 33.3cm

"Ibid., 138.

"Ibid., 323.

By understanding a sense of oddness from the vernacular
Sharon Lockhart, is an American artist known for her precise method of capturing individuals and communities in their everyday lives with film and photographs.\(^{10}\) In Lockhart’s work I recognised some sort of unity or understanding of cultural perception between herself and me. This is embodied in her works through the slippage of her interpretation of Japanese culture as evident through the *Goshogaoka*, 1997 (Fig. 6) and the associated series of photographs *Goshogaoka Girls Basketball Team*, 1997 (Fig. 7).

Figure 6: Sharon Lockhart, *Goshogaoka*, 1997, 16mm film, colour/sound, 63 minutes (clip)

Figure 7: Sharon Lockhart, *Goshogaoka Girls Basketball Team: Ayako Sano*, 1997, C-print, 86 x 68cm

In this work, Lockhart has represented a Japanese subject. Being Japanese, I have a familiarity with these images via our common cultural domain, however when looking at them I have felt the subject both usual and unusual at the same time.

A sense of oddness about Japanese culture is conjured up, even though it is my own culture. Lockhart’s works appear as vernacular imagery, but they have been aesthetically accentuated.

For me, this work acted as a case study for progressing my project. She has demonstrated a course an understanding of the slippage between the maker of the photograph, in this case her, the person seeing the photograph, in this case me. I was the person seeing Lockhart’s work, which comprised images of my culture pushed through her cultural, American, lens reinterpreted through my cultural, Japanese, lens. This highlighted for me a theoretical position in my project of the person seeing the work that has been embodied in ‘an actual position’ as the person seeing the work in front of Goshogaoka.

A comparative diagram below shows how this understanding looks when illustrated through my working position.

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<tr>
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<th>(1, Japanese matter × 2, She as American) + 3, Her cultural lens → Work ← 4, I as actual position</th>
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<td>4 Embodies B’ as tangible thereby B ≅ B’</td>
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Figure 8: A comparative diagram about positions of Sharon Lockhart and I for making artistic work

I would like to note the analysis of the image-making methodology of Lockhart by the curator Martínez Chus, to develop an idea of multi-layered structure of the photography, which can be applied to the method of my project:

‘...as she concentrates almost exclusively on visual description. What we see is what is important. But what precisely can we see? The entire effort of the work points to an analysis of the elements that make up an image, enabling the artist as a photographer and as a filmmaker to create a context that is not based on a prior narrative, but is instead fashioned by the image itself.

... her chosen methodology and themes put the viewer in a frame of mind for accepting responsibility for his or her own expectations.

What do we really look for in an image?’

Insofar as I occupy the same space as another person, I cannot understand the other person. I therefore use words and visual representations to exchange or share our mutual experiences. The idea of the multi-layered structure of photography visually represented in these words is, I believe, valid in the exchanging or sharing of experiences of different cultures. Lockhart created works showing her experiences of Japan through her lens and representational means, and her works are the medium for such exchange or sharing. Her works form a case study for me in this regard.

To conclude this chapter, the misunderstandings in communication and the differences in culture which I myself have experienced outside my mother country form the core of my series of works. Creating the photographs became the framework and strongly influenced my choice of photographic subjects. My first body of work established the framework and were the result of experiential observation attempting to represent photographically my personal sensations. The methodology validated by this gave birth to the photographs in my second body of work, in which I explore slippage in words and photographs. I validate this by looking more intensely at how photographs could be interpreted.
Chapter 2: A dual-language immersion – The first body of work

This chapter will investigate the idea of my photographic work being seen as analogous to my first body of work. Analogy is a term that the theorist Kaya Silverman uses to describe another possible reading of the photograph: one that is not based on the indexical. This approach has allowed me to see correlations in features of my photography and functions within the Japanese language in parallel. These have become vital parts of this project.

In March 2013, I had been living in Melbourne for two years and I was accustomed to life here. However, numerous miscommunications occurred in conversation in English and I was finding this tendency was also occurring in my conversation in Japanese. This was because my mother tongue was influenced by English. The tendency has remained with me until the end of this research. English has in some ways touched on my Japanese, and the patterns of thought and verbalisation that it gives rise to are different from my original patterns of thought and verbalisation (in the sense of the thoughts and verbalisation before I lived in Melbourne). I do not see that I can divide the thinking and feeling for words that has developed into Japanese or Australian.

I would like here to consider the constitution and history of the Japanese language, and to research it while comparing the Japanese and English languages. I would then like to offer some observations on my work as very initial research into this subject.

