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Simon Starling: Modernism Gazing Into the Past

By JASON FARAGODEC. 29, 2016



Masks and Video From "Simon Starling: At Twilight," an exhibition at Japan Society.

"Modernism is our antiquity," the historian T. J. Clark wrote in "Farewell to an Idea," his 1999 eulogy for the art of the last century. By which he meant: As Greece and Rome served as the base line for Western culture from the Renaissance onward, modernism itself had become our model and myth, to be reinterpreted at will but never really understood. Spend half a day in Chelsea, and you will see few gods and heroes — but you will trip over archives of failed utopian collectives, photos of crumbling tower blocks, rebooted avant-garde dances and all sorts of fragments of the recent past. Ulysses may be dead, but "Ulysses" endures.

Few contemporary artists have wrestled with the legacy of modernism as consistently as Simon Starling, a Scottish artist based in Copenhagen, whose previous projects have involved melting Bauhaus chairs down into beer cans or chucking a replica of a Henry Moore statue into Lake Ontario. Now, in an airtight but gratifying exhibition at Japan Society — his first at a New York City institution — he turns to William Butler Yeats and Ezra Pound, two modernist writers who had their own ornery gazes on the past. Yeats's "At the Hawk's Well," a 1916 one-act play indebted to both Irish folklore and Japanese drama, provides the tonic note for Mr. Starling's "At Twilight," a forking meditation — featuring both his own art and significant historical loans — on modernism's cross-cultural power and contemporary resonance.

This is a rare outing for a non-Japanese artist at Japan Society, and it has been curated by Yuki Kamiya, the director of the institute's art gallery. It opens with a dark, spotlight gallery featuring exquisite lacquered masks, of the sort used in Japan's highly ritualized Noh theater, attached to charred tree trunks. (The masks were newly made from Paulownia wood by Yasuo Michii, an artisan with whom Mr. Starling has collaborated before.) Rather than recreate the props of "At the Hawk's Well," Mr. Starling riffs on its creators and their colleagues in wartime Dublin, Paris and Tokyo. One mask depicts Yeats with a swoop of lustrous white hair, his jaw shut by knotted strings. The one depicting Pound, who served as Yeats's secretary and translated Noh dramas, is all white and angular, repurposing the bust of the poet sculpted by Henri Gaudier-Brzeska in 1914. Already, then, Mr. Starling is both channeling Yeats's original play and improvising, to create a remake that chases its own tail.



Yasuo Michii's "Mask of Nancy Cunard (After Constantin Brancusi)" in the Simon Starling show at Japan Society.

There are other masks. A gilded one has just two slits for eyes; it represents Nancy Cunard, the hard-drinking heiress who opened her home to Yeats's performers and whom Brancusi sculpted in a similarly abstract way. Another draws on Jacob Epstein's "The Rock Drill," a classic of Vorticist machine romance that later came to symbolize the brutality of World War I. A stern bronze mask with long animal hair depicts Michio Ito, the Japanese dancer in "At the Hawk's Well"; he played the title bird, who protected a well of immortality. (You may have seen the dashing portrait of Ito on the poster for "Human Interest," the Whitney's current show of American portraiture.)

A video features the alluring Thomas Edwards, of the Scottish Ballet, in a hawk costume, as he reimagines the play's largely undocumented choreography. He swoops his arm down, in flight; he lunges backward, pushing his head to the ground; he bobs left and right, like a disco dancer, against a score of cymbals and horns that charges harder than the flute and drum backdrops of Noh. You can later see his ravishing steel-gray costume, which Mr. Starling designed with a Tokyo atelier.

Mr. Starling, who won the Turner Prize in 2005, first presented "At Twilight" in Glasgow, where the masks were used in a three-night performance of a new play whose characters included Yeats, Pound, Ito, Cunard and Mr. Starling himself. (A critic for the magazine *Frieze* called the performance "as much theatrical lecture as play.") At Japan Society, the new masks and costumes are instead placed in conversation

with impressive archival materials from Yeats and his circle: letters from the poet detailing the preparations for "At the Hawk's Well," on loan from the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin; "The Rock Drill" from the Museum of Modern Art; and a newly cast edition of Brancusi's Cunard bust.

Half a dozen Noh masks from the 14th century, and woodblock prints of Meiji-era Japanese actors, reintroduce the theatrical tradition that Yeats and his collaborators — with the confident universalism that we later generations can find suspicious — actually understood rather poorly. And, a bit weirdly, there is a stuffed Eeyore, A. A. Milne's depressed poetry-writing donkey; Yeats and Pound waited out the war in the Sussex forest where Milne set "Winnie-the-Pooh."

In other, more nervous hands, the kind of archival project that Mr. Starling has undertaken could become defensive, an easy way to buttress one's own position in an art history that can seem infinite. (When everything's been done, isn't it safest to rework an older masterpiece?) What makes this project more engrossing — beyond the beauty of the masks and the elegance of the filmed dance — is Mr. Starling's understanding of historical modernism as a transnational condition, indeed the first such transnational style, which an Irish playwright, an American poet and a Japanese dancer could share even if they understood it with slight differences. That promiscuous approach is one the globe-trotting Mr. Starling adopts in "At Twilight," though here Noh theater and Irish legend have been supplanted, as source materials, by modernism itself: The recent past is our own mythology.

And yet gazing on Mr. Starling's masks and on the photos and letters from a century ago, I felt that the distance between the two bodies of work was not so great. The idea that modernism may be our very own kind of antiquity emerged in the 1990s during a moment of relative peace and permanence that some thought signified the end of history. Two decades later, the themes of Yeats, Pound and other modernists — themes of alienation, decay, a world in fragments — feel more current than anyone expected.



"At the Hawk's Well (Grayscale)," a mask by Yasuo Michii.