

The Gaze of Ghosts

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The paintings of Hideyuki Nagasawa contain various ghosts.

They comprise a certain kind of, or rather in several ways signify, spirit photography.

But what exactly is meant by a painting that is like a photograph? And what is implied by a painting that contains ghosts?

It would appear that what are undeniably “paintings” are, in a literal sense, simultaneously “photographs.” Moreover, what they portray are authentic “ghosts.” The reasoning behind such assertions, however, is not entirely easy or straightforward. Consequently, it is necessary to consider each in due order.

Nagasawa’s recent series of work, which include his latest paintings, roughly adhere to the following productive process. First of all, a single printed photograph—either a so-called memorial photo or portrait photo—is prepared, the whole or part of which is then copied precisely as a drawing. The photographs used as the subject/material for these paintings belong to Nagasawa’s own family members and relatives, but also include photos relating to phenomena and events that for some reason attracted the artist’s attention, each used following an appropriate procedure. There are also cases where these drawings become a piece of work in itself. Next, the image is transferred/traced onto the canvas. At this point, the original photographic image is enlarged several times. Following this, many colored dots are applied over the drawn image in a pointillist manner. At first sight, these dots appear to be vivid brush marks of irregular shape and size, but according to the artist, the eyes of the figures in the original photos act as a yardstick for the brush marks. After a certain number of dots have been applied, the canvas is rotated 90 degrees, and the same action continued. The canvas is then turned and painted two more times in the same way until being returned to its upright position. After this process has been repeated a number of times, the surface of the canvas comes to be scattered with countless dots, obscuring the photographic image beneath. However, it doesn’t completely disappear, and can still be discerned in its totality: the image hasn’t forgotten the memory of its

past as a “photo.”

Thus, in this way the completed works assume a strange duality as abstract paintings and portraiture. A particular feature of these paintings is the transformation of what can be seen within them depending on one’s distance from the canvas. When the viewer stands in front of the painting and observes it from a reasonable distance, the image resembles what it actually is—a painting of human figures (at this point, it is unclear whether they are based on a “photo”) strewn with colorful dots. But as one approaches the painted surface, these dots abruptly stand out, the portrait rendered in the layer behind is pushed backwards, and the modality of the picture as an abstract painting comes to the foreground. If one moves still closer and pays attention to the details, it is possible to confirm that the eyes, mouths, and fingertips of the figures have indeed been rendered on the canvas. While the “eyes” and “dots” are of almost the same size, the differences between them are apparent. This time, if one moves away from the painting, the dots blend together in one’s field of view and sink to the back of the painting, while the image of the figures distinctly emerges. If one looks from a considerable distance, what seems to occupy the canvas is a portrait of figures almost completely covered in color. In other words, by standing in front of the canvas and repeatedly tracking up and tracking back to observe it, the same singular painting appears to be a very different image.

Such visual effects might draw comparison with so-called trompe l’oeil paintings, images that act as illusions by inverting the figure and ground. The actual impression these paintings convey, however, is completely different. What can be said with certainty is that, having arrived at what can arguably be called a unique productive process, Nagasawa’s intention is not to cheat the viewer by inviting a visual double bind between the image and painted surface. The logic that is latent here in the genesis of the work is wholly different. So what is the rationale at play here? This is where “spirit photography” enters the stage. What is spirit photography? The term, of course, refers to photos that appear to capture spirits. Incidentally,

after giving it some thought, what seems somewhat strange about such photos taken in Japan is that the majority of them are unmistakably and overtly not photos in which spirits can be distinctly identified. As such, they are often, in actual fact, “photos in which something resembling a spirit has been caught on photographic film.” It was during the 1970s that spirit photography became the rage in this country, but what formed a backdrop to this was the widespread use of photographic cameras and film development that had resulted from its increasing affordability, lighter weight, and greater ease of use. As people came to take photos of one another, from time to time and even in absence of special events that warranted being recorded for posterity, what resulted was the proliferation of memorial photos, group photographs, and portraits to the point of saturation. And among them, cases would also occur where something that somehow defied understanding would be captured on film. What is interesting is that among spirit photographs, certain images, such as those in which a person’s hand is visible or in which, on closer inspection, a part of the photo resembles the face of a woman, seemingly bear a strong Japanese quality. Of course, corresponding images can be found among spirit photographs taken overseas, but often from the outset these are “photographs taken of ghosts” rather than “photographs in which ghosts have been captured.” Namely, they are not accidental photos but are based on (premeditated) convictions (and are therefore mostly rendered implausible after closer inspection).