Japanese is vague and English is definite

The Japanese language derives from a variety of proto-languages, which give rise to its complexity and make it equivocal. According to the theory proposed by the comparative linguist Biten Yasumoto, people living around Lake Baikal (now located in the Russian region of Siberia) migrated to Japan. Yasumoto regards their language as a forerunner of the Japanese language. There is a very strong likelihood that this proto-language had the same grammar as contemporary Japanese (subject-object-verb). Yasumoto also believes that this proto-language was influenced in part by the waves of other languages (such as Chinese) which have come to Japan since the time of the proto-language.

Yasumoto stresses that the source of the vocabulary of Japanese is the same as that of Indonesia and the archipelago around it. Moreover, China developed its characters (kanji) as a written form of words around the latter half of the 4th century BCE, and these later developed into the three written forms of Japanese (kanji, katakana and hiragana) (Fig. 9). Having undergone such complex transitions, the Japanese language is classified as a high

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13 Ibid., 94-96.
14 Ibid., 39-45, 58-59, 126-27, 41.
context-dependence language. In such languages, the listener reads in important information from the form and character of the conversation, even important information which is not put into words by the speaker. However, the inferences by the listener may not necessarily be correct, and misunderstandings often arise in such languages. In this way, Japanese is an equivocal language.

Figure 9: The multiple origins of Japanese language

The cultural analysis in the book *Japanese Culture and Communication* shows the manner of Japanese conversation.

‘In Japanese speech, in contrast to English, personal pronouns (I, you) are generally avoided (though not totally); this encourage a collectivistic sentiment.’

‘In comparison with western people, who generally prefer to state their opinions as explicitly, logically, and objectively as possible by following a ‘step-by-step’ approach, the Japanese favour a “roundabout” way of approach. Japanese people choose to speak and behave in a vague, ambiguous, and indirect manner when making requests, settling business deals, and so on. They are more likely to consider other people’s feelings and hesitate to make “either-or” decisions or give definite “yes-no” answer.’

A study from formal linguistics that provides a useful lens through which to consider the ambiguity of Japanese language:

‘Relative clauses are particularly ambiguous in Japanese because they do not

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16 Ibid., 220.
have any marking to indicate their beginning or end, and arguments can be freely dropped. It is commonly assumed that readers do not posit unnecessary clausal structure if an overt indicator is not available; in Japanese, that is equivalent to assuming that relative clauses are initially processed as main clauses with dropped arguments.'\(^{17}\)

In contrast, the English language is classified as a low context-dependence language: full information is relayed with a high degree of precision. I find a correlation between these two characteristics of the Japanese and English languages as a way to produce photographs. It is a way that allows for a slippage in their interpretation to occur dependent upon the context favored by the viewer but made possible by the photographs. In interpreting the photographs I show below, the two or more subjects captured in a photograph form the ‘character’ when taken together. To take an example, a sheet of paper might be placed on the floor forming the ‘character’, but we do not simply see the ‘sheet of paper’ and the ‘floor’, but rather our interpretation starts from the interrelation of the two. This concept of interpretation is manifested in my second body of work.

**Photographic practice - Possessions**

*Possessions*, 2015 (Fig. 10) consists of 4 photographs, each having 2 images juxtaposed within the same image plane, utilising a personal narrative negotiating language and culture between Japan and Australia.

![Images of Possessions]

<table>
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<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A: None of the Men Know / All Men Know</td>
<td>B: Reflection / Watering</td>
<td>C: Into them / Out from them</td>
<td>D: Walking on / Flying up</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10: Akihiro Okumura, *Possessions*, 2015, Digital C-type printing, 34 x 41.5 cm x 4

*Possessions* was an attempt to reflect the incomplete feeling of being located in two places, in my case Australia and Japan. The upper and lower parts of the images are visually connected using formal directions such as colours and shapes, but allow a questioning from the viewer about how the images are to be understood. The appearance of the subjects in the photographs could indicate visual connections as analogy (not sameness) for

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\(^{17}\) Edson T Miyamoto and Michiko Nakamura, "Subject/Object Asymmetries in the Processing of Relative Clauses in Japanese" (paper presented at the Proceedings of the 22nd West Coast conference on formal linguistics, 2003), 343.
interpretation. Thus, the feeling which the artist had may be relived, rather than described, through the viewing of the photographs.

Narrative in my practice can be identified as an important component in creation of my work; this is a technique derived from the Haiku model of poetry. The technique links two contradictory words like antonyms in a verse as the wordplay to engender some potential interpretation that I used in the production process of Possessions. For instance, Reflection / Watering (Fig. 11), which is one of the pieces of Possessions, shows two different shapes of images to the viewer that are organic and inorganic - water ripples and circles on toys for children - respectively. These are likely to be associated with everyday scenes even though they are represented in the forms of imaging which means that things in a photograph are disassociated from their origins. However, the viewer still has a connection among the shapes of images and the things in day-to-day world, which allows for a potential slippage between what is there in the image as presented and what is there in the image as seen. This implies the vulnerability of forms in the production of images and forms in interpretation of images. Everything becomes ambiguous.

