

red by berlinbookclub

Satoshi Fujiwara

BLEACHED

29. Nov 2024 – 31. Jan 2025



Satoshi Fujiwara, *Bleached*, Print on blueback paper, 2017–2023. Courtesy the artist. Installation view of the exhibition *Bleached* at red, Berlin, 2024.

CURATORIAL TEXT

[...]

*And on the lion rides a boy in white,
who holds on with a small hot hand;
meanwhile the lion shows his teeth and tongue.*

And now and then there's a white elephant

[...]

- Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Carousel* (1907)

In the summer of 2017, more than 800 neo-Nazis gathered in Berlin Spandau to commemorate the 30th anniversary of Rudolf Heß' death. The former deputy to Adolf Hitler

was found guilty at the Nuremberg trials and in 1987, after serving 40 years of his lifelong sentence, took his own life in Spandau Prison (Kriegsverbrechergefängnis Spandau). The memorial march took place in Wilhelmstraße, where the now-demolished Prison was located. In defiance of the government ban on displaying Nazi symbols in Germany, the participants of the march carried black-white-red Deutsches Reich flags, symbolizing their National Socialist and anti-democratic beliefs.

Within this charged atmosphere, Kobe-born and Berlin-based artist Satoshi Fujiwara set out to capture the event from up close: Disguised as an Asian tourist and armed only with his camera, he approached the neo-Nazis at close range to document the spectacle. These photographs became the foundation for his *Bleached*-series. Fujiwara meticulously edited them and removed any color and symbolic elements from banners, flags, clothing and skin of the participants. What remains are bleached white canvases and textures.

Fujiwara's work exists within the interplay of two seemingly paradoxical elements: While the journalistic technique of on-site documentation is crucial to his work in order to experience the spectacle and bear witness to the event, nor does he hide the fact that the images he presents are manipulated. In times of deep fakes, most viewers might be aware that photographic images have never been a particularly trustworthy source of information, much less so edited images. However, such common understanding does not stop from feeling a certain immediacy resonating from Fujiwara's images: stylistic cropping brings the marching crowd extremely close to the viewer, further emphasized due to high resolution and the sharpness of the images. We stand face to face with the protesters and perceive this event as a factual reality. In other words, we become witnesses to the spectacle.

This is at odds with our knowledge of the artist's manipulation process. By being altered, these images leave behind an inherent quality as "declaration of the seamless integrity of the real" (Rosalind Krauss) that the medium of photography claims. But through the manipulations, textually implied by the series' title, we gain access to something else, or to quote Jean Baudrillard's description of hyperreality: "It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real [...]". In relation to Baudrillard's description, Fujiwara's images are constitutive of a hyperreality. Simultaneously, the images' blank spots and title are betraying their artificiality and unveil their hyperreal condition.

The process of bleaching becomes a multifaceted phenomenon. Originally an act of iconoclasm of Nazi symbolism, it also refers to censorship and the government ban on such symbols. The color white unfolds multiple meanings: immaculateness, the veil, innocence or hope. However, its "purity" often comes from exclusion or erasure of what was there before. It is related to the idea of "Auslöschung" (annihilation) and is an integral part of right wing racial theory of "white supremacy" and "white power".

Fujiwara brings this discourse into the white cube of the art space, drawing a connection to Rilke's aforementioned "white elephant". Rilke's poem originally describes a carousel, which as a term can also refer to an ever-recurring phenomenon, as in this case right wing tendencies throughout Germany's history. The white elephant is moreover an established term for a troublesome possession that is highly expensive to maintain or difficult to dispose

of. One could refer to Rudolf Heß as such, as he continued to live in captivity for 40 years, long after the new German state wanted to shed all links to its Nazi past.

