

steve jansen

through a quiet window



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cape breton university art gallery, may 11 - july 6, 2018
carnegie gallery, august 3 - 26, 2018



raindrops kamakura, kanagawa, 1982

the view from here

greg davies

Those who visit this exhibition and happen to be familiar with Steve Jansen's camera work will certainly find themselves transported back in time to a pivotal moment in the history of alternative British music, circa 1979 - 1983. There are some familiar faces here, and pictures that invite the viewer into the world of a group of musicians who left a profound mark on a generation of younger listeners and emerging artists. **Japan** formed in London in 1974, signing to the German record label, Ariola Hansa in 1977, before eventually moving to Virgin Records in 1980. The group disbanded shortly thereafter in 1982, following the release of their critically-acclaimed studio album, **Tin Drum**, and just prior to the release of a live album in 1983, **Oil on Canvas**, which documented their final tour. During this time Jansen was most readily visible as the band's drummer, but his camera was never far away and the subsequent images, taken on the road and in the studio, serve as a remarkable record of that chapter in the group's history.

But these images are not simply archival and they do not belong to the past alone.

In fact, looking at them in the context of the gallery now, where they are accompanied by the most recent of Steve's audio recordings - a lush, forty-eight minute instrumental titled, **corridor** (2018) - they emphatically shed their historic trappings and emerge as contemporary works, as vital today as they were almost forty years ago. It is indeed a testament to Jansen's visual acuity that they have transcended time in this way, but perhaps not especially surprising. The framing of the images alone reveals a photographer's eye very much attuned to a cinematic way of seeing the world. Consider, for instance, the row of small figures in **raindrops kamakura, kanagawa, 1982**, moving diagonally across the lower mid-ground of the photo, vaguely reminiscent of the dancing hillside figures in Bergman's *Seventh Seal*; or the film-noir effect of the lone figure in **pilot toronto airport, canada 1979**, set in silhouette and shrouded in the velvety blackness of the building's infrastructure. Even the most ordinary of subjects assumes interest through this camera lens.



chair in a hotel room, japan 1983



There is, of course, a tradition behind the impulse to elevate the mundane in modern art. One has only to think of the domestic and urban settings depicted by the 19th-century painters - Realists, Impressionists and Post-Impressionists alike - to recognize the shift in interest from the grand narratives of history to a focus on the 'everyday' which defined the early modernist aesthetic. Yet even before this, artists turned to commonplace subjects to find inspiration and uncover ways to speak to human experience through imaginative images of banality; re-framing the ordinary for viewers to see the world in a new light. Nowhere is this more evident, for instance, than in the Dutch genre paintings and landscapes of the 1600s.

I do not mean to suggest that there is a direct parallel between these historic canvases and Jansen's images. But in their framing and handling of subject, these photographs reveal ties to the history of art, reminding us that there is much more at stake here than the ordinary snapshot might ever offer.

Collectively, Jansen's work reflects his interest in people, even if the approach to subject varies dramatically from one picture to the next. Of the twelve images selected for this exhibition, for instance, at least five present scenes in which people remain absent from the picture. The traces of human presence are, instead, found in the details. A chair set against a hotel window in Japan reveals a slight crease in the middle of the seat; a lingering vestige of wear. Clouds of smoke rising from chimneys in **industrial view from shinkansen, japan, 1980**, serve as indicators of the workers within the depicted factories, cut off from view but present in our imaginations nonetheless. Telephone lines bordering a country road blend with a row of blurred trees seen through the window of a speeding car in **loom** (1980). In another photograph titled **listening** (1983), a communications tower rises above the narrow line of a cityscape, alluding to the sounds carried through its transmitters. Voices heard, but not with our ears.

These are evocative images to say the least. Sometimes melancholic or nostalgic; they speak to the experience of life in a world of constant movement punctuated by moments of introspection, anticipation and even ennui. But always in each, we encounter the beauty of simple moments.

There is a discrete force to these photographs which recalls the subtlety and power of historic works such as **Van Gogh's Chair** (1888, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London), in which much is conveyed with great economy. A chair, a pipe and a pouch of tobacco resting on a seat is enough to bring us close to Vincent's world: so too does Steve's image of a **chair in a hotel room, japan 1983** draw us close to the weary reality of the musician on tour. When the photographer sets his lens to capture a frame dominated by sky - as we find in several of the images here - it is hard not to see connections with the Dutch landscapes of the Golden Age and their stark emphasis on narrow horizons set well beneath the vaults above. Through the lens of the travelling artist, the world can seem immense and our place on the planet can appear quite small by comparison.

