

Headiness: Naoki Sutter-Shudo Sabrina Tarasoff

Fragments of moments altered by their motion blur: Naoki in the swimming pool smoking a Camel Wide. Naoki at Le Chiquito drinking a second *demo* of 1664. Naoki pouring delicate glasses of shiso liqueur over ice. Naoki spilling secrets into a martini. Naoki and I sulking in a garden with a bottle of Barolo poured into plastic cups; or drinking Jack Daniel's at a nameless American bar with our phones turned off; or tiny beers in his studio with the AC turned on high; Crémant de Loire at his wedding; chain-smoking Gauloises Blondes with chartreuse in small snifters.

"Love is like liquor," writes Louis-Ferdinand Céline in *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932). "The drunker and more impotent you are, the stronger and smarter you think yourself and the surer you are of your rights."¹ In the word-sculpture *Theorie* (2017), Japanese-French artist Naoki Sutter-Shudo disorients literary systems of meaning to similar end. Woodblock letters in an alpine green are speckled with frail daisies; each letter is a mirror of itself. In this twin aspect, *Theorie* is laden with the vertigo of love with no reason or rationality. Literature's systems of meaning are tipsied and blur under the artist's preference for literary *style*; in the work's baroque misspellings, "theory" is deliriously lost into an image of itself. Sutter-Shudo, like Narcissus in the clarion pool of self-image, indulges in an intellectual life without reducing it to mere contemplation. "Let me keep looking at you always," he asks of his objects of adoration.² The disorderly conduct of words lends a presence, a charm, to their very meaning. It is the sense of exaltation that isolates and encloses in the present, and so reveals, in a moment of exceptional, daisy-chained pleasure, that in contrast to the discourse of reason, delirium, be it of love or liquor, elevates mere ideas into art. Our conversations accumulate over time about fiendish literature, prohibited objects, poorly kept secrets, the impermissible in art, intemperate friendships, drunkenness, the impermanence of it all. A shared love for the idea of *eau de vie* arises from the spirit's ability to provoke an instability at surface that makes boundaries—formal categories, epistemologies—dissolve into some delirious feeling of being at an edge. Sutter-Shudo's headiness is marked by a commitment to "influence": literary influences, spatial ones, idols, votives, and the sphere of Frenchness, but clearly also the intoxicating atmosphere of drinks, or cigarettes (read: *substance*). Semiotic collapse, the topology of beauty, and the momentousness of inflection aside, I like to imagine the spirit of Sutter-Shudo's work as emanating from some state of emotional (and moral) ataxia, a swindling threat to reason. Put through the Proustian mind, "drunkenness brings about, for the space of a few hours, subjective idealism, pure phenomenalism; all things become mere appearances, and exist only as a function of our sublime selves."³ *Alors*, call it "the Naoki sublime": a *laissez-faire* romanticism preoccupied with what is concealed, and uncertain, and maybe a little stoned, which is to say in awe of (or *under the influence of*) sights, or subjects, that are entirely about appearances, *miens*, and impressions. Consider *C'est la guerre!* (2018), an impeccably *confiture*-colored still life of a teapot and ceramics mingled in a cloud of

smoke. In its evocations of rooms laden with hazel-flavored opium smoke, looming danger, desire or sadness or some in-between—some heaviness, which may as well be the heft of art history—disorients in its stillness. I am always moved by its wordless battle as it condenses into one image, on Proustian terms, "the unconcern that others dilute in their whole entire existence [. . .] in which they see their whole lives, still lives only within their fragile brain."⁴ We are on the side of aesthetics, here, in a realm where the slightest variations in form have euphoric effect.

In another photo-diorama, *Smoky (freedom always)* (2017), an image of a pack of Gauloises Blondes is distended laterally and framed in impeccably enameled wood. If the cigarettes are his "Mont Blanc" ("lending splendor, where from secret springs," as Percy Bysshe Shelley writes in his 1816 natural ode from *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*), smoking is then a pastime made monumental with posteriority in mind.⁵ Under the influence of the image, its surface speckled somewhat masochistically with pins, pricks of desire, one's vision is not only blissfully impaired, but everlasting in the universe of things: cigarettes, like great art, liberate the mind from past and future. "I was trapped in the present"—the Proustian narrator goes on—"as heroes are, or drunkards."⁶ The impeccable stillness of the photographic image is unsettled with the nails, branches, and pins that adorn its frame, all violent acts of disturbance, which the artist recognizes as somewhat revolutionary, at least in jest. Hence the prevalence of *La Tricolore*, the red, white, and blue of the French flag, in Sutter-Shudo's extended oeuvre: clearly a parody of the artist's most sublime self, summoned in the drunken buffoonery of patriotism, which both dismantles meaning in exhausted national tropes, such as painted, stale baguettes, while still professing a longing to participate, albeit recklessly, in their symbolic order. To dispense with unnecessary moral or historical precaution, and proceed to drink deeply the Kool-Aid of Frenchness is to embrace the work's delicious abandon: "In the kitchens of love," Céline educates, "vice is like the good pepper in a sauce, it brings out the flavor, it is indispensable."⁷ Sutter-Shudo's vices are similarly essential. In their darkness, one is filled with dreams.

- 1 Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932; repr., New York: New Directions, 1960), 186.
- 2 Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 72.
- 3 Marcel Proust, "Within a Budding Grove," in *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–27; repr., New York: Modern Library, 2003), 539.
- 4 Proust, "Within a Budding Grove," 540.
- 5 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni" (1816), in Mary Shelley and Percy Bysshe Shelley, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour through a Part of France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland, with Letters Descriptive of a Sail Round the Lake of Geneva and of the Glaciers of Chamouni* (1817), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45130/mont-blanc-lines-written-in-the-vale-of-chamouni>.
- 6 Proust, "Within a Budding Grove," 539.
- 7 Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, 51.

239 Naoki Sutter-Shudo, *Theorie*, 2017.

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240 Naoki Sutter-Shudo, *Disagreeable flower with upside down T(theorie) base*, 2017.

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241 Naoki Sutter-Shudo, *Smoky (freedom always)*, 2017.

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242 Naoki Sutter-Shudo, *C'est la guerre!*, 2018.

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243 Naoki Sutter-Shudo, *Dispenser (brains)*, 2020.

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