Figure 11: Akihiro Okumura, Possession: Reflection / Watering, 2015, Digital C-type printing, 34 x 41.5 cm

In this work, the decision as to what to take in is subjectively-based, whereas the selection and juxtaposition of the subsequent images stresses the objective. In preparing these works, I have avoided any record of my simple personal experiences in the different countries in the final photographs, and have arrived at photographic works that reflect one’s sensations based on cultural differences. However, at the same time, the processes of capturing and structuring the works is to be analysed through the excessive action of my personal cultural lens. This is because at the core of my works is the highly subjective idea of the cultural differences that I have experienced myself. When such subjectivity is deployed appropriately, a constructive balance between the subjective and the objective is maintained in the preparation of the works.
The results of the analysis of the preparation of my works based on a balance between the personal, subjective and the objective in Possessions are clear in the improvements to my second and subsequent bodies of work. In this case, the balance between the personal, subjective and the objective is achieved through my subjective experiences in Australia and the objective reason and knowledge which I have derived from these experiences.

Shifting from digital photography to analogue photography
I shifted from digital to analogue photography between my initial research (first body of work) and then middle period of my research (second body of work). I did this in order to obtain photographs that included the element of the accidental. Analogue photography is more time-consuming, it takes longer from the point of taking the photograph to the seeing the photograph than digital photography does. I chose to use analogue photography because the image of the ‘subject matter’ lingers in my memory at the moment of capture, but I am aware of an extensive slippage between that and the image of the ‘subject matter’ as it appears in the photograph print. In this way, analogue photography gives me the opportunity to capture the unanticipated or the slippage.

Ambiguity of photographic interpretation
The idea of ambiguity is important in my photographs. This is one possible method of representation: it is not uncertainty over the interpretation of a given photograph, but rather means the possibility of a multiplicity of interpretations of a single photograph.

Ambiguity is not a negative thing, and the fact that it can be an acceptable multi-layered way of thinking opens peoples’ eyes to the image. In a similar vein, Japanese poetry offers an expression on ambiguity. I have applied this way of representation to my photography. William Empson in Seven types of ambiguity says that:

‘For poetry has powerful means of imposing its own assumptions, and is very independent of the mental habits of the reader; one might trace its independence to the ease with which it can pass from the one to the other of these two sorts of meaning.’

‘As examples of the things that are taken for granted in this way, and assume a habit, rather than a piece of information, in the reader, one might give the fact that a particular section of the English language is being used; the fact that English is being used, which you can be conscious of if you can use French; the fact that a European language is used, which you can be conscious of if you can use Chinese.’\(^\text{18}\)

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Empson’s idea of ambiguity as a multi-layered way of thinking can be read in a similar way to Kaja Silverman’s idea of analogy in photography and directly effected my way of thinking about representation in my own photography:

‘Photography is also an ontological calling card: it helps us to see that each of us is a node in vast constellation of analogies. ... It is able to disclose the world, show us that it is structured by analogy, and help us assume our place within it because it, too, is analogical.’\(^{19}\)

Through the switch to analogue modes of production I was able to obtain photographs that included unanticipated elements. Thus this type of photograph meant that there were failures in image capture, but at the same time they showed the slippage that I myself had produced (the actual results versus what I had anticipated). I believe that, by using analogue photographs, I succeeded in making explicit through my photographs the sense and reality of slippage that arises between cultures. Moreover, this change was bound up with the new framework within which I was producing my work and developed into my second body of work.

\(^{19}\) Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy, or, the History of Photography* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015), 11.
Chapter 3: Slippage and creative errors – the second body of work

This chapter will focus on my body of work ‘Kitchen towel, Green with red and Diamond’ which was produced through the idea of an odd subject-combinations. The Japanese point of view on images in everyday life that could be applied to the way of viewing images in photographs and interpretations is a roundabout way of approach. When we understand an object, we see it in the light of a range of events and contexts, and it is from their coming together that we understand a thing. I used this way of understanding to embody my work (in the selection of subjects and their position) to ultimately create my photographs, and this validates how they are interpreted.

In October 2015, I went back to Japan for three weeks only. While in Japan, I felt as if it were not my mother country, but some other country. Then, when I returned to Melbourne airport, I felt simply that I had come back to my mother country, and I was enveloped in a sense of security. This emotion was the reverse of that I felt on first arriving in Melbourne. On returning to Japan this time, I underwent a cultural re-immersion in Japan, and I experienced a kind of cultural difference from Japan.