Steve Jansen's photographs are remarkable portraits: of society, of individuals and of the artist himself. While he does not physically appear in any of the images, the pictures nonetheless reveal much about his unique perspective on the world. And it is a deeply personal view that we are offered. From the familiar faces of his colleagues to the anonymous people within and beyond the frame, all are delivered to us through the keen and observant eyes of an individual moving through life experiences at incredible speed.

In the sanctuary of the gallery space, time seems to slow down. The visitor who pauses to enjoy these images accompanied by the delicate audio progression of **corridor**, is transported ever so gently to the periphery of a rapidly-moving world of recording sessions, tour dates and transit between airports, cities and hotels. The exhibition space is an oasis: a place to breathe and reflect. It is in this space that the artist offers occasion to see the past in slow motion and through a contemporary lens.

a conversation with steve jansen

GD. *The photographs in this exhibition appear to have been taken on the road or in the recording studio during your early days with Japan. I've come across the work of a number of musicians who have tended to use visual media in this way, capturing moments during busy schedules of touring and recording. For some, the impulse seems to stem from a desire to document or preserve those experiences in the moment. For others, though, it appears to draw from a need to find an alternate, visual form of expression; a conduit for creative impulses that might not be satisfied through music alone. What motivated you, at the time, to take these images?*

SJ. I had a tendency to record and document events, partly born out of the nature of my job and partly because I felt that life was showing and teaching me things so fast that I knew no matter what I did I would certainly miss much of it. I developed a particular urge to pause events, capture moments, take notes, before they expired forever. I started writing a journal from the age of nineteen and photography was somehow running in parallel to this as well as recording music. All forms of documenting. Storing. I had no masterplan except to have a back up. Some recall. Experiences were rushing past like landscapes on a speeding train.

I, and the people that surrounded me were highly attuned to visual appearance. It wasn't for the purpose of pretence or image, it was a real and vital identity. A decisive leap away from suppression and control, and an escape from the authorities that hounded us all of our young lives. Society was still very much in denial about the abuse of kids in the seventies and the adult world was always in control with its sticks for beating us down and destroying our will. Some sort of change was called for. If the sixties was an era of revolution for young adults, then the seventies saw a revolution for young teens, not old enough to make their own choices, but fighting for their basic human rights and challenging the aggression that society throws at what it doesn't understand or what it wishes didn't exist.

We became colourful people, yet quiet and private. I mostly wanted to capture in monochrome. Although I didn't understand it at the time, the absence of colour makes a more compelling statement and an intensity, whereby something different emerges, something more soulful. This is where I found the connection.

Despite travelling the world, which kindly provided an ever-changing backdrop, monuments and buildings weren't something I needed to document because that would always be there. What I felt mattered was the relatively short lives that were shining bright in the foreground, naturally projecting themselves out of the everyday.

I prefer images that are naturally lit so that the atmosphere of ambient light is maintained, despite the blurring and distortion that might then occur. Since many of the settings were interior, the light source would usually emanate from a window, and as such, a subconscious theme emerges. Through another window the photographer observes, and presses pause.*

GD. *With the publication of your photographic book, **Through a Quiet Window**, you had occasion to revisit these images and realize a project which had clearly been on your mind for some time. Why was it important to you to produce the book at this moment? Has your relationship with the work changed in any way as a result of the experience?*

SJ. I had for a number of years made prints available to purchase via my website but about five years ago I created an online blog expressly for the purpose of posting various random photographs for the public to enjoy. This blog then developed into something of a 'question & answer' platform whereby questions were submitted to me by the public to which I would respond, often with photographs to enhance the reply. Over time the blog attracted a fair amount of interest as it seemed to coincide with a general appreciation of the band by a younger audience on the image-based Tumblr platform. In 2012 when visiting Japan I had a conversation with Yukihiro Takahashi and he mentioned his appreciation of the images on the blog and proposed publishing a book of my photos via his own publishing company. This was easier said than done as the internet, with its colossal database of images, has affected the demand in book sales, however in finding printers in Japan and focusing on a loyal fan base for both **Japan** and **Yellow Magic Orchestra** we were able to see it to fruition.

GD. *The first time I encountered your photographs I was struck by their cinematic quality. Many could be mistaken for film stills, even though they often appear to be taken 'on the fly'. The circumstances of each imply that there was little time to deliberate while composing, but the framing and lighting suggest an eye already attuned to a cinematic way of seeing the world. Would you say this was the case? If so, would it be fair to say that cinema or film have also had some impact on your approach to composing and sound engineering?*

SJ. I've always had a passion for cinema, since my mid teens. Looking through the camera lens would give everyday life a cinematic quality and I would relish getting processed film back from the lab and going through contact sheets and making prints. I was fortunate enough to work with professional photographers to learn something about the technical side and also had the chance to produce some vinyl record sleeves for the band. I guess this opportunity fell upon my shoulders as the other members of the band could recognise my passion for photography (despite all of us owning cameras), it was certainly something I was much more attuned to as I bought various SLR cameras as opposed to relying on the more common instamatic cameras of the time. I studied the basics and from then on it became a keen interest for me and another way to express myself creatively. I enjoy the synchronicity and power between captured image and sound therefore putting the two together is a natural path for me to want to pursue.

