ForeWord Reviews

Tokyo Sex Underground
Romain Slocombe
Creation Books
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These two 8” x 11” album books are best taken as a combined dose of difficult reality and escapist fantasy. Vertigo (a text-and-picture combination) demolishes the traditional city guide that comforted earlier generations; Underground re-ignites the sexual fantasies that parents hoped their children never had. Readers should brace themselves and hold tight for the ride.

In driven, pulsing prose that rollercoasts from paean to panegyric, from dithyramb to threnody, Barber leads readers through a dozen Tokyo districts, juxtaposing the populations’ frenetic contemporary mass activity against vignettes of past denizens—lost, lonely, or simply surviving.

This is not a celebration of the artistic or architectural past (as Paris or Florence would demand): readers are thrust into the pulsating, neon-lit intensity of street life, into urbanscapes menaced by overhead highways, towering office blocks, and ceaseless traffic, wondering whether they can survive an unparalleled assault on the senses.

Two themes punctuate the uneasy journey. The first is references to the city- and life-shaping force of the earthquake of 1923, the horrendous firebombing of 1945, and the city’s explosion into an instant megalopolis in the 1960s; the second is the representation of the changed city in recent and contemporary art, film, and photography. These themes, and the pervasive, urgent sexuality that beats relentlessly in this city of seething activity, drive the second half of Tokyo Vertigo.

The book takes excursions into aspects of the Tokyo experience—visual, aural, pictorial, media—rather than to area walkabouts. Overall, Barber brilliantly captures Tokyo’s intensity and nervous energy, its hyperactive efforts to meet every passing consumer whim, and the sense of a historic human culture being overwhelmed by the city’s myriad impersonal forces. The exhausted salaryman and the thrill-seeking teenager are surely its twin images.

In Tokyo Sex Underground, Slocombe (often using models) documents his interest in the city’s sex industry, with its twin specialties of bondage and fetishism. His ninety full-page black-and-white photographs range from the faux-innocent naturalistic through the healthily erotic to the artfully kinky. Bobby-soxed schoolgirls, demurely costumed nurses, intricately roped and trussed young women, and (the specialty offering) the bandaged and the braced, gaze out

invitingly at the reader. Young women decorating beds run from the pre-simmering passively coy to the post-arousal actively twitching.

Reality, not whimsy, dominates. This is sex-as-industry, clearly implying that whatever item the purchaser selects from an extensive erotic menu, the offering will be distinctly impersonal, microwaved into instant warmth for immediate consumption—but lacking in real nourishment.

Separately and together these two books are disturbing. Both capture the rapid change that increasingly renders harsh realities, good for a half-decade until the next and harsher reality takes hold. Barber hints at a deeply impersonal city in which the restless, mechanistic present destroys the human past, an environment where residents survive rather than live. Slocombe's photographs suggest that the female body has not only been commodified but is infinitely manipulatable, with customized models for every purchaser.

Both authors have impressive track records: Barber in biography (Edmund White; Antonin Artaud) and Slocombe as a photographer, filmmaker, and novelist. Both have won major public awards for their work. Their combined take on Tokyo, with its focus on the manic and the erotic, is powerful. Not a city for maiden aunts or the libidoless. The show goes on—on the streets, in the clubs, and in the rented rooms. Pay a mental fee; make an imaginative choice. (Tokyo Vertigo: April; Tokyo Sex Underground: July)

Peter Skinner