Slippage in subjects – images

*Kitchen towel,* 2016 (Fig. 12) shows an image of a single kitchen paper towel, taken using colour negative film. In this work, the juxtaposition of the kitchen paper towel with the floor is an odd subjects-combinations.

![Image of Kitchen towel, 2016](image)

Figure 12: Akihiro Okumura, *Kitchen towel,* 2016, C-print, 46 x 56 cm

What presents as the subject of this work, a kitchen paper towel, can be effortlessly found in just about every house or acquired in any supermarket. It is a popular everyday item. However, it has an impression of the reproduction of nature within it, conveyed through the
dotted ring pattern that resembles ripples of water. When this item is photographed, an image arises apart from separate from its function and role that suggests another possible reading of the image.

From my cultural background, I link this image with an object in Japanese culture: a Japanese rock garden (枯山水=karesansui) (Fig. 13). There is no water in a Japanese dry garden. The rocks and white sand are used for the form of a garden, reproducing the atmosphere of mountains and waters. The reason for this association is the representation of water as the dot ring pattern in the kitchen paper towel.

![Japanese rock garden at Ryouan-ji, Kyoto](image)

**Figure 13:** An image of Japanese rock garden at Ryouan-ji, Kyoto = 枯山水 京都龍安寺

**Slippage in translatable words – colours and stories**

In the Japanese and English languages, the colours green and blue are associated, but there are great differences in their representation. In Japan, people commonly refer to the ‘blue’ colour as ‘green.’ It is said that this is because the definition of ‘green colour’ is broader in the Japanese language than in the English. On the other hand, the ‘blue colour’ would rarely be represented by another name in the English language. The idea of this difference in the green-blue colour expression, which is peculiar to the Japanese language, led to my work *Green with red*, 2016 (Fig. 14). In this work, the position of red toy block with the branch with its blue/green leaves forms the idea for the odd subjects-combinations.

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In Japan, it is said that traditionally the blue colour and the green colour were well represented both in the spoken word and the written word. For example, there is the idiom ‘the blue of fresh verdure’ to describe young plants. This presents problems when directly translated into English. Plants do not appear as ‘blue’. However, this type of green-blue colour expression is widely employed in Japanese verse and haiku. I have made use of this peculiarly Japanese representation in selecting twigs with ‘green’ leaves as my subjects. It also deeply interesting that, in both the Japanese and English languages, the figurative meanings of ‘blue colour’ and ‘green colour’ are similar. For example, ‘immaturity’ in the Japanese language is figuratively ‘blue’, but in the English language it is ‘green’. This difference in cultural focal points, which appears in words, is a conceptual axis for constructing my works.

A further subject that appears in my work is a red LEGO brick. I selected it because of the 2003 story of the LEGO company and its subsequent corporate restructuring. In 2003 LEGO was unable to compete with digital toys and games as new production environments in business. In response LEGO adapted the bricks to those environments creating tie-ups with many popular characters such as Harry Potter and Star Wars. These attempts were a major success. I felt a similarity between the story of the LEGO company and myself in being forced to adapt to a new culture that created cultural slippage through a type of serial acts of failure and trying again.

Figure 14: Akihiro Okumura, Green with red, 2016, C-print, 46 x 56 cm

24 Ibid., 100.
The juxtaposition of a twig and a red LEGO brick in my photograph is odd, but the intent of the photographer in this construction is strongly suggested, and the observer will interpret this intent through the observer’s own knowledge and experience. Such interpretation is a series of acts of failure and trying again. It can be said that the interpretation of the photographs is similar to cultural slippage in this way.

**Slippage in cultural perception – subjects**

*Diamond, 2016* (Fig. 15) aims to articulate that the interplay between subjects has an effect on the perceptual process of image decipherment.

![Figure 15: Akihiro Okumura, *Diamond*, 2016, C-print, 56 x 46 cm](image)

When the observer sees the photograph, he or she is aware of the colour and shape, and reconstructs it as his or her own experience. This is the perceptual process of image decipherment which I advocate in my work, and is embodied in the interplay between the images themselves and the observer’s knowledge. The image was taken of a square shaped page, but was composed as an apparent diamond shape placed on cloth. When reduced to a two dimensional plane the diamond page itself appears as a gash in the spaces apparent in the cloth. The visual effect draws the attention of the observer and piques his or her awareness, giving rise to a conversation of awareness between the photograph and the observer.
The meaning of the photograph in this conversation of awareness is to be understood as the result of observation by the observer. The subjects of the photograph (the page and cloth) were clearly captured as photographic images and unalterable perceptual information, but they can be said to be transformed through the knowledge of the observer. I believe that this type of transformation of phenomena through knowledge is one part of interpretation. The cultural perceptions of the observer also play a significant role in the process of interpretation. Thus the framework to my photographic work is the slippage that occurs between the true nature of the subject and the interpretation of the subject when a person observes the image.

