

A Movement of Edges

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アレ・ブレ・ボケ – *are, bure, boke* – literally “rough, grainy, out of focus” – adj | A term popularized amongst Japanese photographers in the 1960’s postwar era that sought to define the edge of a cultural identity teetering on the clash of imperial Eastern tradition and modern Western influence.

There is an ambiguity to the largely printed black and white photograph. Shadows and highlights, mountains and valleys: is it a landscape? A dark triangular shadow along the left-hand side of the frame becomes a sloping lighter hue which fades into an even lighter incline. Soft and grainy with the push of expired film, the gray background deepens as it descends. So many grays, but ample contrast. Look a bit closer. The curve of a chin, the angle of a jawline, the slope of a neck, imitating nature. Bodies like flowers, like fruit, like mountains. A form rendered down to its simplest parts—shape, line, color—until its distinct identity is rendered nearly obsolete.

Gray scales eliminate colors that allow for identification: shape. This is a skin-tone; therefore, this is a person. This is nearly black, this is lighter gray, and this the lightest; what is this? I did not shoot these photos in black and white on purpose, it was just the roll I had loaded into my 35 at the time. Expired 400 speed film pushed to 100 ISO. Grainy grays that worked in my favor to eliminate the known from the viewing experience, chance at first, choice thereafter. Once color and characteristics are eliminated, what is left of that which we know intuitively by sight? Shapes, light, line, shadow obscured. It forces us to think once again, rather than to immediately recognize a form with which we believe ourselves to be familiar. Once studied so closely, race, gender and age begin to blur, even more so once color is eliminated. Who are we? Why do we recognize people as one thing or another? By doing so, do we in turn identify ourselves? What is there to be found along blurred edges?

These are the questions I sought to ask, and I have installed my work in such a way as to convey those questions. I chose to hang my black and white photos in a grid, printed in large scale, arranged to flow through their lyrical lines rather than conforming to a standard set of dimensions; colored photos are also present, arranged together on their own separate walls. A series of prints, lines translated from sugar-lifted copper that flow into one another like those of their black and white counterparts. A compliment, staggered across its own wall: line. Walk in, walk straight, take in the photos that are larger than life, bodies like landscapes but are they bodies or are they landscapes? Look left, now right. Things begin to make sense with colored photos. Skin tones and jade green backgrounds: color. Visual cues to allow the mind to recognize the form once again.

This brings me now to the print, a set of copper plates bathed in ferric chloride that transform into one long flowing line composed of many parts, derived from those of the forms, whose grays and white interact in their own lyrical dance. These toned grays move across panels

in a way that mimics the movement of my photographs, though the two processes themselves are nearly perfect opposites, foils. Photographs are composed, a shutter clicked, an instantaneous capturing of light. These lines were planned, drafted, meticulously inked. Copper cut, rotated, rearranged. A process that began with ink washes in a second-floor room above a laundromat to translate the movement of edges captured on a January night in New Orleans.

Through these lines I wanted to depict the purposeful blur, the key movement of my photographs that dances along the edge. David Hinton speaks about this idea in his *Existence | A Story*, a short detailing of the works of Chinese landscape painter Shi Tao. Shi Tao, too, inhabited an edge: the lone survivor of the Ming Dynasty's imperial family, spirited away to a Ch'an monastery, his adult life spent in disguise.¹ White space as distance, mountain ranges as dragons hiding in the clouds, edges of dynasties, of identities.

Hinton describes Shi Tao's paintings as being autobiographical. The one he focuses on most has a name long forgotten, an ink wash of two men overlooking a valley from a mountain top, the details of the land covered by white clouds (Fig. 1). To the right-hand side is a poem written by Shi Tao's longtime friend, Huang Yan-lu. It is said that beneath the clouds lies the ruins of a village razed to the ground by the Manchu who overthrew the Ming Dynasty and cast Shi Tao into the world a wanderer.

