

**THE CONSCIOUSNESS
OF CONTEMPORARY
JAPANESE WOMEN
SEEN IN THE WORKS OF
YANAGI MIWA**
(2007)

On the occasion of the publication of *Nihon no keshō
bunka, keshō to bi'ishiki* [The Cosmetics Culture of
Japan, Cosmetics and Aesthetic Consciousness]

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ISSUES OF SOCIETY AND SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE WOMEN

THE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT, released annually by the United Nations Development Programme since 1990, compiles indices and proposals that promote their mission to “advance human development and reduce global poverty and inequality.”¹ In the 2005 Report, Japan dropped two places in the HDI (Human Development Index) rankings from the previous year down to 11 out of 177 countries, and also dropped 5 places in the GEM (Gender Empowerment Measure) standing down to 43 out of 87 countries. What kind of image of Japan do these numbers present to us? What these numbers suggest is that while the average life expectancy, educational standards (adult literacy rate and employment rate), and per capita national income may be high, “women’s earnings, and the rates of women in professional and technical positions, as legislators, senior officials and managers, and in parliamentary seats”² are extremely low compared to other developed countries. Simply put, the image these numbers project is that Japan, despite being an economic power that boasts high educational standards and high life expectancy, is in fact an uncivilized country where discrimination against women persists.

How then, do women who actually live in Japan feel when they learn of these numbers? Will many accept these numbers with a sigh of resignation as a valid reflection of their reality? Or will they be offended that these numbers are far from their perception of reality: one in which women are being heralded for taking active roles in various fields, with 50 percent of women in the workforce,³ and where women have the right to speak, and hold the purse-strings, in their households? I think

1 *Human Development Report 2005 Overview*, 2005, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2005, n.p.

2 “Ningen kaihatsu shihyō,” [Human development indices], in *Iwanami Josei-gaku jiten*, [Women’s studies dictionary], editorial supervision by Inoue Teruko, Ueno Chizuko, Ehara Yumiko, Ōsawa Mari, Kanō Mikiyo (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2002), 366-367

3 According to the 2004 edition of the “Hataraku josei no jitsujō” [Current states of working women] compiled by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, “in 2004, the female working population increased for the first time in three years to 27,370,000 (difference of 50,000 from the previous year). (The male working population was 39,050,000, a decrease of 290,000 from the previous year.) The female workforce participation rate (in the population over fifteen years of age) was 48.3 percent, same as the previous year, and the male workforce participation rate was 73.4 percent, the seventh straight year of decline (a decrease of 0.7 percent from the previous year).

that many women would feel perhaps somewhere in between.

This ambivalence felt by many of us today stems from the gap that exists between the consciousness of women, which has radically changed over the past twenty years, and that of the many men currently in power who struggle to maintain the archaic social system, which fails to embrace this change. The reactionary forces against this rapid change of women's consciousness are determined to uphold the role assignment and family institution based on such patriarchal gender division, and have become the main cause of the evident gender gap in wages and employment conditions, as well as the so-called "glass ceiling" phenomenon prevalent in companies and government bodies, in spite of the Basic Act for Gender Equal Society having been enacted in 1999. Perhaps Japan's 43rd place in the GEM ranking is, after all, no surprise. Contemporary Japanese women have, however, objected to this current situation, and their dissatisfaction has become manifest in the falling birthrate and the increased choice of unmarried life.

Currently, Japan has the latest-marrying population in the world.⁴ While the percentage of unmarried women in their late twenties was 18 percent in 1970, the percentage had tripled to 54 percent by 2000, and 27 percent of women were unmarried even in their early thirties.⁵ Since the birthrate declines in accordance with the tendency to marry late, the fact that the total fertility rate has continuously decreased from 2.05 percent (1974) to 1.34 percent in 1999, to 1.29 percent in 2004, and then to 1.25 percent in 2005,⁶ suggests that the tendency to marry late has further increased since 2000. Moreover, the number of people who will never marry in their life is also speculated to rise. The sociologist Ueno Chizuko surmised that this increased choice of not marrying and accelerated decline of birthrate are the "conclusions" women have arrived at in response to "this kind of society." She has assessed that "the collective unconsciousness of women has come to the historical conclusion that they cannot give birth and raise children in a condition like this."⁷

⁴ Ogura Chikako, *Kekkon no jōken* [The conditions for marriage], (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbunsha, 2003), 14.