In my photographs, as second body of work, I formed ‘odd states in everyday life’ by using combinations of everyday items for testing the creation process of meaning within the photographic images that I made. Through the subsequent act of deciphering the viewer comes to understand the images through his or her own personal experience with the cultural knowledge. In the second body of work I focused on the way of selecting subjects with the odd subject-combinations. In turn this led to my third body of work, a finding of a method for visualising cultural differences between Japan and Australia in a single photograph.

To summarise, then, I have embodied in photographs my separate interpretations born out of the trivial misunderstandings I have experienced through cultural slippage and in conversation. I have produced my works by juxtaposing odd subjects derived through Japanese methods of thinking as articulated in the Haiku. The outcome of this method is my body of work which is clear at present. I have been able to represent slippage and the creative errors that occur between cross cultures in photographs. These have acted significantly on the third stage of my photographic works, and were ultimately bound up with leading to the outcome of my research.
Chapter 4: A parallel structure for the capacity of imaging – Third body of work

This chapter will explore my most recent photographs. In this chapter I will further articulate how slippage plays a role in the process of thinking of photographic images through a functional parallelism consisting of language and the photograph. Functional parallelism is a term that describes the situation where two states of being are processed in parallel when each state is considered on the same or different way of thinking. Over the course of this research, as my understanding of this parallelism has developed, my photographic outcomes have likewise developed.

This chapter will also examine the recognition of functional parallelism between my experience with language and the production of my photographs.

On the evening of the 16 April 2016, my parents were affected by the series of large earthquakes that occurred where they were living, in Kumamoto Prefecture, in Japan. I found out about the earthquakes from the TV in Melbourne. Their house was damaged and they were forced to flee for fear of their house collapsing and the danger of a tsunami. Their place of refuge was a primary school and after living in their car, they returned temporarily to their house. They were witness to the way everything stopped when their life was destroyed and they evacuated.

The earthquakes damaged my hometown - my literal first place, my starting point for culture and language. I saw there were abrupt changes of my hometown in photographs before and after the earthquakes. This difference between images before and after the earthquakes has aroused a feeling of anxiety. They become a trigger for rethinking what images provide to me.

Possibility of analogue photography
As argued in Chapter 2, my research proposed a condition whereby analogue photography, due to its process of production, has the potential to increase the chance of unpredictable images. Walter Benjamin suggests that the characteristics of image representation lie not simply in the manner in which one presents oneself to mechanical equipment but also in the manner in which, by means of this apparatus, one can represent one’s situation.25

In analogue photography, I make use of the different timeframes that arise between the time of taking the photograph and time of imaging or printing the photograph. In the delay between these two positions I am able to recover my own awareness out of the immersion in the moment of capture, a return from the subjective to the objective. In this regard, one could say that analogue photography gives greater control over the image-making process.

than does digital photography. In what I have defined as digital photography, the image capturing action and visualisation occur at the same time, but the feelings and awareness of the photographer for the image are inhibited or excessively augmented. Such overwhelmingly rapid imaging technology is different from the human awareness of time and can lead to distortion in recognition.\footnote{Paul. Graham, Kim, Soo., Pearson, Anthony and Cotton, Charlotte, "The Value of Photography," in \textit{Words without Pictures}, ed. Charlotte Cotton and A. Klein (New York: Aperture; London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), 206.}

An important element of my research is making explicit in the interpretation of my photographs the idea of functional parallelism that constructs both time and space and slippage. In the embodiment of the interpretation of my photographs, I am advocating ‘a further standpoint’. This standpoint is the position experienced by the photographer after the imaging, and it can be represented this way. The act of photography occurs at a present time and in a particular place, ‘here’; the act of viewing the image arises after the imaging, ‘there’. The image, in the photograph which is in the past, is yet in the present, ‘here’. The act of viewing the image includes the possibility of viewing the image from a different place from the original. Thus the state in which the present (‘here’) and the past (‘there’) are both together ‘another’ is the ‘further standpoint’. In this case, the observer can interpret the intent of the photographer from the ‘further standpoint’. Thus the photograph holds both the present and past time axes, and the concepts of the time and place of the observer are abstract.