As stated above, Nagasawa often uses commemorative and portrait photographs. However, what is meant by referring to these images as “spirit photographs” is not that, in a peculiarly Japanese sense, a spirit (or something resembling one) is identifiable somewhere within the image depending on one’s viewpoint, nor is it the case that they are evidence photos that prove the existence of spirits, as with such examples found overseas. Rather, Nagasawa refers to “memorial photos,” “portrait photos,” and even “photos” themselves as “spirit photographs” while using them as the manifestation of a medium that captures spirits. In other words, the standing or sitting subjects who

pose for the camera are themselves “ghosts.”

This, of course, is not to say that all the subjects appearing in the photos are already deceased. Among them are people who have passed on and perhaps others whose status cannot be confirmed, while it is also possible that some photos are of people still living in this world. However, transcending such distinctions, Nagasawa believes that the subjects captured in photographs are, for the most part, ghosts. This can be put in a different way. People become ghosts at the moment they are captured in photographs. In other words, all photographs of people are, in fact, spirit photographs.

In the past, when photographs were still rare, people feared having their photos taken by a camera due to rumors that their soul would be drawn from their bodies. The reason for this was that they believed the soul, having been separated from its physical avatar, would take root in and come to occupy the photographed image. This is nothing more than a superstition that existed at the dawn of photography, but the reason why the feelings it induces cannot wholly be shaken off and discarded even though its origin is recognized as a superstition is that, as anyone can understand, the person captured at the instant the photo is taken can never be reproduced in the same way again. Photography is a technology that plainly freezes moments in time. When the lens of the camera is pointed at someone living, he or she is frozen at the moment the photo is taken only to be returned immediately to a state of perpetual transmutation, never being able to revisit that same moment in time—a proposition which is, at any rate, unachievable. We might also say this: The moment frozen in the photograph cannot actually be found anywhere. Time in the real world continues without pause, and it is the “photograph” that forcibly performs an impossible scission.

What is reflected in the photograph is, always already, that person at some point in time, and can only ever be so. Even if one doesn’t know what second of what minute of what hour of what day of what month of what year that the photo belongs to, the only thing beyond doubt is that it is absolutely within the past.

And the past is time that has already been lost. This may seem self-evident, but the “photo” intervenes in this commonplace notion. In a sense, what is perceived here is the moment=time that had not existed anywhere until the shutter button was pressed. Nobody sees the world, others, or themselves in the same way as a “photo,” and this is likewise impossible. The past begins to exist for the first time through the action of taking a photo. Photos give existence to things that did not exist. Things that should have been lost are imprinted onto the photographic film. In this sense, every “photograph” is evidence of the absolute past, namely dead space and time—the space-time of ghosts, that is, “spirit photographs.”

As is well known, in *Camera Lucida* (1980) written in his later years, Roland Barthes proposes a theory of photography that defines the essence of “photos” using the notion “that-has-been” (ça-a-été). However, the obvious problem is that the “has been” in “photos” is the freezing of an instant of time within a still image. And, excluding exceptions such as long exposure, basically that instant is the moment at which the shutter of the camera closes. In other words, the essence of photos signified by Barthes’ concept connects with the “capturing alive” of a moment in time through the artificial technique of photography, or rather, a moment being made to exist through its assignment to a frozen state as a photographic image. And the single photograph thus obtained serves as a trace of time that can never again be revisited, while simultaneously capturing, as I have previously explained, a moment that had never existed in the first place—an event that can only be called a miracle. While this is true of every photo, some people are aware of this and others are ignorant, some are sensitive to it and others are oblivious. And Hideyuki Nagasawa is undoubtedly using this truth as a starting point. In other words, “photographs” are ghosts of this world’s existence and that of those who inhabit it. We are only ever able to take spirit photographs.

However, Nagasawa is not a photographer but a painter. Therefore, he first carefully converts the original photo on which the work is based into a drawing. It would be possible, for example, to make a copy of the photo

itself and then apply dots of paint onto its surface, but Nagasawa chooses not to. He doesn’t use the “photo” as it is. But it is probable that the reason for this is not only because he is a painter rather than a photographer. Here, again, the problem of the “moment,” namely, “ghosts,” plays a central role. For now, let’s move on. The last stage of the production process is the distribution of dots, as described above. According to Nagasawa, approximately two weeks are spent on this phase. I have no means of judging whether this is long or short, but one thing I can say with certainty is that, for the artist, the time needed to complete this process is somehow equivalent to the moment at which the original photographs were captured. In other words, Nagasawa is undertaking a process of extending, to a period of two weeks, the moment at which the photographic image was brought into the world—a moment that hadn’t actually existed anywhere in reality.

