Mannequin Rising
by Roy Miki

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Roy Miki was born in Winnipeg only months after his family was sent to Ste. Agathe, Manitoba, from their home in Haney, BC, as part of the mass uprooting and dispossession of Japanese Canadians during the 1940s. He eventually returned to BC, where he was professor of literature at Simon Fraser University until his retirement. This is his fifth book of poetry, having published his first in 1991. He won the Governor General’s Award in 2002 for his third book, Surrender.

Interspersed amongst the poems of Mannequin Rising are Miki’s photographic collages, the focus of which is the concept of the mannequin. Although denying a direct influence from the Fluxus movement, which combined art forms, Miki readily admits that he was aware of it in the ’60s. Begun by George Maciunas, who took his cue from the indeterminacy of John Cage’s compositional techniques, this movement appealed more to visual artists where, according to Wikipedia, “like Dada before it, Fluxus included a strong current of anti-commercialism and an anti-art sensibility, disparaging the conventional market-driven art world in favor of an artist-centered creative practice.”

Miki considers himself a disciple of Warren Talman, who brought the Projectivist poets – Olson, Creeley, Duncan, Levertov, et al. – to the attention of students attending the University of British Columbia at the time and who was, in large part, responsible for the great Vancouver Poetry Conference of 1963. Miki refers to this as “process poetry” and, in fact, wrote one of his theses on the poetry of William Carlos Williams, a poet loosely connected with the Objectivists – Zukofsky, Oppen, etc., the precursors to Olson, etc. Process Poetry, as Miki describes it, is concerned more with the process than with the end result. Miki would probably agree with this statement on Olson’s poetic process made by Roger Gilbert in http://www.jrank.org/literature/pages/9886/Projective-Verse.html:

For Olson the poem is a “high energy-construct” that embodies or enacts “the process of the thing.” Olson’s own verse offers an especially clear illustration of how all the elements of the poem—typography, rhythm, syntax, the page as “field of action”—can be mobilized to create a strong sense of movement or forward thrust. For Olson two factors are crucial in allowing the poet to translate the moment-by-moment process of composition into language. One is the poet’s own breathing, which Olson insists must generate the poem’s shape and rhythms; the other is the typewriter (Olson assumes that modern poets compose on it), which allows for a precise mechanical registering of “the intervals of its composition.” This peculiar combination of the organic and the technological lies at the heart of Olson’s poetics, and may suggest some of the contradictions lurking within it.

As to the concept of the photographic collage and poetry, Miki had this to say in an interview by Kirsten Emiko McAllister titled “‘Always Slippage’: An Interview on a Collage Poem Project in Process” published in an issue of West Coast Line devoted exclusively to him:

My interest in constructing visual collages crept up on me. I’ve been using photographs for a while alongside poems, you could say in conversation with poems. Photographs have been a mediating device for me to free up more open ended approaches to language and form. I’ve
loved working with photo images. But when I retired from the university, it struck me more than before how much my intellectual life has been dominated by the printed word and, of course, printed texts, so I felt a need to figure out ways to enter into a relationship with the spaces of visual images rather than treating them only as accompaniments to poetic texts.

It is then incumbent upon us, as readers, to attempt to engage in the process of Miki’s creations. This is the opposite of approaching the poems from a New Critic perspective, where the poet is disengaged from the result and the poem is read as an artefact. Miki immerses himself and becomes integral to the process. A good example is the opening poem, “Tokyo Evening.” It is possible to read this poem as if it were written by a person emigrating to Canada – but that’s not what Miki intended. In fact, at one point in the poem, he states “(Yet who is that white haired old guy / scribbling away in his little notebook?),” inserting himself into the poem. Miki advised me that he wrote this poem following a trip he’d made to Japan some time before the poem was written. This fact creates a reversal of the reading of the opening couplets:

Long ago he arrived from a distant land
with nothing but cultural baggage

Everything wore the sheen of overwritten
landscapes wrong from the outset

By slipping in and out of coffee houses
he soon began to re-orient himself

To the vibrant maples set alongside the
towering bluer that blue yuletide tree (3)

This entry into diasporic literature captures the culture shock Miki experienced in returning to the land of his ancestors – the blue Christmas tree set against maples being a huge aspect of that experience.

Although many of the techniques developed by the New Critics have been supplanted by newer developments, those of close reading and listening to the play of sound remain within the arsenal of the contemporary critic and the contemporary poet, as the second poem, “Three Takes on Culture,” demonstrates. The third couplet, in particular, shows that sound and rhyme remain integral elements of a well-crafted poem: “But hey rapids ripple down spine / in a tolerance to dine on my lungs” (5). The “rapids ripple” captures the turbulence of the river of life Miki rides. Rhyme may not be found exclusively at the end of the lines but may be moved internally – “spine” and “dine,” for example. What is most interesting about this rhyme is that Miki has conflated the words “down spine” to arrive at the rhyme word, reflecting the process of poetic creation by letting what was said before lead you to the next word.

The enjoyment of reading the poems that accompany the photographic collages and discerning the interaction, the way they speak to each other, must be left to the reader. It is an enjoyment that must be experienced.

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