Below is a diagram (Fig. 16) of the functional parallelism used in my research and the improvements I have made as my research progressed. The diagram has time as the vertical axis, with the past to the present running from top to bottom. The horizontal axis compares language and photographs, and shows the changes that have arisen in me. In my research, I have attempted to explain visually how I capture slippage and bind it into my body of work. I hope that I have made visually explicit how I have moved from my improved functional parallelism in my third body of work. This focuses more directly on slippage which can partake in decoding and encoding as well as transcoding and deciphering the world.
**Figure 16: A diagram of parallel relationships between language and photographs**

**Slippage in photographic images**

This process was explored through two photographic works produced. Each work has a different two-image combination focusing on the dislocation generated through a process of slippage. These images were formed through the use of two situational references as tools for dislocation, one was a cultural reference and the other was a geographical reference. The decision on the two-image arrangement of my work was based on theatrical criteria by analysis of slippage, in which slippage itself becomes a trigger for further slippage.
A place on a tea towel (parents’ house), 2016 (Fig. 17) demonstrates the idea of dislocation formation through two images, using slippage in their context dependency. The idea of dislocation formation is linked to the idea of slippage in that there are two palpably different images in this photographic work which was in the same place.

I have made one photograph from two images. One is of the interior (kitchen) of my parents’ real home (in Kumamoto Prefecture, in Japan). It was abandoned after suffering damage in the great earthquake. One has the feeling that the flow of time in the house has stopped. It suggests anxiety, devaluation and blindness. These give me a similar sense of photographing. It can be argued that the action of photographing is an attempt at holding back time that ‘the photograph is a thin slice of space as well as time.’ This seems to act counter to natural laws, thus photographing gives me, as the photographer, a sense of anxiety. In this case when walking into my parents’ house, the feeling in relation to the flow of time was similar to the feeling I have when I am making photographs, a dislocation from the natural laws of time.

In turn the other image is of a tea towel, which is a cultural reference to Australia. This is the situation of dislocation. The photo is located on the tea towel to be photographed while proposing the location where the tea towel may have originated from. The visual reasoning has reversed the geographical relationships between the ‘subject’ depicted. The framework concept here was derived from the uncertain relationship between the images and objects. In capturing objects in photographs, they are abstracted, and the images themselves are not defined as the same as the objects. Objects do not escape from their true nature through the act of photography. Images are not able to be redefined as things were.  

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In this regard, the existence of my parents’ house captured in my photographs is retained, from the ontological viewpoint. Here, my intent in the act of re-photographing the house and the tea towel was to heighten the idea of dislocation. My reasoning was that the definitions of ‘house’ and ‘tea towel’ are separate, but both appear on the one photograph. This photograph is related to the implication of a different cultural sphere in the separateness of the house and the tea towel captured in the photograph. However, while the social context of each of the objects is explicit, the actual interrelationship of the objects is not. Thus their presence is the concept of the photographer. I believe that the interpretation of their interrelatedness is at the core of the interpretation of the photograph.

The intent of the photographer is to conceptualise the world in images and then to implement them with the camera. However, the images themselves are frequently embodied through the experiential model, the knowledge and then the culture of the observer. Such individual and subjective transformation appears to be a miscalculation in the interpretive approach, but it may be that this in itself is to be interpreted as a form of slippage. This is because the visual information at the macro and micro level in the photograph cannot be abstracted. Thus I believe that the photograph is, by analogy, to be interpreted. In my works, the idea of dislocation formation becomes explicit through the process of interpretation of two apparently unrelated images.

In *Into skyscape (Australian sky)*, 2016 (Fig. 18), the idea of dislocation formation is applied to the placement structure of this photograph of which a photo, which was taken in Japan, is raised up to the sky in Australia. In this case the sky is a geographical reference.

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29 Ibid., 32.
The structure in this work is the same as the work, *A place on a tea towel (parents’ house)*. Each has a photograph using geographical location and references to undermine the cultural context of the images depicted.

In *Into skyscape (Australian sky)*, the two images (interior of a house and sky) in the work arose in different places. It is not possible to determine a specific location from the individual images, and therefore the locations can be described as obscure. One image appears to be of the interior of a house, the other is the background colour of the sky. Regardless of that, the two images can be readily divided and can be commonly understood as ‘the interior of a house’ and ‘the sky’. Nevertheless, even if they are divided and understood, they both remain obscure.

The photograph contains inevitable contradictions: the house may be a specific house or any given house. In the same way, the sky might be anywhere. The thought process is the interpretation of the image, which is reinforced in this work, and the result of the interpretation is slippage.