Translator's note: As mentioned in Ogura's book, according to statistics, the countries with the latest-marrying population in the world at the time of this publication was Sweden, followed by Denmark, then Japan. However, as the percentage of women in their early twenties in both Sweden and Denmark who are unmarried but living together as a couple reaches 40 percent, Ogura surmises that the age where women register their marriage does not necessarily match the age-specific marital rate. Meanwhile, the rate of women who are unmarried but living together as a couple is extremely low in Japan (unmarried men and women who are currently living together as a couple is a mere 3 percent for the age range 25–29). Given these statistics, Ogura concludes that Japan is virtually the country with the latest-marrying population in the world.

⁵ According to the "National Census" compiled by the Statistics Bureau of Japan.

⁶ According to the "Monthly Report, Outline of Vital Statistics in Japan (approximate numbers)" from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare website.

⁷ Ueno Chizuko, "Shirīzu 'genzai' e no toi, dai 4 bu, sōzōryoku no yukue 4,

WOMEN IN JAPANESE CONTEMPORARY ART

CONTEMPORARY ART REFLECTS contemporary society and the conscious and unconscious minds of its people, shakes up rigid values, and provides a glimpse into the imminent future. How then, are women performing in the field of contemporary art in this country, currently standing at 43 in the GEM ranking, where women's consciousness has undergone a radical change over the past twenty years, as symbolized by the choices not to marry and the declining birthrate?

Although oftentimes misunderstood (with bad intentions), thoughts on gender in Japanese contemporary art never arose as “something borrowed” or a “bad influence from the West.” Feminism in Japan has charted its own path, strongly reflecting the uninterrupted series of movements born out of urgency and necessity many women had felt over time, beginning with the Jiyū Minken Undō (movement for civic rights and freedom) of the Meiji era (1868–1912), Hiratsuka Raichō's founding of the first all-women literary association Seitōsha (blue stocking society), the women's suffrage movement and the controversy over the protection of motherhood that rose to prominence during the so-called Taishō Democracy, to the women's liberation movement during the postwar years, the Ūman Ribū (woman lib) movement and the second-wave feminism of the 1970s, and so forth. Many women continued to create art in the face of adversity even in the years before and during the war when the patriarchal society had shut out women from schools, painting circles, and art organizations, and the opportunities to study art were scarce. This phenomenon has been reviewed thoroughly in the exhibition *Japanese Women Artists*

feminizumu wa doko e mukau no ka?”
[Series: Questions for the present, Section 4, The direction of creativity 4, To where is feminism headed?], Mainichi Shimbun (evening edition, October 31, 2005), 6.

8 Translator's note: The controversy over the protection of motherhood (*bosei hogo ronsō*) developed between 1916 and 1919 among Yosano Akiko, Hiratsuka Raichō, Yamakawa Kikue and Yamada Waka. While Hiratsuka claimed that financial assistance by the government is necessary to establish women's national and social existence, Yosano disagreed with the concept of the state providing motherhood protection, claiming that this would only create a dependence mentality. Yamakawa, being a social feminist, called for equal gender rights and claimed that the liberation of women required the reform of capitalist society. Yamada took a different stance, with her main interest in protecting women's roles as wife and mother.