GD. *Beyond cinema and the influence of some of the professional photographers you worked with at the time, are there other forms of visual art that have informed your approach to working with the camera?*

SJ. I was initially keen on portrait photography, Yousuf Karsh, Irving Penn, Man Ray to name a few, but I also liked the more candid images and social commentary by the likes of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Brassai, Sergio Larraín, Bill Brandt. I felt there was always a story within a story waiting to be told whenever I pointed the camera at something, and for me that is where the inspiration for capturing the moment lies.

GD. *Represented in this exhibition are a number of striking portraits. Also included are some landscapes and interior scenes. But, always, at the centre of each of these are people. We either find them wandering into the picture frame or sense their presence within the spaces they normally inhabit - even when there is no one in view. In this respect the images all seem to be portraits of a sort. Does this connection with people stem from that deep interest in identity you had mentioned earlier? Are the photographs as much the signifiers of a need to understand your own identity in the world aside from those in front of the lens?*

SJ. Since leaving school I was existing in a sort of bubble because of the type of work I was doing, not really connecting with society on the normal level. I felt, and still do feel, as though I am observing society rather than taking part in it, despite the fact that I no longer exist in that same bubble anymore. I'm not sure I will ever understand how I fit in this world, maybe that's the same for many of us.

GD. *Following upon this, I'm wondering if there is a parallel in terms of the motivations behind your photography and both the music and visual appearance of the group? You noted that the issue of identity was real and vital for each of you. If the music and visual appearance of the group marked a break from oppressive authority and control could the same be said about the photographs? Was the process of taking pictures somehow liberating?*

SJ. The band was all about each person pushing their own creativity, finding their own voice as much as possible but we still had to work together, not individually, so photography was something I could explore alone, which I found liberating. The fact that I was surrounded by some good subject matter helped spur that interest.

GD. *You also mentioned the vinyl record sleeves you had produced for Japan and I know tht you remain involved in the design of visual graphics for your own work today - sometimes using your own images and sometimes the work of other photographers or artists as in the case of **Slope**, **Tender Extinction** or **The Extinct Suite**. I imagine that in many of these instances the images and designs follow the music but have there been situations where the reverse is true? Instances where composing or recording your music has been inspired directly by specific images?*



SJ. The music generally happens first, then the titles reveal themselves. Finding the right image to represent the work is something I enjoy doing but it doesn't always come easily.

GD. *In closing, could you briefly comment on the inspiration behind the recorded work for this exhibition, **corridor**?*

SJ. I wanted to make something that created a stillness as well as gradually introducing tonal qualities and subtle themes to nestle somewhat covertly within the general ambience of the space.

*reprinted extract from **Through a Quiet Window** (Tokyo: Hints Music Inc., 2015)

list of works

all works, except **corridor** (2018): black & white photograph, digital print

loom, 1982

man, sylvian musée rodin, paris, 1982

tsuchiya live tour, paris 1982

karn in hotel room, leeds, live tour, uk 1981

don't go, 1982

mount fuji view from shinkansen, japan 1983

industrial view from shinkansen, japan 1983

raindrops kamakura, kanagawa 1982

pilot toronto airport, canada 1979

listening, 1983

barbieri recording 'tin drum', regent's park studio, london 1981

chair in a hotel room, japan 1983

corridor, 2018, multi-instrumental audio recording (duration: 48 minutes)

credits

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition **through a quiet window**, curated by Greg Davies and presented at Cape Breton University Art Gallery (Sydney, Nova Scotia) from May 11 - July 6, 2018 and the Carnegie Gallery (Dundas, Ontario) from August 3 - 26, 2018.

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past exhibitions

the art of parties: PARCO Tokyo, Hokkaido and Osaka, 1981 (group)

expressions: The Photographers Gallery, London, 1983 (group)

tribute exhibition for Mick Karn and Family: Treviso, 2010

through a quiet window: Jr. Kyoto Isetan 6f, Kyoto, 2018 (solo)

cover front: **industrial view from shinkansen, japan 1983**

cover back: **mount fuji view from shinkansen, japan 1983**