These images are unidentifiable. The two works were photographed in different contexts, but in the process of recapturing them together, I have produced a work having a new status. The images in the photographs had dissimilar sources (subjects), but in interpreting them, by analogy, a new meaning must be constructed for the images. As a result, I show the possibility of the observer interpreting the unidentifiable in the photograph. However, it is in one regard not indexical. These works had intent and that shows clearly the development of the process of interpretation of the photograph.
Towards a meaning of a photograph

In Riffs on Real Time (4 of 10) (2006-2009) (Fig. 19), the two images used by Leslie Hewitt (photograph and magazine on one page) are juxtaposed to create a single photograph, and I would like to examine the effect of the photograph on the observer. I believe that this examination will serve to elucidate the results of my research by comparing my research with Hewitt.

![Image of a page from Riffs on Real Time (4 of 10)](image)

**Figure 19**: Leslie Hewitt, *Riffs on Real Time (4 of 10)*, 2006-2009, C-print, 76.2 x 61 cm

In this work, Hewitt associates two photographs taken for different reasons, and makes explicit the difference between the two directionalities. One photograph was her own; the other is a page from the magazine *The National Geographic.* It could be said that one photograph was taken by Hewitt for her own reasons, or perhaps for friends and family. On the other hand, it could be said that the other photographic image was intended for countless other people. By re-photographing together these photographs with their polar opposite purposes, the observer re-edits the two opposing purposes as their own reaction. Thus the observer attempts to find Hewitt’s intent, and to analyse and interpret the photograph. Hewitt submits the re-editing of her intent in taking the photograph to the observer. I regard this as the form of interpretation of the photograph that she has produced by the process of re-photographing.

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30 Eric Crosby, Thomas Beard, and Eva Respini, *Ordinary Pictures* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Walker Art Center, 2016), 112.
31 Ibid., 16.
The act of interpretation of this photograph, which is accompanied by slippage (a type of creative slippage) embodied in the work, is to be used to compare the understanding of the interpretation arising from my re-photography of A place on a tea towel (parents’ house) and Into skyscape (Australian sky), showed above.

Roundabout interpretation – photographic interpretation through slippage
I have loosely labelled this way of understanding the photograph as a ‘roundabout interpretation’ of the photograph. The ‘roundabout interpretation’ allows the observer to find the state of the photograph arising from the relationship among subjects as images. This leads to an understanding of how each of the images interacts within itself. This way of interpreting has its origin in a Japanese way of looking at things. In this regard, a person who is looking at the whole of the forest is at the same time the person who is looking at each of the individual trees. This ‘roundabout approach’ allows observers to have simultaneous access to multiple images within the photograph opening up. This articulation is the result achieved through this research.

My photography takes as its starting point the differences between Japanese and Australian culture and language, which I have discussed in this chapter. I have considered these differences as a parallelism and I have been able to juxtapose these differences as I have subjectively experienced them as a framework for my photographs. It is, moreover, useful to consider the slippage that arises between the photograph and its subject, and the slippage between the perception of interpretation by the observer and the intent behind the photographic work. This is bound up with the ultimate results of my research. The interpretation of photographs through slippage is the capacity to understand the parallelism among the three players: the intent of the photographer, then capacity of the photograph for abstraction and the act of viewing by the observer.
Conclusion

My research has made some observations on whether the cultural slippage between Japan and Australia can function as a framework for photography and interpretation. My methodology in photography has brought two results. The first is that functional parallelism conceptualises the experience and thinking of the person capturing the images. The second is that formation through dislocation is a practical method of capturing the cultural slippage between two countries in a single photograph. These two processes of photography functioning together form a framework for photography and the interpretation of photographs. Thus, I have described the findings of this research in the following terms.

Functional parallelism for the production of the photograph is a framework for thinking through slippage. Functional parallelism forms a model for thinking about different objects captured in words and photographs as constituent elements in the photographic process. This model of thinking can be used to observe the functional aspects of both words and photographs, but can also be used at the same time when considering cultural slippage as a constituent element of the photographic process. Such parallel thinking contributes to the prevention of the mixing together Japanese and Australian cultures, and as a result I regard it as preventing cultural symbolism. This is because, in my research, I have used cultural slippage based on my own subjective view (in the sense of capturing my own unique thoughts) as a reference point. Amongst other things, this allows me to identify the Japanese and Australian, which could easily involve cultural symbolism. On this point, I realise that identifying cultures could lead to a lack of objectivity in my preparation of photographs. Thus I have used functional parallelism as a framework in my photography by taking culture as the aggregation of human knowledge and experience, and taking account of the individual differences between these aggregations as cultural differences.