Before and After World War II, 1930s–1950s, curated by Kokatsu Reiko.⁹ Furthermore, the exhibition *Women Artists in Avant-Garde Movements, 1950–1975*,¹⁰ which served as a sequel to *Japanese Women Artists Before and After World War II, 1930s–1950*, also curated by Kokatsu, covers in detail the careers of female artists who were active during the postwar years. After the war, the formal recognition of coeducation also opened the doors for women to art education. Consequently, “many women with successful careers became members of art groups,”¹¹ and many women became active in various art movements such as “Gutai” and “Neo-Dada.” Undeniably, however, women artists were a marginalized presence, as indicated by the fact that even after the war, the word “female” was used without hesitation as a category to describe an artist. Within the outdated system in which men were placed in center of artistic power, including as university educators, mainstream artists, critics, and media people, the assessment of works by women artists would often consist of the clichéd phrases “rare for a woman,” or “typically female,” and recognized only within conventional frameworks of “femininity.” While a limited number of female artists were praised as “exceptional cases,” many others had to wait for proper recognition until, for example, the aforementioned exhibitions shed light on them.

And how are things now? A great majority of students enrolled in art and photography schools, or those who study art history or visual arts are female, and it’s become almost impossible to imagine exhibitions and events related to contemporary art and photography, both in Japan and abroad, without the participation of women artists. Although still insufficient, women are also making significant advancements within the power structures of universities, museums, and mass media. And so, has the situation changed at all? I think that many artists, curators and researchers are feeling the same sort of ambivalence, as they may have toward the GEM ranking.

Artworks dealing with gender perspectives, as well as gender-oriented research and exhibitions have dramatically developed over the years, particularly since the 1990s. Many artists of varying ages quickly come to mind whose works address various issues from diverse perspectives. For example, Ishiuchi Miyako takes her mother’s body and belongings as her subject matter and expresses within her personal

⁹ *Hashiru onnatachi: Josei gaka no senzen, sengo 1930–1950 nendai* [Japanese Women Artists Before and After World War II, 1930s–1950s], held at the Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts, October 21 to December 9, 2001.

¹⁰ *Zenei no josei, 1950–1975* [Women Artists in Avant-Garde Movements, 1950–1975], held at the Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts, July 24 to September 11, 2005.

¹¹ Kokatsu Reiko, “Sengo no ‘zenei’ geijutsu undō to josei āchisuto 1950–60 nendai” [Avant-garde movements after World War II and Japanese women artists, 1950s to 1960s] in *Zenei no josei, 1950–1975* [Women Artists in Avant-Garde Movements, 1950–1975], exh.cat. (Tochigi: Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts, 2005), 9.

history the changing views that a Japanese woman experienced through the postwar years; Idemitsu Mako and Okada Hiroko challenge issues revolving around the modern family institution, especially those of gender-based role division; Shimada Yoshiko critically unearths how women were capable of victimizing others during wartime, as well as the relationship between politics and individuals; Sawada Tomoko, Suzuki Ryōko, and Nagashima Yurie brilliantly expose in their respective ways the wavering consciousness and identities of young women of their generation; Yokomizo Shizuka examines contemporary human relationships by photographing strangers in their personal spaces; BuBu de la Madeleine continues to explore women's sexuality; and male artists such as Morimura Yasumasa and Takano Ryūdai uncover sexual and bodily power structures from the male perspective, and the list goes on.

Significant accomplishments have been made not only by contemporary artists, but also in the fields of research. Research on gender in the visual arts field is becoming more in-depth in Japan, and has matured both in quantity and quality. Having already covered general theories, research is applied on a wider range of subjects, including the discovery and reappraisal of earlier artists buried in history. New art and photography histories concerned with “how existing histories of art and photography have been produced and utilized by men within the patriarchal society”¹² are being written. Recognition of a new kind of art that aims to deconstruct the gender binary is spreading, and images of power and gender as expressed in representations of war, sexuality, and the body are being closely studied.¹³ Having said that, it is also true that an impulsive sort of bashing had at times been directed against these accomplishments, as early as the 1990s when gender criticism first arose in Japan, namely the “efforts to depoliticize visual and bodily representation and to nullify the study and critical evaluation of such ideas.”¹⁴ And now, particularly due to the reactionary administration under Prime Minister Koizumi (2001–2006), which abhors even the word “gender” as it aims for a return to traditional family values, gender research seems to be facing an even stronger political headwind. It should be noted that under such circumstances, many of the women artists in Japan are avoiding the labels “feminism” or “gender,” even though their works address such

12 Wakakuwa Midori, “Bijutsu to jendā” [Art and gender] in *Iwanami joseigaku jiten*, [Women's studies dictionary], editorial supervision by Inoue Teruko, Ueno Chizuko, Ehara Yumiko, Ōsawa Mari, Kanō Mikiyo (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2002), 386-387.

