



A figure sits cross-legged on the floor, head bowed. Black curtains of hair conceal her face and bury their ends in the fleshy folds of her kimono. Her costume is dense and bulbous – a costume to be danced with, not in. Her movements are slow and saturnine. Right now she is less a human figure than a cowering animal or hunk of flesh.

She begins to dance, her expressionless face ashen against the infinite blackness. Devoid of props, staging or set, there are no clear markers as to the subject’s ‘where’ or ‘when’. The crispness of the video image suggests a technological currency, but there is a foreignness, an out-of-time-ness. As her hands gently propel the billowing smoke away from her body to encase a glowing orb of light, she morphs through human-animal-object-image and back again. We see *a* body, but not *her* body; a body divorced, temporarily, from its subject.

Oasis (2011) is a new body of work by Australian cross-disciplinary artist Eugenia Lim. *Oasis* explores the Japanese myth of Amaterasu, the Shinto sun goddess, and its intersection with the contemporary cultural phenomenon of *hikikomori* – acute social withdrawal. Presenting a *mise-en-abîme* structure to tell a story-within-a-story¹, Lim’s re-imagining of contemporary Japanese life is filtered through the multiple lenses of spectrality, technological addiction and social reclusion.

In Shinto mythology, Amaterasu, the celestial sun goddess, is one of the most revered deities. Amaterasu was the daughter of the creator-god Izanagi, and the sister of Susano-ô, the unruly god of storms and sea. Amaterasu and Susano-ô had a fierce sibling rivalry. Their friction

culminated in Susano-ô ravaging the earth and desecrating his sister’s garden, temples and rice fields. Furious at Susano-ô’s actions, Amaterasu retreated deep into a cave, blocking the entrance. Her withdrawal plunged the earth into perpetual darkness, causing the lands to be sapped of all vitality. Despairing in the darkness, the gods and mortals undertook an ambitious crusade to bring Amaterasu out of her deepest isolation. They assembled a mirror outside of the cave, hanging it in a tree. Sacrifices took place and rituals were performed in her honour. Eventually the indignant Amaterasu peered outside of the cave to inquire into the rambunctious activity outside her shelter, only to be met by her own reflection. Mesmerized by her own image, the sun goddess reclaimed her intended duty as the sun goddess, allowing life as normal to return to Japan.

The myth of Amaterasu finds a contemporary expression in *hikikomori*, the disturbing phenomenon that has seen a million or more young Japanese adults² – the majority of them men – literally shut themselves away from the sun, closing their blinds, taping shut their windows, and refusing to leave their bedrooms for months or years at a time. Subsisting on a diet of manga, anime and videogames, their only contact with the outside world is through online chat-rooms and social media. Barricading themselves in the impenetrable, nest-like spaces of their bedrooms, *hikikomori* negate their burgeoning adulthoods. Disengaging from the outside world, they occupy an extended, barely-changing present.

The precise cause of this behaviour is unknown. Some psychologists believe Japan’s social system, with its Confucian

ideal of conformity, has given rise to a bullying culture that victimizes those who sit outside the group norm. A sociological explanation can be found in the post-bubble economic world of Japan, where young people see no future for themselves in a nation crippled by unemployment and recession. The full-time salaryman jobs of the previous generation have withered, leaving behind a disaffected group of young people who cannot, or will not, assimilate into the ossified local workforce.

For US economic journalist Michael Zielenziger, the anomie that has descended on modern Japan is symptomatic of its staunch economic nationalism and long-held resistance to global integration.³ Japan’s *sakoku*, or ‘closed country’ policy might have ended nearly 160 years ago, but the country has maintained a relatively closed and regimented economy, and by extension, culture. Business and government have, over time, worked synchronously to forge collective values and customs, and to keep foreign innovators and investors out. For Zielenziger, “*Japan is coddled by its own hubris and sheltered in its technological sophistication... It refuses the challenges of globalization and of competing in an information age against hungrier, risk-taking rivals.*”⁴

Hikikomori forms a rich metaphor for Japan’s overall cultural and economic malaise, particularly when considering the culture-bound nature of the syndrome and its emergence at this particular historical moment. The self-imposed isolation and insularity of the *hikikomori* mirrors Japan’s flailing cultural and economic situation, where both the nation and its young people

are experiencing a severe intolerance, or adjustment disorder, to the social and economic demands of the globalised, contemporary economy.

In *Oasis*, Lim casts a light on the hidden world of the *hikikomori* not simply to fetishize the syndrome or to malign it, but rather to question the implications of our Western culture’s own fascination with, and denial of, difference. Like *Australian Landscapes* (2008) and *Nowhereland: The Paris Human Flesh Incident* (2009), two projects that explored cultural fetishization and stereotypes, Lim’s *Oasis* presents Japan as a symbol of ‘otherness’. Fluorescent lights serve not only to illuminate the *hikikomoris*’ hidden and mysterious world, but also to imbue it with an aura of exoticized difference. The backlit images of plasticized food – modern-day ‘deities’ – likewise enhance the strangely devotional, arcane undertones of the scene. *Oasis* is thus a seductive yet consciously two-dimensional representation of Japanese social mores, art, religion and culture. It highlights the carnivorous nature of western visual culture and the way it recasts and commodifies difference.

Just as it took a mirror for Amaterasu to leave her cave, *Oasis* reflects back the emptiness of cultural stereotypes and the inherent narcissism of both East and West when viewing ourselves as apart from the other. *Oasis* invites audiences to consider what these stereotypes might reveal, and conceal, about our own cultural trajectory, and what they might foretell of our own destiny.

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1. *Mise-en-abîme* occurs within a text when there is a reduplication of images or concepts. *Mise-en-abîme* is a play of signifiers within a text, or sub-texts mirroring each other. This mirroring can get to the point where meaning can be rendered unstable and in this respect can be seen as part of the process of deconstruction. See Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

2. The stigma associated with *hikikomori*, and the invisibility of those afflicted has meant that reliable statistics pertaining to the scale of the epidemic are difficult to obtain. Expert estimates of the total number of current and former *hikikomori* in Japan range from a low of 50,000 to a high of 1.2 million. Likewise, whilst psychologists first reported the phenomenon in the 1990s, the Japanese Ministry didn’t officially recognise the problem until 2001. See Maggie Jones, ‘Shutting Themselves In’ in *The New York Times Magazine*, January 15, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/15/magazine/15japanese.html>

3. Michael Zielenziger, *Shutting out the Sun: How Japan Created its own Lost Generation*, New York: Random House, 2006.

4. Ibid, p8.



The Deities (Burger Deity, Pink Sashimi Deity, Coca Cola Deity, Red Sashimi Deity)
2011, four light boxes, backlit digital film, 50 x 50 x 10.5 cm

opposite
Nest (video still)
2011, single channel HD video, 14 mins

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