

Izima Kaoru

Erin O'Connor wears Vivienne Westwood

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For the past thirty-odd years, the discourse upon the relationship between the photographic image and death has been explored thoroughly, particularly in the works of Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag. Whether one finds their work helpful in understanding the nature of photography, or alternatively, very problematic, their essays are constant points of reference for students, writers and practicing artists. Whether or not relating to Barthes and Sontag's conceptual parallels (I rather doubt it), the genre of fashion photography has also adopted themes of death and particularly violence to tap into our subconscious fantasies: only a few weeks ago Dolce & Gabbana received a firm slap on the wrist for their latest advertising campaign depicting scenes of murder and rape, albeit with a sense of elegance and decorum, described by their PR people as being based on Eugene Delacroix's paintings. Indeed, the relationship between fashion and violence is much older than that between photography and death, since skins and furs have been symbolic of power and social status ever since Man began to hunt other animals.

For over ten years, Japanese fashion photographer Izima Kaoru has also explored this relationship in his ongoing series of actresses and models photographed in their chosen, fantasised place and cause of death, wearing clothes of their choice. The project began in 1994 when Kaoru was the editor of the fashion magazine *Zyappu* based in Tokyo. Kaoru's regular slot *Serial Murders of Actresses* featured popular actresses playing dead in various locations with the clothing brands cited in the captions. *Zyappu* went bust in 1999, but Kaoru had enough material for an exhibition in Tokyo and also for the monograph, titled *Twenty Landscapes with a Corpse*. Early images from the series were not macabre, but certainly less glamorous than images typifying Kaoru's later work, and generally

featured the women dead on street corners and in alleys, which was suggestive of violent death or sexual assault.

Kaoru's latest victim, and indeed first British subject, is the well-known model Erin O'Connor (who starred alongside Twiggy et al in Marks & Spencer's latest television advertising campaign), and she has been treated to a very British death: judging by the toxic datura flower that hangs over her head, she has apparently been either murdered or committed suicide in the grounds of Kew Gardens, dressed by the most British of designers, Vivienne Westwood. The series is consistent with Kaoru's previous scenarios, whereby he shoots from a variety of angles and distances, firstly putting the corpse in context, and finishing with a close-up of the body or face. The opening shot has been made from directly above the corpse and shows off the surrounding tree ferns to their best inside Kew's palm house. Despite being almost in the centre of the composition, *O'Connor* is a tiny fragment within the environment. It is very similar to his image *Matsuda Jun wears Marni 271* (2000) which features the model and actress in a tiny clearing of an enormous sunflower field. The second shot of O'Connor is also quite typical as it has Kaoru's deliberately voyeuristic aesthetic, achieved by the out-of-focus foliage which obscures the viewer's perspective.

Kaoru's choice of making scenes with a few pictures made from varying distances has led to his work being compared to a cinematic vision. Kaoru himself has been reluctant to see his work in this way, and I find that his images read much more clearly as scene-of-the-crime photographs because of the increasing proximity the viewer has to the corpse. It is as if the photographer/viewer is drawing a breath and finding courage to move a step closer to the dead body, which is something that is repulsive yet morbidly intriguing. Kaoru takes the viewer by the hand and conducts them step-by-step through this process (albeit a simulation) of staring death in the face. The flatness of light that Kaoru always chooses to use adds to the static and perhaps a little clinical atmosphere of his images which enhances to their forensic quality. They are dramatic but certainly without melodrama.

Although Kaoru's ongoing series began in the context of editorial fashion photography, and the *O'Connor* suite, before being exhibited at *fa projects*, will be launched at the fashion event On/Off at the Royal Academy of Arts, his images

occupy a curious space between fashion and fine art: this is due to the collaborative nature of the work, whereby the final images are the result of a true collaboration between Kaoru and his subjects. This method is in fact an inversion of traditional fashion shoots, whereby certainly the models, and often the photographer are merely necessary tools at the disposal of the art director and client.