I began studying these works both for their meaning and for their form. The print began as a simple watercolor line of the tracing of edges within my photos but soon begged to be elongated into one continuous flowing form. I then posed the question of the line itself: I sought a very particular one, though it was not until studying the ink paintings of Shi Tao, the sketchbooks of Hokusai (Fig. 2-3), that I was able to recognize the shape I wanted it to take.

Though the term *are, bure, boke* is one that surfaced far after these artists had passed, it is embodied in the edges of their work both literally and contextually. For Shi Tao, this edge was of two dynasties, of a true self and a public self that came together in his paintings. For Hokusai, it was a cultural edge, the height of the Edo period in which the merchant class began to rise. Theater flourished, education increased, and from the floating world came the woodblock prints for which artists such as Hokusai are so widely known.

The form of the lines of these artists is one that contains a definitive edge and one that fades, that blurs. Rough, grainy, out of focus. It is this form that I adopted for my print, and while studying it also discovered the significance of line within the written characters of the Japanese and Chinese languages. While this is something I was raised to understand, it was not until studying the artistic line work of these cultures that I connected the significance of both the linguistic line and the painted line. However, when taking into account the relationship between language, psychology, and worldview—that is, linguistic determinism—it makes perfect sense

¹ David Hinton, *Existence | A Story*, 13.

that Chinese and Japanese artists would put such emphasis on linework, as lines themselves possess written meaning.

For example, the Japanese word for the number one is written as follows: 一

The number two: 二, and three: 三

They are pictograms, and when learning to read the language, one must first learn the meaning of the parts, called radicals in English, that comprise the whole.

A few further examples:

One tree is 木, and many trees create a forest: 森

To speak is to form words with your tongue, thus: 言 and 舌 together become 話す. An idea is a sound above the heart: 音 and 心, respectively, which then become 意. A firework is a flower made of fire: 花 and 火 come together to create the word 花火. There is meaning in line; edges are quite literally defined to create words. It is natural, then, that the linework of Chinese and Japanese paintings should be, at least in part, about the meaning of an edge. One sharply defined, one that blurs, pronunciation slightly altered in the creation of words. This returns me to linguistic determinism and the ways in which Japanese people speak, their relationship to words and to nature and to their understanding of the world that is so built upon their language. Inherent in their speech is the essence of the thing, a pictogram taken from the very object or idea itself as if it, too, possessed life. Even the word in English, *character*, implies possession of *being*.

It is this idea that contributed to writing as its own distinct art form—shodo in Japanese, calligraphy in English—that prescribes as much care to the formation of the characters themselves as it does to their meaning. This idea of the line is then translated to ink paintings, wherein dragons fade into mountain tops and distance is implied by an absence of pigment. For blur to become clear, one must simply step back far enough to view it so that edges once again take shape. The same can be said of my photos: stand too close, and they are nearly unrecognizable. Take a few steps back, view everything together as distinct yet related parts of a whole, and their relationships become clear as the eye traces one line to the next. *A Movement of Edges*.

There are threads that can also be traced from the inks of the ancient East to the peppers of Edward Weston, to his landscapes and the photos of his wife, Charis (Fig. 4-5). The same kind of sensual lens traces lines that define shadows, weave across sand dunes, define a figure (Fig. 6). At first, they may not seem so similar, yet there is a continuity to the ways in which these artists use edges to translate ideas, along with the simplification of form. Hans Bellmer and Nobuyoshi Araki utilized the edge in a more literal sense, winding it around the figure in order to disfigure, men masochistically binding their female subjects. It is through an almost grotesque use of bondage that Bellmer's work tends to move away from the humanity of the form and instead render object (Fig. 7). Araki, however, objectifies by utilizing a tradition of eroticism—*shibari* or *kinbaku* (Fig. 8-9)—derived from the art of binding prisoners of

war—*hojojutsu* (Fig.10-11). Each set of photos implies a difference in consent and participation, and one can infer from the history of erotic bondage a certain lack of both—or at the very least—the depiction of it. I am not attempting to do any of that.