A painting completed in this way is no longer a photograph. There is only an image painted by Nagasawa’s brush. But within it are the remains of a memory of what was once a photograph. If turned inside out it is, in a sense, not a painting but a photograph. A photo is depicted within the painting. This process can be understood at once by placing the original photo, the drawing, and the finished painting side by side. Let us again pose the question: Why on earth does Hideyuki Nagasawa do this? What is the real meaning contained within this mysterious and perplexing method of production, and the paintings it generates? What exactly is the significance of the *Ghosts of the Future* series?

Here, I can offer two ideas of my own. The first concerns moments and time, as I have discussed above. Put simply, Nagasawa reproduces the photographic image while stretching the instant of time in which the shutter of the camera was closed through the use of his paintbrush. This also constitutes the act of reproducing, in reverse, the mechanism that allowed the image to be born into the world. Somewhere at some point in time, someone turned the camera lens at someone and pushed the shutter button. As a group of people line up and turn their smiling, estimable faces towards the

cameraman, the shutter resounds and a single photo is generated—with the subjects' souls still intact. To reiterate, this moment essentially cannot be found anywhere, and is only made to exist by the camera, the evidence of which is the resulting photo. Nagasawa releases what can be referred to as "ghosts of the moment" from their immobilization, casting them to a state of sustained and endlessly changing time, in an unfathomable space beyond "present" and "past." For him, this is realized through the action of transferring/tracing the photo to a drawing, and of distributing dots across its surface. Such a process will always demand the passage of a certain period of time. It is the action of returning to the original, impossible, miraculous moment—not necessarily experienced by the artist—at which the image used as a motif was born into the world. Put differently, it is a process similar to that of a long exposure photograph.

This "extension" is not limited to time. Many of the photographs used in the paintings are old to some degree, meaning that many are black and white images. Both the drawings and images transferred to the canvas are drawn in monochrome. However, color is used for the dots, and this can result in somewhat colorful renderings depending on the work. This resembles, so to speak, an enlarged black-and-white photograph whose particles have gradually been exposed with its enlargement, offering a glimpse of something resembling color due to the light and condition of photographic paper. Also, in addition, the real world in which the photograph was taken undoubtedly had color, and so the process Nagasawa employs also involves identifying various colors within the black and white photographs by utilizing materials, testimonies and his own imagination. And the time taken to finish a single piece of work is also time used to consider such fundamentals. All this surmounts to none other than the moment at which the shutter was closed as imagined/envisioned/conceived in the painter's mind. And this moment of time is subsequently folded into a still image in the form of a painting.

The second idea concerns the problem of gaze. A camera is a technological device, but at the same time it also has a "gaze." Characteristic of commemorative

photos, group photos, and portrait photography is that all the people present are looking in this direction.

When I talked with Nagasawa, he spoke of the extreme importance of this aspect of photos. The camera is looking at someone. And that someone is staring at the camera. Even if, for example, no one was standing beside the camera at the moment the shutter button was pressed, the figure to which the camera is directed stares back as if such a person were there. That is to say, a crossing of gazes occurs. In short, the figures in the photos are always turned to look in this direction. And Nagasawa explains that the same is true even when looking at one's own photo. There are two situations in which one's gaze is directed at oneself: the first, needless to say, is when looking in a mirror; the other is when looking at a photo of oneself. The former is an event that takes place in the present, while the latter always involves a time difference: It is the intersection of one's gaze in the present with that of one's own ghost.

The people in the photographs who are turned toward us are staring both at the camera, the person behind the camera, and the person who will see the photo. While sustaining the chain of intersecting lines of sight, Nagasawa converts the image from a "photo" to a "painting." For a certain length of time in which the productive process is carried out, the painter also turns his gaze to the figures that have been transferred to the canvas. The painting reaches completion. Ghosts stare out at the viewer, peering from between the gaps in the myriad dots. Our eyes come to meet with theirs simply by our turning to face the canvas. It is an eerie experience, but also an enchanting one. It is similar to the fear, as well as the strange nostalgia—which is not in any way contradictory—that we feel when inadvertently looking upon a "spirit photograph."

When considered in this way, it seems to me that what is portrayed in the paintings of Hideyuki Nagasawa is the "gaze" of "ghosts," crossing and interlinking across many layers. From a moment in the past, which has come to be extended through the artist's eyes, hands and brush, the ghosts' silent and unwavering gaze falls upon the viewer, gently beckoning while remaining immovable. This goes beyond the act of us looking at

someone or something, as well as differences between the expressive mediums of "photography" and "painting" to encourage contemplation of extremely fundamental problems posed by trying to depict such ideas. These are questions that concern "representation" as well as "art," but also, if expressed more simply, they are problems that concern our "world" and "lives."

We are all ghosts of the future. And this is true in a sense different from the common knowledge we all share about living and dying. This is what Hideyuki Nagasawa's "ghosts" teach us.

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