

## Mrs. Merryman's Play of Images

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Contact Sheet 187: Light Work Annual 2016.

“Literature is not innocent. It is guilty and should admit itself so.”

Georges Bataille

*Mrs. Merryman's Collection* (Mack, 2012) invites its audience to discover and drift through a collection of puzzling postcards, a series of uncanny documents and *invitations to the voyage*. If, to begin with, one is introduced to the collection solely through Anne Sophie Merryman's prologue, the stage is set for an unfolding of images and fragments of stories, in which the thresholds between reality, the realm of dreams, and of the imagination appear elusive.

Old postcards are appealing objects in themselves because they are now the concrete relics of a once widely shared epistolary form of writing, a combination of words and images that have now migrated and mutated within the digital sphere. They are a particular semiotic object, imprinted with multiple layers and traces of visual culture, of collective and individual memory. However, the contrast between what we would expect from a collection of old postcards, and a grandmother's collection in particular, and what is presented to us here, provokes a sense of mystery.

The photographs themselves are like fleeting and enigmatic visions. In one postcard, a myriad of monkeys have reached a mountaintop, rising up and gazing together towards an overwhelming light, as if magnetized by the energy and warmth of the rising sun, and responding to an archaic instinct, a primordial call, which seems to echo a feeling that is buried somewhere deep inside each of us as human beings. The postcard thus embodies the presence of a message, of an ancestral memory, addressed to us from an almost primitive and originary state. In a similar way, every postcard in the collection seems to be *looking back at us*, to borrow Georges Didi-Huberman's phrase, and to address different places within our own mind. When in a postcard we see a luminous flying object, or energy source, rifting through dark space, forming shining paths and shock waves, or a cluster of eggs, which once contained gestating creatures, on display inside a vitrine, we ponder our place in the world, our actions and perceptions. The overall collection offers an idiosyncratic tour in which the evidence of life and death in this world, the possible existence of parallel ones, and the ambivalent presence of human beings and their doings, co-exist. No wonder a certain form of curiosity animates our eyes, what Baudelaire called the “ecstatic gaze of a child confronted with something new.”

Adding to that strangeness, the contrast between the images and the handwritten words inscribed on a number of postcards – whenever they are readable – produces another uncanny clash, while the iconography of the stamps seems to echo that of the photographs, hinting at correspondences between the two. And we wonder: who were these numerous anonymous photographers? What kind of dialogues did the senders and recipients have? What obscure desire or obsession pushed Mrs. Merryman to gather these kinds of images and pass them on to another generation? A reader might leave at this stage and carry away an unsettling sense of wonder of the images and the story. But if curiosity pushes someone to come back and look closer at the postcards and their details, the experience moves to a different phase. Gaps, inconsistencies and contradictions appear and proliferate as we eventually realize that a *mise-en-scène* has candidly and cruelly hijacked our mind.

The audience then enters into a form of play within a play, or a series of frames within the frames, in both visual and textual terms. The eventual appearance of the proper name of the artist, Miki Soejima, which takes the shape of a concealed signature, establishes a new reading contract. Unlike what occurs with the traditional use of a pseudonym, the idea of authorship is here suspended, or rather fragmented into a multiplicity of anonymous voices, which together form a composite image of the collector's intangible identity. Anne-Marie and Anne Sophie Merryman are more like the characters in a fable, echoing the tradition of anonymous fairy tales, with Anne Sophie stepping into real life through an actor to present the collection to the public. If the artist's name may be seen as the key to the mystery of the story, it is a key only in so far as it opens the door to another dimension, to another journey, in which signs and images take precedence.

*Mrs. Merryman's Collection* is an elusive creature within photography, taking the likeness of an uncanny apparition to become a fable and a performance, about the combined powers of narratives and photographic images, and about the threshold between reality and imagination.