13 For further information on the accomplishments of gender studies in visual representation in Japan, refer to *Imēji & jendā* [Image and gender], bulletin for the Image and Gender Conference, vol.1-5 (Tokyo: Saikisha, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005).

14 Chino Kaori, “Jendā hihyō no mirai e” [Towards the future of gender criticism] in *Onna? Nippon? Bi?* [Women? Japan? Beauty?], eds. Kumakura Takaaki, Chino Kaori, (Tokyo: Keiō University Press, 199), 300.

issues. Even before the concepts of “feminism” and “gender” could be widely examined and take root in Japan, these words took on a life of their own with a different kind of image, first distorted by the mass media and now being avoided entirely. This image of feminism can be described as “sort of scary, sort of hysteric, and sort of dogmatic and inflexible.” Consequently, ideas related to feminism and gender have come to be represented in artworks without employing, at times consciously and at other times unconsciously, an ideological framework, and has brought forth a very ambiguous, quintessentially Japanese situation.

THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE WOMEN SEEN IN THE WORKS OF YANAGI MIWA

ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT artists whose work represents this contemporary state of Japan is Yanagi Miwa (b. 1967). Yanagi has continued to produce striking images that visualize the identity and consciousness of women in the high consumerist society of contemporary Japan, as well as the inner feeling of ambivalence and even anger toward the gender inequality they face in this society. The work that brought Yanagi recognition was the *Elevator Girl* series, which she started in 1993. Yanagi made a spectacular debut in the art world with this series, in which she portrayed women cursed with the ideals of “youth” and “beauty” as standardized products that are reproduced and multiplied.

The women portrayed in Yanagi’s work are dressed in typical elevator-girl uniform consisting of a crimson two-piece suit, a hat, and white gloves. In *The White Casket* (1994), for example, these women (who are hired in department stores to operate the elevators and escort

customers) are lying on the floor in the form of a ring. A puddle of blood oozes out from inside the elevator, and immerses not only the women's uniforms in the same crimson color, but also their flesh, which seems to altogether melt into the pool of blood. Another work from this series, *Elevator Girl House 1F (left)* (1997), a two-part work, shows elevator girls sprawled on a narrow moving walkway wedged between glass cases in which a neat array of cut flowers are displayed with their price tags. Here again, they are wearing short crimson-colored dresses, white gloves, and yellow-green hats, shown either lying down or sitting with their long slender legs folded sideways and casting their glance into the distance. The right side of this work, *Elevator Girl House 1F (right)* (1997, fig.1), shows the women displayed in the same glass case, taking mannequin-like poses. Another piece titled *Paradise Trespasser I* (1998) shows a group of women with long straight hair, dressed uniformly in black from head to toe, inside what appears to be a stockroom for merchandise. In this high-ceilinged room, partitioned all the way up to the top with empty aluminum shelves in the shape of a triple-decker bed, the women are either lying down or sitting down holding their knees. *Midnight Awakening Dream* (1999) captures women lined up against the banister of an open atrium inside a bleak, sophisticated shopping mall full of luxury brands, casting their gaze downward in a feeling of ennui. In such ways, Yanagi cleverly and symbolically employs the idea of the standardized and confined space of elevators with uniformed figures and produces an endless array of beautiful, android-looking young women.

