

# BÜCHER

## BOOKS

### SEIICHI FURUYA: LAST TRIP TO VENICE

by Sally Stein

The most recent book by Seiichi Furuya continues his longstanding topos of portraits of his wife while also constituting a radical variation on that theme and even the idea of photographic memento. Last Trip to Venice (2002) is physically smaller than his earlier books of portraits, in overall dimensions and number of pages. It is also a self-



SEIICHI FURUYA, Venice / East Berlin, 1985. From / aus: Last Trip to Venice, 2002.

published edition, limited to 529 copies, which comes housed in its own printed slipcase. In these formal respects, this is the most precious of his publications, and also the most privately revealing, though still only in oblique ways. On learning about yet another book by this photographer based on the portraits he made of Christine Goessler between 1977 and 1985 when she committed suicide, cynics might wonder if this is not clever repackaging of old wine in new bottles. For there has been a sameness in the published portraits themselves and in a number of the past publications. In other words, is there anything else to say, or see? Though this book probably will not appeal to those who may have been morbidly fascinated by the serial progression of a young woman's descent into irretrievable depression, its different approach demonstrates that the archive, turned upside down, might yield if not conclusive answers then at least new questions.

Most of the previously published portraits of Christine Goessler have the gloss of technical perfection: hyper-sharpness, »good« centered composition, stylish posing – which both seems apt with the sculpted beauty of the slender young woman and somewhat at odds with the story of a talented theater student who rapidly loses all self-possession. By contrast, this new book expresses the photographer's effort to relinquish control or, as important, to examine his various impulses to control, by proximity and distance, the evidently volatile relationship he had with his wife. On other occasions Furuya has remarked that the continuing preoccupation with the portraits is a way of maintaining a dialogue with his wife. And in these previous works, Christine has commanded our full attention, thereby offering some semblance of a visual dialogue. Though the back-

ground landscapes often prove to be an interesting counterpoint to the portrait, she looms large in each picture and the implicit narrative of self-estrangement makes her presence even more compelling – and likewise that of the seemingly dispassionate, ever observant husband.

But in this new publication made seventeen years after her death, she recedes from front and center of the pictorial stage while Furuya's authorial command is also diminished. There are a number of technical reasons for this. All the previous publications represented a carefully edited selection of portraits. As a set, they all but declared that the photographer had no other mental or visual interest. But of course, this was an effect of editing his photographic work for pictures of his deceased wife. Now, nearly two decades after his wife's death, he may have reached the end of that archival possibility. At the very bottom of the

»archival barrel« he finds two rolls of color film shot on a very brief trip to Venice at a time when the marriage and her life were clearly in crisis and both partners grasped at any escape that offered even momentary relief. Venice, it was, and the photographer who was working in Dresden and East Berlin, shot two rolls of film, one of which he also accidentally double-exposed with views from his travels in East Germany. (He does not tell us whether he exposed the film before or after this brief reunion, and for reasons I haven't fully figured out I wish I knew that micro-chronology.) But whether he took already-exposed film and re-exposed it in Venice, or took a roll of film from this brief so-called vacation and re-exposed it, we see for the first time a quite different way his eye and attention worked, and a larger more complex world in which his troubled wife was just one element. The accidental montage has her swimming in a sea of disparate images – of fountains, East German architecture, Venetian church façades, quaint canal bridges and bureaucratic socialist apartment blocks and city squares.

Maybe we all should try taking previously-exposed film on our vacations, where Pierre Bourdieu has informed us so much photographic material gets consumed. For it is on vacation that we desperately seek a pristine world, even as we carry with us all our mental as well as physical baggage. The standard vacation snapshots fulfill this fantasy of a wholly separate unspoiled universe, whereas this accident of double exposure makes a mockery of the escapist impulse, with all shadowed by prior- or after-images. However, this book proposes that such an accident should not be regarded as a form of tarnishing of the pure silver-based photographic image or the equally pure romantic myth. For by abandoning

the idea of purity and fixity – the promise of professional photography – a sense of balance, or re-balance may be achieved. Christine, it appears, was not always the obsessive center of the photographer's attention. The photographer's professional chronology of residences in other locations already tells us this, but the unedited film says it more emphatically. She commanded a great deal of his attention, but there was still a larger world out there. Had it not been so, life would have been unendurable.

It is in recovering that vision that Christine may be finally laid to rest, paradoxically more secure on a bed of disparate, layered memories that better support her as well as him. I wonder if this is the reason that on the printed covering of the slipcase, the photographer has produced a darkly solarized rendering of a wall of East German school portraits, almost as regular and regulated as his earlier pictures of his wife; more prominent on the other side of the slipcase is the luminous shape of starfish, something that floats briefly in the sea or aquarium and then settles to the bottom, attracting our attention but often eluding capture. So, too, with these memories that taunt the photographic record, they remain the ineffable stuff of dreams.

And with the underlying accident, there is also possible comedy, welcome because it is so unexpected and even unseemly. The last portrait in this faithful rendering of two rolls of exposed film is not his wife, but a rather ordinary looking bureaucratic type in a black suit. He could be an undertaker or funeral director but he's probably an elected official or dignitary on a visit in East Germany where Furuya worked as a translator. That last portrait is followed by a warmly lighted interior of bedroom, with two single beds, only one of which seems to have been used. Though this last picture offers only one location caption (unlike many others that are titled »Graz / Venice«, or »East Berlin / Venice«), there's an unreal string of lights like phosphorescent seaweed bobbing uncontrollably from another exposure in another place. And in this layering there seems an intriguing double solace. Our attention is so easily distracted that horror and angst always find another object – might not this be the secondary conclusion of Freud's discourse on fetishism? On the one hand, this leaves the everyday world at risk of being freighted to the point of sinking with anxious associations. On the other hand, the world offers a site of endless distraction, and in that dispersal we may both lose and possibly find ourselves anew.



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