The theme of National Socialism is deeply ingrained in German history. Artistic treatment of this sensitive subject varies widely. In his 1965 series of portraits of family members during the Third Reich (Onkel Rudi, Tante Marianne) Gerhard Richter, similar to Fujiwara, chose photographic images as source material for his studies into Germany's past. Richter departed from archival photos, which he then transferred to the medium of painting, thereby opening a discourse about guilt, personal fates and repressed memories. Fujiwara, however, aims at the opposite: His camera serves as a tool to capture neo-Nazis in contemporary society. Instead of blurring these photographs in a Richter-like manner, he sharpens them, and thereby evokes a distinct realism that forces its observer to trust the reality of the spectacle witnessed. Although the images depict a memorial march, *Bleached* is not primarily about memory. Everything we witness is located in close proximity to the viewer, a testimony of our contemporary society and times.

In this practice, Fujiwara finds an ally in spirit in the person of Maurizio Cattelan. When asked about his planned, but never executed fake neo-Nazi rally in the Netherlands in 1993, Cattelan's response was extraordinarily serious: "You should witness a real skinhead rally. I just take it; I'm always borrowing pieces – crumbs really – of everyday reality. If you think my work is very provocative, it means that reality is extremely provocative, and we just don't react to it. Maybe we no longer pay attention to the way we live in the world. We are increasingly ... how do you say, 'don't feel any pain' ... we are anaesthetized." By the choice of photography as medium and emphasizing testimonial character of the audience, Fujiwara shows a glimpse of such an "extremely provocative" reality. Fujiwara's *Bleached* images can be seen as subverting Friedrich Nietzsche's famous saying: "Truth is ugly: we have art lest we perish from the truth." Although, in a very cynical and ambiguous way, the artist presents a "whitewashed" version of reality.

Accompanying the series *Bleached* are two videoworks. In *Haunted Tourist (After Hans-Joachim Bohlmann)*, Fujiwara wears a police body cam as he documents the hanging of his posters around public places in Berlin. The work's title refers to Hans-Joachim Bohlmann, an infamous iconoclast, who damaged more than 50 works of art from museums and galleries during his lifetime. POV-like sequences in Fujiwara's video are repeatedly interrupted by scenes of protests of the year 2023, in which fragments of arguments among protesters and police can be heard and seen. No context of the causes for these protests given to the viewer, thereby renouncing any narrative structures. Eventually, the video shows Fujiwara revisiting the locations where he hung the posters and collecting the remnants. These weatherworn, torn and crumpled pieces are presented in the exhibition in a sculptural arrangement. Like the medium of photography itself, they possess an inherent indexical quality. As artifacts they vouch for the factuality of the events shown on the screen. Acts of iconoclasm, whether caused by forces of nature or committed by people in the form of digital image manipulation or tearing down posters manually, appear to be an integral part of any reality.

A second video work, *Kopernikanische Wende (Copernican Revolution)*, can be viewed on a much smaller screen close to the ceiling of the same room. It shows first person footage of the artist working shifts as a dishwasher in a restaurant in Berlin. It consists of more than 8

hours of footage in a monotonous and repetitive routine, resembling the tasks of a typical workday. While conditions have much improved since the line of work of the “plongeur” was famously described by George Orwell in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), its social status has remained very much the same. Such jobs are mostly invisible to the public and executed predominantly by immigrants. Curiously, it is a common xenophobic claim that immigrants are stealing the livelihood of local populations. However, when it comes down to doing low paid jobs that are socially looked down upon such as washing the dishes, there is surprisingly little interest on behalf of these same prejudiced claimants.

BIOGRAPHY

Satoshi Fujiwara (b. 1984, Kobe, Japan) is a Berlin-based artist whose interdisciplinary practice spans photography, installation, collage, and video. His work critically interrogates the visual and linguistic codes that shape society, diverging from conventional art discourses to deconstruct the politics of contemporary imagery. Through the heterogeneous definition of his visual language, Fujiwara creates a new emerging lexicon. His works have been presented at international institutions, including the Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto, Canada; Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai, UAE; Fondazione Prada, Italy; La Boverie, Belgium; 21_21 Design Sight, Japan; and Deutsche Oper Berlin, Germany, among others.

GENERAL INFORMATION

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Thursday – Saturday: 12–6 pm

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