These young, expressionless beauties in pretty uniforms certainly embody the image of the contemporary woman living in the highly-developed capitalist society of Japan whose "individualism has been concealed and in whom a highly symbolic behavior has been fostered."¹⁵ A sense of stagnation brought about by the massive consumer society, where people are surrounded by sophisticated material objects and bloated from capitalist values, looms over these images. This sense of suffocation most certainly reflects how contemporary Japanese women are feeling today. The hypocrisy inherent in Japan's patriarchal society has given birth to this sort of women imagery; while on the surface, society preaches the importance of individuality and human qualities, so much importance is placed on

15 Uematsu Yuka, "Yanagi Miwa: Jibun sagashi no tabi" [Miwa Yanagi: Her journey in search of herself] in *Yanagi Miwa Shōjo jigoku gokuraku rōjo* [Miwa Yanagi: Darkness of girlhood and lightness of aging], exh.cat. (Kagawa: Marugame Genichirō-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004), 25, 43.

how young or how attractive a woman is, in all aspects of employment and human relations. At the mercy of this double standard, women know that individual personalities and ways of thinking are simply troublesome and uncalled-for, and that they are being treated in society as consumable items with expiry dates. In full awareness of this absurdity, they have learned to force a smile on their faces and transform their bodies into the standard form of “beauty” that society imposes upon them as tactics to make their way through this tough society. This survival skill of resignation mixed with shrewdness, which women acquire at an early age, is for sure embodied in Yanagi’s work as, in her own words, “a symbol—a life in a small box, cut off from society.”¹⁶ As a way to self-protect and survive, women have learned to conform to the values of society that inflict harm upon them, seemingly succumbing to the expectations while also enjoying the benefits of that society. In fact, they are rejecting that society and finding momentary refuge in retreating to the small confines of their personal worlds. These women who “prioritize self-interest”¹⁷ are the very ones who are accelerating the pace of declining birthrate and marriage rate, and are in fact hollowing out the societal values that they are outwardly following as a way to thrive. “Like a demon child, a child who has grown up obediently under a patriarchal system becomes the biggest menace to patriarchy. See for yourself the conservative and passive nature of the young people.”¹⁸

This image of contemporary Japanese women is increasingly present in Yanagi’s subsequent series titled *My Grandmothers*, which was first shown in 2000. In this photographic series, the ideal self of the young female subjects in fifty years’ time have been visualized. Yanagi, based on an extended dialogue with each of her subjects, imagined their respective life stories for the next fifty years. The process culminated in Yanagi’s portrayal of the woman in their imagined worlds of fifty years into the future. Each work is a photograph of the female subject acting as “the ideal grandmother in an iconic moment of her life,” accompanied by a “candid” text statement about what she is feeling.

Take for example *YUKA* (2000, fig.2), laughing heartily with her mouth open wide, riding down a highway in the sidecar of a motorbike of her young “boyfriend.” Her hair, dyed bright red, is whipped up by

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 25, 44.

¹⁷ Ueno Chizuko, Ogura Chikako, *Za feminizumu* [The feminism] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2002), 191.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 239.



figure 1

Yanagi Miwa, *YUKA* from the series *My Grandmothers*, 2000

Digital color print, 1600x1600mm

Courtesy of the artist and Yoshiko Isshiki Office, Tokyo

the wind, and the laced blouse she is wearing has a low neckline. While holding a lit cigarette between her bright red manicured fingers, the gold teeth filling shows from her mouth. By her own account: “After taking lots of little trips, solo, I met my current lover (a spoiled rich kid I hear). All of a sudden, I ended up being taken across the US in search for ‘black gold’—on another one of his ridiculous dreams. Indeed, I’ve had to turn down his marriage proposals, but he’s obviously not giving up.”¹⁹ Meanwhile, *MIE* (2000) is pictured sitting alone quietly in a world after a great disaster has wiped out most of humanity. She notes: “This is not something about lamenting over death, nor is it a blessing in the form of new life—in fact, it’s not even something that we can pursue. It is, however, about sharing what little remaining food we have left, and, should we become unable to carry out our given role, it is simply about choosing death for ourselves as a race. And yet, we survive. This is the place where perfect harmony and equality dwell.”²⁰ *MINAMI* (2000) is a female CEO who succeeded in her theme park business with her brainchild “Little Milky” character. She bosses around her young female secretaries and announces with great enthusiasm: “We’re currently constructing ‘Minami Island’ in Hawaii. It’s simply fabulous! You know, sometime soon, we’ll show up in Los Angeles and Paris, too. The black rat has always been my life-long rival. I absolutely refuse to lose.”²¹ *HIROKO* (2001), a former dominatrix of a private sadomasochistic service, lectures her young successor: “You are still a greenhorn at this, you know. Make very sure that you understand that, ok?”²² The fortune-teller *AI* (2003), the geishas *AKIYO*, *MAI*, *HITOMI*, and *NORIKO* (2002), *MIKIKO* the nursemaid of the dying (2001), and the owner of an entertainment production company *YOSHIE* (2001) are all still going strong and committed to their work despite their age.²³