Dislocation formation for the photograph is a visualising methodology through slippage. Dislocation function is a method of capturing cultural differences and embodying them in photographs. In this methodology, I have taken one photograph captured in Australia (the photograph as a substantive print) and taken it to Japan where I have re-photographed it as a single photograph together with Japanese cultural or geographic references. I have followed the same procedure when capturing images by bringing Japanese photographs to Australia. This methodology allows the simultaneous visualisation of two countries (as photographic objects) in a single photograph. The observer can then see the slippage between the countries in a single photograph. In other words, the observer can visually compare the slippage at the same time and interpret the photograph from the observer’s point of view. I have photographed the slippage I myself have experienced through dislocation formation, whereby the photograph itself becomes the medium for the observer to discern the intent of the photographer.
The ‘roundabout interpretation’ consists of a way of approach that explicitly encourages multiple readings of the image. This method explicitly suggests that while the seeing of an image is translated through the lens of the viewer and the viewers subjective life experience, it is not limited to this. Rather I suggest that the state of being of the image is situated by the photograph. In other words, the reality has its roots in a subject (dependent image) and the reality comes through in the photograph (independent image). These two types of images exist in parallel. For instance, a sky in a photograph that may be a particular sky or the sky from anywhere. The ‘roundabout interpretative’ approach allows for both without the denial of the other.

Overall, the research and discussion of the photographs with the researcher’s own subjective cultural differences has had two findings from this research: functional parallelism and dislocation formation and the result: the roundabout interpretation of the photograph. These function as interrelated factors in the process of photography and provide a framework for interpreting it. The photographs I have submitted here are a result of reflections on the differing interpretations of culture and language that I have seen while at the same time being media through which an observer visually interprets my intentions. The series of interpreting actions itself is the process of producing the photographs though slippage in my research. This proposes the roundabout interpretation of the photographs.
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**VHS**


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Appendix

List of images from the final exhibition

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Akihiro Okumura, *Green with a corrugated panel*, 2016, chromogenic colour print mounted on aluminum-Dibond, 48.4 cm x 58.4 cm

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Akihiro Okumura, *Images on a stone step (At Shinto shrine)*, 2016, chromogenic colour print mounted on aluminum-Dibond, 48.4 cm x 58.4 cm

Figure 24
Akihiro Okumura, *From dusk till silent night (Xmas-motif bag)*, 2016, chromogenic colour print mounted on aluminum-Dibond, 48.4 cm x 58.4 cm
Figure 25
Akihiro Okumura, *Green with red*, 2016, chromogenic colour print mounted on aluminum-Dibond, 48.4 cm x 58.4 cm
Figure 26
Akihiro Okumura, *Diamond*, 2016, chromogenic colour print mounted on aluminum-Dibond, 58.4 cm x 48.4 cm
Figure 27
Akihiro Okumura, *Square (Australian house in Japan)*, 2016, chromogenic colour print mounted on aluminum-Dibond, 48.4 cm x 58.4 cm

Figure 28
Akihiro Okumura, *Doves on a stone path*, 2016, chromogenic colour print mounted on aluminum-Dibond, 48.4 cm x 58.4 cm
Figure 29
Akihiro Okumura, *Into skyscape (Australian sky)*, 2016, chromogenic colour print mounted on aluminum-Dibond, 58.4 cm x 48.4 cm

Figure 30
Akihiro Okumura, *Bricks with manga books*, 2016, chromogenic colour print mounted on aluminum-Dibond, 48.4 cm x 58.2 cm
Figure 31
Akihiro Okumura, *A place on a tea towel (Parents’ house after the series of earthquakes)*, 2016, chromogenic colour print mounted on aluminum-Dibond, 48.3 cm x 58.4 cm

Figure 32
Akihiro Okumura, *Into skyscape (Japanese sky)*, 2016, chromogenic colour print mounted on aluminum-Dibond, 58.4 cm x 48.4 cm
Figure 33
Akihiro Okumura, *Into them / Out from them*, 2016, Lambda c-type print (Digital C-type printing) with acrylic face-mounting, 34 cm x 41.5 cm

Figure 34
Akihiro Okumura, *None of the Men Know / All Men Know*, 2016, Lambda c-type print (Digital C-type printing) with acrylic face-mounting, 34 cm x 41.5 cm
Figure 35
Akihiro Okumura, *Reflection / Watering*, 2016, Lambda c-type print (Digital C-type printing) with acrylic face-mounting, 34 cm x 41.5 cm

Figure 36
Akihiro Okumura, *Walking on / Flying up*, 2016, Lambda c-type print (Digital C-type printing) with acrylic face-mounting, 34 cm x 41.5 cm
Figure 37
Akihiro Okumura, *The final exhibition*, 2016, installation view

Figure 38
Akihiro Okumura, *The final exhibition*, 2016, installation view
Figure 39
Akihiro Okumura, *The final exhibition*, 2016, installation view