Is it the monochromatic nature of their images that lends to the ambiguity of their subjects? Or, as Weston said, is it that "this is just a pepper—nothing else."² A pepper shot in color is easily recognized as a pepper, as is a sand dune or a human body. But as I demonstrate through my own colored images, it is not palette alone that allows for easy identification. The emphasis on light and shadow in Weston's peppers leaves room to see in his images what is desired to be seen. He did not intend for them to resemble a nude or convey a sensuality, but the very nature of his photographic composition allowed for the questioning of the identity of their contents. The opposite is true for Bellmer and Araki, who, through the physical manipulation of the forms rather than photographic composition, render their subjects nearly unidentifiable.

There are certainly aspects of each of these artists present in my work. There is a relationship between human and nature, body and landscape that is present within the work of Edward Weston and there is a twisting of figurative lines not unlike those of his peppers. There is also a conscious effort to *not* do what Bellmer and Araki did—that is, distort the body in an obvious way, a nearly grotesque way, in order to render it unidentifiable. My images were composed in the moment, naturally. I did not pose my models; I added light to curves much like the photographers of the Czech avant-garde. Artists like Frantisek Drtikol (Fig. 12), Jaromir Funke (Fig. 13) and Jaroslav Rossler (Fig. 14) who utilized light and shadow in order to create a relationship between shape and the human form without objectifying in the ways Bellmer and Araki did. It is the combination of light and shadow that create an edge, and it is edges that bring me back to a blurred ambiguity and an inhabited in-between space.

From where does this originate? A confused sense of my own identity, maybe, from growing up with multiple identities yet not being able to truly claim one or the other. Most people, when meeting someone new, ask a similar series of entry-point questions:

"What's your name?"

"Where are you from?"

"What do you do/study?"

Most people, when they meet me, follow up with a fourth, rephrased to varying degrees of perceived politeness or political correctness.

"What are you...?"

Maybe I am so drawn to this idea of ambiguity because I have lived within it my entire life. Not Japanese enough, not American enough. Too dark, too pale, beauty standards not met. A habitation of the edge, a personal embodiment of *are, bure, boke*, an edge that is rough, blurred, and out of focus. A purposeful manipulation of my own reality as representative of my life's

² Conger, Amy, *Edward Weston: Photographs from the Center for Creative Photography*, Fig. 562.

experiences. When studied closely enough, the human form itself becomes an object of ambiguity. Race, culture, and gender become less relevant when the label of “body” itself is not easily recognized. Through my photographic depictions of the female form I seek to amplify this state of ambiguity by raising the very question that I find people so often asking themselves when they meet me – “How do I identify what it is that I am looking at?”

This is a show about ambiguity, about edges, about what it means to occupy a thin line between. We rely so heavily upon what we think we know in order to interact with and understand the world, to recognize and to remember. The use of black and white film eliminates the cues that allow for immediate recognition, and instead force thought. The implementation of *are, bure, boke* within the colored images does so by eliminating the very thing emphasized by the black and white ones—that is, form. The print is line, a detour from the photographs that seeks to define an edge along the unknown but then returns with vague hints of identity aided by very deliberate composition. A hand, a jawline, folds of skin. Absence of accent, facial features, a paper folding fan on a summer day. Blurred edges brought to focus for just a moment.

Index of Photographic References:



Fig. 1 - Shi Tao's landscape



Fig. 2 - *Great Wave off Kanagawa*, Hokusai (for those of you not familiar with Hokusai, I included this because it is arguably his most well-known/recognized work)

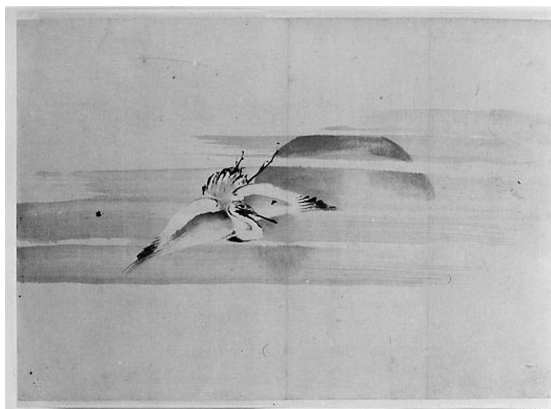


Fig. 3 - *Crane and Sun*, Hokusai School: I studied his watercolors out of a book that belongs to Bill, and this was the closest image I could find elsewhere that was even close to related.