As many critics have pointed out, we see almost no trace of the women’s families in their future images. Their appearances in fifty years’ time are antithetical to popular “grandmother images”—the “sweet” granny surrounded by her children and grandchildren, or the wife growing old with her husband through thick and thin. The “ideal” grandmothers these women have envisioned for themselves couldn’t care less about public decency. They do not worry about the trouble they may be causing others or what others are saying. These women are guided by their inner desires with a strong sense of self-assertion.

19 *Yanagi Miwa Shōjo jigoku gokuraku rōjo* [Miwa Yanagi: Darkness of girlhood and lightness of aging], exh.cat. (Kagawa: Marugame Genichirō-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004), 51.

20 *ibid.*, 53.

21 *ibid.*, 57.

22 *ibid.*, 59.

23 Translator’s note: The occupations of the women in this series are as they appear in *Yanagi Miwa Shōjo jigoku gokuraku rōjo* [Miwa Yanagi: Darkness of girlhood and lightness of aging], exh.cat. (Kagawa: Marugame Genichirō-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004).

They fear not of being or ending up alone and are proud on their own. Even death is not to be feared; these women accept death as one of the many ordinary happenings in life. At the same time, the women do not necessarily seek enlightenment through aging. Rather, they choose to live in the moment. They have certainly lost some of their looks and show signs of physical decline, but they are gracefully chic, fashionable, and pursuing their own style in every way possible.

While assuming the role of the pure and poised “elevator girls,” the women secretly dream of a future where they can live true to their strong individualities, completely unlike their current selves. For the contemporary Japanese woman, the feelings of resignation and despair towards society have come this far. These women know that youth and beauty are the only weapons they have against society, that they are fated to be quickly consumed by their “best before” date. While in their hearts they harbor disdain toward society and the people who place value on youth and beauty, they also fear that as they age, they will no longer be able to reap the benefits of such values. At the same time, they seek relief in the thought that as they grow old, they will be liberated from the structures of youth and beauty. Women want to be slightly different from one another, and yet they fear standing out in a group. With empty smiles on their faces, they obediently perform their mundane routine work and then withdraw into their small personal worlds. The “ideal grandmothers” they wish to become in the future are not reflections of actual women but are inverted self-portraits in the sense that the ideal self, though currently unattainable, is realized in the photograph. The women are not yet at the point of imagining the true reality of aging. They certainly don’t expect to magically transform into the wild, cool, and independent “granny” they wish to be, but the imagining of a “distant future” allows them to fantasize to such extremes.

What then, is reality like for grandmothers? In a series titled *Granddaughters* (2004), Yanagi addresses the reality of aging through videos of individuals speaking on the topic. The subjects are women of various nationalities in their seventies to nineties. Each woman is filmed from the front against a panoramic backdrop of what seems to be her current home city, speaking in her native language about her own grandmother. As the subjects themselves are over seventy,

