

# YASUMASA MORIMURA

what a drag

by nora landos

If an image hangs on a gallery wall, and no one is around to view it, does it make an impact? Images are nothing without a viewer. As if through divine transfiguration, an image becomes itself in the presence of human eyes. There is power in the gaze, not only in the act of seeing, but in the act of being seen. This in no way means that images are powerless in and of themselves. On the contrary, the power of images is an extension of all other forms of power; throughout history social, political, and religious messages were carefully cultivated to match the values of the ruling few which as a result became the values of everyone else. Of course this is the case. It has to be. It is only in recent centuries that art has become anything other than visual rhetoric: a heavy, influence wielding instrument of worldless expression.

There exist artists even in our day who continue to revel in the megalomania of the Western art historical narrative. Yasumasa Morimura exploits the power of images to its fullest potential, gaining might from the creation and control of his own image. It seems almost contradictory that an artist who presents appropriated and reinterpreted iterations of iconic images like da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Frida Kahlo's surrealist self-portraits, or Audrey Hepburn's Holly Golightly is said to be the creator of an image all his own. Morimura borrows from art history and pop culture, using recognizable imagery as the tools of his alchemy. With makeup, costumes, and often elaborate sets, he conjures up self-portraits that tap into the collective recollection of the Western world as presented through works of art and famous figures. But these costumes are not disguises. These sets are not hiding places. Rather than defining his photographs by what they are, it is easier to define them by what they are not. They are not copies of famous images, nor are they merely works of admiration, and they are certainly not caricatures. When considered as a whole his "Daughter of Art History," "Actresses," and "Ragism" series act as a single body which builds upon the foundation of a Western cultural context, only to then burn it to the ground. Within each image is a message that is uniquely his. It is not he but the art historical narrative that is transformed with each frame.

It is by presenting these classic images, ones with which his audience is certainly familiar, that Morimura is able to transcend them. Playing to our collective cultural experiences, he effectively wipes the canvas clean and renders irrelevant the specifics of the images. It matters little whether he places himself in the sunlit room of a Vermeer painting or on the back of a motorcycle à la Brigitte Bardot; all we see

Portrait by Sôshun.





Yuzo Morimura, *Self-Portrait (Giverny)* / After Elizabeth Taylor 2, 1996.



is the artist himself, front and center, as the subject of each photograph and the object of the viewer's gaze. Visibility such as this can mean vulnerability or it can mean strength. But it is more than this: who gets to be seen and how comes with its own set of Foucauldian power relations. Making himself visible makes him seen, which in the world of visual art makes him heard. The attention he commands in each of his photographs serves as a platform from which to change the rhetorical messages propagated by visual imagery throughout the history of art. In the least vain and most assertive way imaginable, he has made the entire art historical narrative about himself. For the first time a Japanese man in drag is the central figure in Western art and has claimed the power and agency to gaze back at us.

*Las Meninas Resaca de Noche* (*Las Meninas Returns in the Night*), Morimura's latest series, riffs upon Diego Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas*, a scene already crumbling under the imbalance of gazes of its cast of characters and the struggle for control over the presentation of images. Rife with ambiguity, Velázquez's original questions the social and physical positioning of the painted subjects and, most significantly, the viewer. Morimura tackles these same themes but expands them further still. He turns the original image into a microcosm by breaking free of the painting's constricting frame and placing the act of looking in the museum itself. When the subjects of a work of art are no longer objects, what becomes of our relationship with images? What becomes of the speech power associated with a stagnant image? Morimura's *Las Meninas* could be considered his ultimate act of illocution. It is not only what he is saying, but how he is saying it that gives significance to the work. On a most basic level, *Las Meninas Resaca de Noche* makes the same general statement contra the systems of power that dictate images and how we interact with them as any of his other series. Yet by stepping outside the defined framework of a painting on a wall, Morimura challenges not only how we see images in the world, but how we see others and ourselves. In his eyes, he is creator and viewer, subject and object, medium and message; but most of all, when it comes to his own image, he is totally in control.

Yuzo Morimura, *Self-Portrait (Giverny)* / After Brigitte Bardot 3, 1996.



Yusaku Kikkawa, Self-Portrait (Actress) / After Lisa Hirsch 1, 1996.



Yusaku Kikkawa, Self-Portrait (Actress) / After Audrey Hepburn 1, 1996. Following Spread Self-Portrait (Actress) / After Catherine Deneuve 3, 1996.







Yukunasa Motomasa, *Self-Portrait (Actress) / After Rod Meryla*, 1996.



Yukunasa Motomasa, *Top: Self-Portrait (Actress) / After White Meryla*, 1996. *Bottom: Self-Portrait (Actress) / After Black Meryla*, 1996.





Yuzurina Marimura, Self-portrait (Actress) / After Elizabeth Taylor, 1996.



Yuzurina Marimura, Self-portrait (Actress) / After Brigitte Bardot, 1996.