

ARTFORUM



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Futoshi Miyagi, *Banner (from Road to Nominwee)*, 2022, cloth, thread, 23 5/8 × 25 3/8". From the series "American Boyfriend," 2012-.

Futoshi Miyagi

YUTAKA KIKUTAKE GALLERY/VOID+

If your chief medium is photography and your central concern is human intimacy, as is the case with Futoshi Miyagi, then the past three years of pandemic-induced isolation might have prompted a reexamination of the nature of your practice. Miyagi's exhibition "American Boyfriend: Portraits and Banners" took place in two venues in Tokyo. These presentations constituted the latest manifestations of Miyagi's sprawling "American Boyfriend" project, 2012–, which asks whether it is possible for "an Okinawan man and an American man, possibly a soldier" to fall in love in Okinawa. The question that ties profound sexual and emotional pathos to the politically sensitive American military presence in the city on the one hand and Japan's deep-rooted homophobia, particularly in the conservative South, on the other. Its foundation is Miyagi's writing, published on his blog as well as in print, where the artist adopts a distinct style that is at once diaristic and cerebral, confessional and fictive. The visual art belonging to this project includes photography, sculpture, video, and textiles.

In his writing, Miyagi never reveals how much of his writing is true and how much is fiction, nor does he say which parts are autobiographical and which are stories told to him by friends. The presentation at void+, "American Boyfriend: Portraits," largely consisted of photographs from every stage of the artist's career. These images were informal and fleeting, their subjects often looking away. The prints were small and taped simply to the walls, though arranged with utmost precision. All these factors gently created an atmosphere of fragile intimacy, further enhanced by the sculptures in the show, such as a crushed cigarette packet, *Crumpled Peace (Remake)*, 2020. This exhibition also included works that do not formally belong to the "American Boyfriend" project. Among them were those belonging to the early series "Stranger," 2005–2006, consisting of pictures of the artist with men who were unknown to him in their rooms as though they were lovers, and "Sight Seeing," 2011–, a group of portraits of men in their homes at night with all the lights off. These images, collected from different moments in Miyagi's development as an artist, were installed to give the impression that they comprise a single body of work. The stability of the individual image began to blur, leaving the sense of a calculated totality where the smallest and most seemingly insignificant details become significant.

By contrast, the presentation at Yutaka Kikutake Gallery consisted only of works from 2022. Since the pandemic had made Miyagi's usual practice of staging highly private encounters with the people he photographs temporarily impossible, the artist turned to embroidery. These delicate works contained mostly small elements from the "American Boyfriend" narratives, echoing Miyagi's photographic and video works. The stitching in one piece, *Banner (from Road to Nominewee)*, reproduced the verso of a picture postcard in full, with the square to attach a stamp and all, and a short handwritten message scribbled on it. Another piece, *Your Sweater (Night Climber)*, consisted of only a single length of yarn spelling out the sentence REMEMBER OUR NIGHT CLIMBING fixed with pins to the wall.

Isolation compelled many artists to reflect on why they do what they do, and Miyagi responded both with new production and reassessment of his history. This reexamination revealed the contrast between the bewildering complexity of the narrative undercurrent that unites his works and the subtle modesty of the individual pieces that make up his oeuvre—a body of work reminiscent of delicate flowers invisibly connected through a vast root system.

— Yuki Higashino

Exhibition Review Futoshi Miyagi "American Boyfriend: Portraits & Banners"

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<https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/202301/futoshi-miyagi-89897>