the memories told by these women go back about fifty or sixty years in time, contrary to *My Grandmothers*, which portrayed the subjects' imagined self-image in fifty years. As Yanagi describes, "With women from Europe, there are times when I think they're talking about World War II, but suddenly I realize they're talking about World War I,"²⁴ the stories told by these women are in parts embellished or mistaken. Yet still, the memories told in detail by these women are very clear and vivid—a woman may recall the shape of the skirt her grandmother was wearing, or the way she wore her kimono, while another may reminisce about having her hair braided by her grandmother or receiving a pearl necklace as a gift, or even seeking refuge together in a bomb shelter. In this fascinating series, the past life of a real woman from a country afar emerges with great detail as her story unfolds. Furthermore, the work enables us to encounter the vibrant lives of the women telling the stories of their grandmothers, who have themselves reached the age of the grandmothers being recalled. The women are very conscious that they are being filmed; they boldly stand in front of the camera, wearing carefully applied makeup, and dressed in either a suit, dress, or kimono chosen for the occasion, complete with elegant yet understated accessories. Seeing their youthful energy and dignified aura, many would hesitate to call them "grandmothers." In fact, their presence is more powerful than the "ideals" visualized in *My Grandmothers*. These women are also far from the typical "sweet" granny or the type of grandmother who becomes her aging husband's devoted companion. Instead, portrayed in this series are confident, self-assured, independent women.

One must ask, in reality, are there any elderly women who are truly happy to have completely devoted their lives to others (children, grandchildren, or husbands), deferred decision-making to others, and depended on others financially and emotionally? Would we find any women who have happily embraced such roles? If indeed there are such women, they are probably only pretending. Like the "elevator girls," they had no other choice but to take on the roles of the good daughter, wife, mother or grandmother in order to survive. Their true voices and lives were probably firmly hidden behind the mask of those roles. Until society lends an ear to women's voices and embarks on structural reform, women will have to be cloaked in armor to survive while living a

24 "Yanagi Miwa x Washida Kiyokazu"
[Conversation with Kiyokazu Washida],
Yanagi Miwa Shōjo jigoku gokuraku rōjo
[Miwa Yanagi: Darkness of Girlhood and
Lightness of Aging], exh.cat. (Kagawa:
Marugame Genichirō-Inokuma Museum of
Contemporary Art, 2004), 17, 35.

selfish inner life.

In Yanagi's following *Fairy Tale* series, the roles of the old woman and the young girl have been reversed. The series is based on the fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen, where each work evokes a well-known scene from those stories. In an exhibition titled "The Incredible Tale of the Innocent Old Lady and the Heartless Young Girl"²⁵ Yanagi referenced the famous novella by Gabriel Garcia Márquez, *The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and her Heartless Grandmother*. Garcia Márquez' story is a "grim fairy tale for adult readers,"²⁶ in which a "heartless grandmother" trades off her young granddaughter as a prostitute, while the "innocent young girl" passively submits to her grandmother until she ultimately has her grandmother killed by her lover whom she quickly abandons. Yanagi's work titled *Erendira* (2004) shows a brothel room surrounded by walls picturing an endless barren land and a bed canopied with black lace curtains, where a naked young girl, whose breasts are only beginning to develop, lay asleep, presumably exhausted from attending male customers. Next to her is an old lady with long blonde hair, holding a cane with an anchor-like hooked end and wearing a lavish tiara and layers of necklaces. She is leaning back arrogantly in an extravagant chair with her legs crossed. What is eerie in this quiet scene is not only the ominous interior and the irrational story but the fact that the old woman's body is that of a youthful girl. Accompanying the picture are the words, "Lord dear Lord, please forgive me. I who was once pure at heart. Let me know such a love once more." Are these words of prayer uttered by the young girl or the old woman?

In *Sleeping Beauty* (2004, fig.3), the evil witch, also portrayed with a body of a young girl and holding spools in her hands, is being held down against the floor by a girl. Meanwhile, *The Little Match Girl* (2005) has deep wrinkles on her face as she sits with her thin legs stretched out on the snow-covered ground smiling at the flame of the match she has lit. Lastly, in *Snow White* (2004), the stepmother offering a poisoned apple to Snow White is depicted not as an individual but as Snow White's own reflection in the mirror. She is a young girl with an old woman's face.