Fig. 4 - *Pepper No. 30*, Edward Weston



Fig. 5 - *Charis*, Edward Weston



Fig. 6 - *Dunes, Oceano*, 1936, Edward Weston

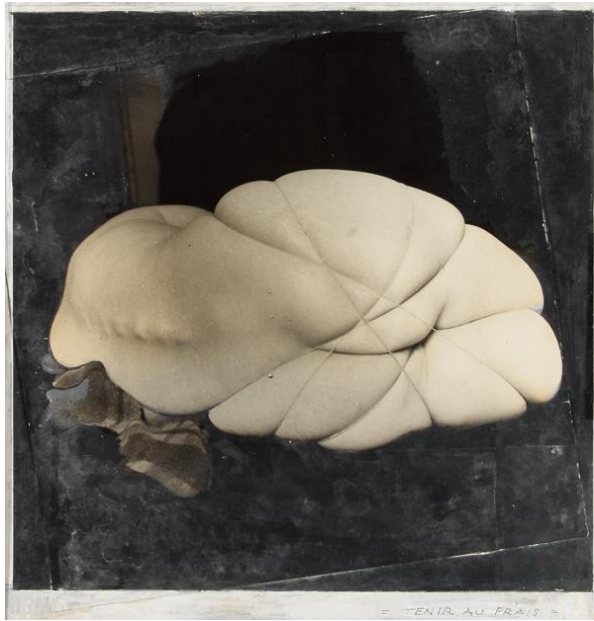


Fig. 7 - *Bound*, Hans Bellmer and Unica Zern



Fig. 8 - *Personal Sentimentalism in Photography*, Nobuyoshi Araki



Fig. 9 - Kinbaku (Bondage), Nobuyoshi Araki

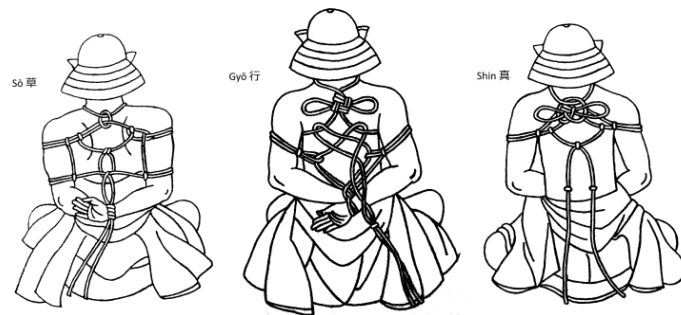
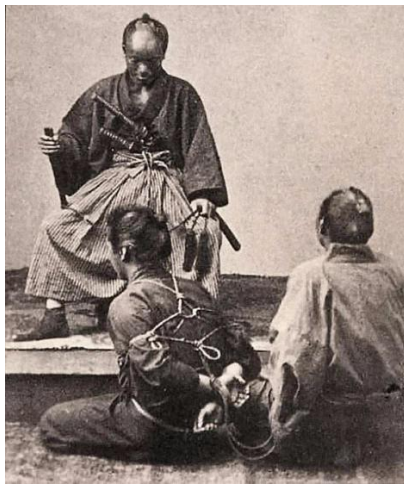


Fig. 10 and 11 - Hojojutsu training and example diagram

<https://molatin.com/hojojutsu-training/>

<https://classicalmartialartsresearch.wordpress.com/category/hojojutsu-heiho-2/>



Fig. 12 - *Nude*, 1927, Frantisek Drtikol



Fig.13 - *Abstract Photo 1*, Jaromir Funke



Fig. 14 - Untitled, Jaroslav Rossler