

Carlo McCormick

99 Nights: Wakeful Dreaming

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A certain kind of near madness can set in if you go without sleep long enough. While it is somewhat of a myth that protracted periods of sleeplessness can result in insanity, extended exile from the land of Nod can result in hallucinations and psychotic episodes. This is not to say that the marathon festival *99 Nights*, which inaugurated the slapdash slum night-clubhouse No Se No in 1983, was entirely sleepless, but it was of a kind of fitful and frenetic restlessness that begged a certain mania. Beyond those telltale signs of lunacy that begin to subtly distort the physiognomy after prolonged revelry, it's hard to properly capture the likeness of a perpetual festival—its visage too mutable and volatile. Toyo's pictures get to the totality of *99 Nights* because they aren't trying to capture its moments like exotics in a bell jar, so much as they're coaxing impressions from the shadows, the clamorous din sounded in the glamorous dim, a poetry of the fleeting.

Considering the scope of Toyo Tsuchiya's immersive journey, it is a remarkably modest record he kept—not the everything so many strive for, but a more personal something, like memory itself, never so much complete as caught in momentary flashes of resonant recollection. I can't be sure, but I'd guess Toyo was likely just as poor as the rest of us, and in this age before the pictorial deluge of digital photography, the investment of time and money on film and development made the opportunities and decisions of taking pictures rather more precious. But if Tsuchiya was guided in part by Cartier-Bresson's mandate of the decisive moment, his eye and heart led him elsewhere, to a world of manifest indecision and imprecision. By nature and craft the kind of discrete cat who would stand to the side—everyone will remember Toyo but not so many can actually remember seeing him take a photograph—this is an artist who has a tangential and obtuse relationship to the action. Diving into it but also somehow looking off just to the side, he fills the frame with the incidental, allowing all the world to be a stage. He understood deeply he was part of a moment where there was no real divide between performer and audience. Everyone was a participant.

It is easy to obsess on the infamous and important artists who populate the photographs of Toyo Tsuchiya, to be impressed as we can be when encountering the likes of Tehching Hsieh, Kembra Pfahler, Stelarc, Jackie Curtis or Jack Smith, but they are like cool cameos within much more complex and radical theatrics. Toyo was never interested in photographing the real art celebrities of New York City cultural capital—and there are tons of excellent photographers from that time if you want to see pictures of Warhol, Basquiat, Haring, Lou Reed, Laurie Anderson or the rest of the all too predictable A-list. He was enthralled by the furthest reaches of the avant-garde, the not only less-than-famous but also significantly removed from the mainstream. Honestly, looking back at these pictures now, I can't recognize so many of the faces as I should. They are part of a greater recognition of what it meant to be there, at that time, on the desperate edge of a very rough neighborhood: in a place without rules, a club without a guest list, a party without a permit. Yes, this is art without license or permission, not meant for the society of spectacle but for the intimacy of the like-minded.

The world Toyo allows us with *99 Nights*, as he did with all his ensuing work at No Se No, the Rivington Sculpture Garden and so many other places that have fallen off the historical map and been paved over by the power of progress (or is that the progress of power), is never the center of things so much as the glorious margins—not the emblematic and iconic moments that come to define so much else, but the interstices that resist definition. These are the nights that turn to days, the spot you don't find on any

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tour guide, the locale wonderfully filled with artists from all over the world. . .travelers and creative itinerants who came to New York City for the chance to be in some place like no other, for surely it was only there where we could each and all be ourselves. I love these pictures because they limn the indescribable, unfold less as great narratives than special little secrets, talk of something we don't really know but understand deep in our hearts, depicting how much the very existence of this outré universe—and all the parallel dimensions where uninhibited creativity is allowed to run wild—matters to the health and vitality of our culture.

Like the long-lapsed scene, these pictures remind us not just of who we were, but also of what we might still be. As great as the photos are, I'm kind of glad Toyo put down his camera. Those instances when creativity ignites a community are rare and ephemeral. Toyo Tsuchiya saw and lived them as they mattered, but is not one to spend his life chasing things that have already moved on. Besides, he's such an amazing artist now, but that's another story we can tell you next time. . .