Yanagi's *Fairy Tale* series liberates women from the misogyny that underlies the fairy tales by Andersen and the Brothers Grimm,

²⁵ Yanagi Miwa, *Mukuna rôjo to mujihina shôjo no shinjirarenai hanashi* [The Incredible Tale of the Innocent Old Lady and the Heartless Young Girl], held at the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, August 13-November 6, 2005. The title references Gabriel Garcia Márquez's novella titled *The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and her Heartless Grandmother*.

²⁶ Gabriel Garcia Márquez, *Eréndira*, trans. Tsuzumi Tadashi, Kimura Eiichi (Tokyo: Chikuma Bunko, 1988), back cover.



figure 2

Yanagi Miwa, *Sleeping Beauty* from the series *Fairy Tale*, 2004

Gelatin silver print, 1000x1000mm

Courtesy of the artist and Yoshiko Isshiki Office, Tokyo

among others. A Sleeping Beauty who has won in a wrestling match against the evil witch wouldn't shamelessly succumb to the curse to sleep for a hundred years. Freed from the curse, she won't have to be abducted and "raped"²⁷ by the necrophiliac prince either. If Snow White knew that her stepmother was an embodiment of her future self, she shouldn't have to be a slave to the seven dwarfs as their housemaid, nor would she eat an apple poisoned with "envy," let alone need a prince who is eager to find a pretty wife. Instead, perhaps, she could have carved out a happy life for herself, while she and her stepmother supported each other as fellow women. Had "Cinderella" been assertive enough to fight against her stepmother and stepsisters, she certainly wouldn't have been satisfied with a prince who can only love a beautiful, obedient woman. The women in Yanagi's *Fairy Tale* series have grown out of the image of women as portrayed in the original stories, as passive individuals who idly wait for someone else to make them happy, and resist to fall into the hackneyed patriarchal trap of believing that "women are women's worst enemies." These women are already aware that when a woman waits for someone else to make them happy, they end up becoming either the evil old woman, witch, or stepmother, and that that is exactly what the "princes" and "kings" and the "world" deem them to become in the future. That is why *Little Red Riding Hood* (2004) and her grandmother are portrayed as "newly-born twins"²⁸ inside the sliced-open belly of the wolf, and Little Red Riding Hood embraces her grandmother with affection.

There is no such thing as a genuinely innocent young girl. Nor is there such thing as an utterly heartless old woman. Girls acquire the knowledge and skills to survive and mature while still young. But because their knowledge and experience are undeveloped, they lack the ability to put themselves in other people's shoes, which at times trigger cruel behavior. Women have no choice but to mature from a young age, and because of that, they grow old while embracing an innocent and pure "girlness."

Sunaonna (2005), who has the body of a young girl and hands of an old woman and whose head is completely covered in a tent, wanders about a desert. She is not just a young girl nor just an old woman, but a reflection of the onlooker—the "I"—living in the contemporary

27 Wakakuwa Midori, *Ohime sama to jendā—anime de manabu otoko to onna no jendāgaku nyūmon* [The princess and gender—an introduction to gender studies, Learning through animated movies], Chikuma Shinsho (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2003), 139.

28 Yanagi Miwa, *Mukuna rōjo to mujihina shōjo no shinjirarenai hanashi* [The Incredible Tale of the Innocent Old Lady and the Heartless Young Girl], exh.cat. (Tokyo: Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005), 22.

age. These are the women who are fighting tooth and nail against this difficult world, the innocent, cruel, and self-serving women who are “enjoying in solitude the magic lantern show inside the blackout curtain that is totally shut off from the outer world.”²⁹ The barren wilderness that stretches before the eyes of each “tent woman” is the very reality women are living today.

²⁹ “Yūrēka! Bi no tobira ga hiraku toki, hachi gūwa shirīzu, bijutsu sakka Yanagi Miwa san” [Eureka! When the door of beauty opens, A series of eight fairy tales, Artist Yanagi Miwa], *Sanyō Shimbun* (evening edition, August 21, 2005), 15.

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