

Harvey Benge

b.1944

Self-taught

Harvey Benge has established himself as a shrewd observer of the human condition. He regularly publishes his work in books, and *Tokyo Girl Number 1* is from *You Are Here*, a collection of photographs taken in Japan.

This photograph engages us for several reasons. It is visually striking and addresses us directly. Tokyo Girl's staunch expression is uncompromising. Is it curiosity, disdain or indifference? She dresses to provoke a response, confronting us with her identity. As viewers, we are faced with unjumbling the conflicting codes of dress and adornment that she playfully exploits.

The uniform she wears is like those worn by metropolitan police officers in Japan. Reminiscent of Nazi regalia, it could belong to any puppet regime or nation that slavishly adopts and exaggerates the trappings of autocracy and military rule. The girl is satirising Japanese authority by wearing the uniform the way she does.

Hers is a defiant stance that mocks perhaps the local militia or city hierarchy. Benge has deliberately brought us up close and personal with her, allowing us no escape but to survey her disaffection. The layering of codes confounds the viewer and provokes a complex response.

Her military cap is jauntily tilted, which is more of a nod to the runway than the military or police parade ground. Striking blue lapels and red dashes on the collar provide a self-conscious contrast to the lurid red of her dyed hair.

Furthermore, she wears makeup you would not expect the uniform wearer to have. We see a modern 'Japanese' girl, but her whitened face refers back to the historic Kabuki and Noh theatre traditions. Her dramatically dyed hair could also mimic Western street looks and punk colouring.

Tokyo Girl Number 1 owes its origins to *Fruits*, a collection of photographs showcasing Tokyo's most imaginatively dressed

youth, by Japanese photographer Shoichi Aoki, founder of Tokyo street magazines *Street* and *Fruits*. Aoki began documenting street fashion in Tokyo's fashionable Harajuku area in the mid-1990s. Rather than following European and American trends, people were customising elements of traditional Japanese dress – kimono, obi sashes and geta sandals – and combining them with hand-made, second-hand and alternative designer fashion in an innovative DIY approach to dressing.

Benge's general aim in his work is to look at universal qualities. He usually looks for images that make us think we could be looking at a person anywhere in the world. However, Benge has been seduced by this unique and specifically Japanese context, and his book is something of a homage to Aoki.

David Langman

Artist website:

www.harveybenge.com

Galleries and museums:

www.matakanapictures.com

www.dowse.org.nz

Exhibitions, past exhibitions and Shoichi Aoki

Web search:

Shoichi Aoki

Japanese Metropolitan Police

Kabuki

Nazi regalia

Noh theatre

