

SIMON FUJIWARA

Tate St Ives

An exhibition covering 30 years of an artist's career is a substantial retrospective. In the case of Simon Fujiwara, however, the 30 years covered at Tate St Ives began with the year of his birth: 1982. His idiosyncratic, grand exhibition embraced a fantastical range of stories that wove his own biography together with artists from the Tate collection and St Ives art folklore. A cheekily upfront queerness ran through the show, starting in the first gallery with a number of large phallic papier-mâché lighthouses – supposedly tributes to the 'naïve' local artist, Alfred Wallis, whose small paintings were displayed alongside. The wall text, written by Fujiwara in the style of a Tate information panel, was entitled 'Selective Memory'. So began a medley of erotic childhood memories activated and imagined through supposedly real-life scenarios.

The Berlin-based British artist's work often starts with the writing and performing of scripts, so it was intriguing to see how he dealt with a large exhibition that did not include any live performances. Fujiwara's response was to approach the museum itself as a site ripe for reworking, turning clichés about being the 'local artist' (he spent some of his childhood in nearby Carbis Bay) into an engine that fuelled the interconnected installations. In the entrance hall, a carefully constructed model of the gallery was surrounded by portraits of the artist as a young man, all slipping away into the sand scattered around them. Entitled *Autobiography of a Museum* (2012), Fujiwara maps his own history onto that of the gallery, which opened when he was 11 years old.

The museum's inauguration formed the centre of *The Mirror Stage* (2009–12), one of the most compelling installations in the show. The work incorporates a film showing Fujiwara speaking with a young actor, who is to play the artist at age 11: the boy is to act out Fujiwara's account of seeing a Patrick



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Heron painting at the gallery opening, with his erotic reaction to it revealing his gay identity. The absurdity of this encounter opens up into an explanation of Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, the context of St Ives as an artistic centre in the first half of the 20th century, and the potential relationship between Heron's abstract painting and a Francis Bacon nude. In Fujiwara's hands, there is a dream-like logic to this unlikely compilation that makes his narrative hard to resist. The installation also comprises the real Heron and Bacon paintings, alongside a single bed covered with an IKEA duvet set that is (according to Fujiwara, at least) inspired by Heron's colour palette. As in much of Fujiwara's work, here is research blended with conjecture, childhood scenes melded with art-historical commonplaces, commercial blandness next to 'masterpieces'. The expressionism of Heron's grand canvas becomes a masturbatory space for a young boy, one in which Fujiwara can situate his musings on what it means to be an artist, the

influence of history, and a reflection on the ways in which his practice straddles writing, theatre and art.

Other installations also revived works that Fujiwara has exhibited previously, such as his outrageously homoerotic stories about his mother and father running a bar at the end of Franco's dictatorship in Spain in the mid-1970s (*Welcome to the Hotel Munber*, 2008–10). The bar is the site of a series of erotic stories that the artist initially published anonymously in a queer zine, with the installation here incorporating gay porn alongside combinations of Spanish hams, eggs, swords and sausages. Other pieces were made especially for Tate St Ives, such as *Rehearsal for a Reunion (with the Father of Pottery)* (2011–12), which replicated an exhibition of Leach Pottery that had been shown in the same display case in 2001. From this unpromising beginning, Fujiwara again scripted a dialogue between himself and an actor, this time someone who had been asked to play the part of his father. Here the actor operates more like an analyst, probing a reluctant Fujiwara as to the personal reasons he is using a reunion with his father as the site for the play they are discussing. As in most of Fujiwara's works, he tells us: 'I have not written the end of the play yet,' allowing the rehearsal to stand in for the final, always potential, piece.

Across this exhibition Fujiwara drew viewers into his stories that consistently played with the expectations of what a young artist should present in a retrospective. He seemed keen (in a tongue-in-cheek manner, of course) not to disappoint an audience expecting St Ives-specific art in this remote, picturesque outpost of the Tate franchise, with one installation even including a Christ-like sculpture of Barbara Hepworth. Fujiwara reveals his awareness of keeping his audience with him in a joke he recounts in *The Mirror Stage*: 'How many performance artists does it take to change a light-bulb?' The boy actor replies, 'I don't know.' It falls to Fujiwara to deliver the punchline: 'I don't know either – I didn't stay till the end!'

CATHERINE GRANT



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