

NOT JUST ANOTHER SHINJUKU LOVE HOTEL

Rachel Hope Allan



Figure 1. *SALARYMAN*, 2021,
digital inkjet print on Hahnemühle paper, 300gsm, 100 x 100 cm.

I am good at airports. I have the uncanny ability to breeze through customs, and up until recently (thanks Air Fiji) my bags have always arrived on time and undamaged. Narita airport was no different. Light bounced off unfamiliar rescue vehicles and airport structures as a smoke-filled glass box beckoned me from afar. I inserted coins into a vending machine, then stepped inside the curious building. It was hot inside the glass box. The air was thick. Glazed passengers stood silently, inhaling tobacco and checking their phones.

I had been dreaming about this place since I was 14, and I chose Japanese (language) lessons over photography.

Narita airport is more than organised.

As I stood beneath the flashing Shinjuku light, gloved hands silently stowed my luggage into the belly of the bright orange limousine bus. As we drove into the megalopolis, images of *Blade Runner* melded with *Tokyo Drift*. I could see truck drivers watching porn on tiny TVs attached to their dashboards and salarymen squeezed into overstuffed trains. Empty fields and baseball parks were intermingled with mid-rises and clip-on roadways hugged apartment buildings. Highways and arterial roads meandered like afterthoughts between historical structures and neon signage. I have never seen anything like this before. The light begins to fade as we crossed the Rainbow Bridge. I rest my head against the heavily starched headrest and whispered to myself, "This is Tokyo."

Tokyo is broken up into 23 special wards, 26 cities, one district and four sub-prefectures. It was originally a fishing village called Edo, that became an important political centre when a Tokugawa shogunate seat was established there. This city was renamed Tokyo in 1868 after imperial rule was restored. The greater Tokyo area is the most populous metropolitan area in the world.¹ The metro area population of Tokyo in 2021 is 37,340,000, a 0.14 percent decline from 2020.² Tokyo is a megalopolis. A conundrum that is both fast-paced and serene. Traditional but convention-defying. High-rise buildings are constructed silently behind plastic white walls as pedestrians are swiftly escorted from harm's way by retired school teachers dressed in white overalls and white gloves.



Figure 2. Late night Lawsons, 2021,
digital inkjet print on Hahnemühle paper; 300gsm, 100 x 200 cm.

Konbini are everywhere in Japan. They are an important cog in the machine that is Japan. At a *konbini* you can purchase grocery items, clean white business shirts and socks. You can find a fax machine, use the ATM, pay for tickets and bills, send letters and packages. There are over 7000 *konbini* in Tokyo. The major players are Lawson, Seven-Eleven and FamilyMart. *Konbini* are usually well lit, clean and well-organised. Shelves, bain-maries and refrigerators are constantly replenished with *onigiri*, bento sets, fried *karaage*, Mochifuwa, pancakes and sandwiches. Each chain of *konbini* has specialties; some are 'Premium' or 'Fresh' and some have to publicly apologise for unsanitary rat incidents.³ In 2013, Anthony Bourdain tweeted about "The unnatural, inexplicable deliciousness of the Lawson's egg salad sandwich."⁴ And I can concur that they are pretty decent.

A great *tamago sando* is all about the egg, so there are no pickles, celery or raw onions added. The egg salad is seasoned with a Japanese mayonnaise such as Kewpie, which has a mild sweetness and robust umami flavour. And then there is the bread. Japanese sandwich bread is called *shokupan* (食パン). It is fluffier than Western loaves, with a slightly chewy texture. It is like biting into clouds of air, only superior.

I love *tamago sando*. I have sampled every variety of *konbini* egg sandwich on offer (sans meat). I have taken trains and monorails, ventured up ropeways and mountain sides in search of them. Tested their instagrammed delights at eggbaby,⁵ Eggs 'n Things and Kayaba Coffee. My Google map is so full of stars marking potential egg-sandwich delights that I feel like an egg-headed version of *Kantaro the Sweet Tooth Salaryman*.⁶ *Reji bukuro wa iranai desu* (no plastic bag please) plays over and over in my head as I enter the convenience store.

Each morning I purchase a *sando* and a cold Boss coffee, couriering it back to bed in a cotton bag, but at night, I like to eat my *sando* while I sit in the gutter of the *konbini* carpark, next to the drunken 'boyfriends' and the ever-present crows.



Figure 3. *puppy, baby, monkey*, 2021,
digital inkjet print on Hahnemühle paper, 300gsm, 100 x 200 cm.

Crows are a fixture of the Tokyo skyline, as looming as the Skytree. They stalk the temples and the backstreets. They pull treats and shiny things from neatly stacked rubbish. They cause blackouts and train delays, chase children and salarymen indiscriminately. The Tokyo Metropolitan Government estimates their population to be somewhere between 18,000 and 100,000.⁷ Crows are special – they remember, manufacture tools and use psychological warfare. They employ bait-and-switch to trick, and a recent research study at the University of Washington discovered that crows can “recognize individual human faces.”⁸ The researchers hypothesised that the corvids share the knowledge they gain with their young, as well as with the rest of the flock.

Records also show that crows ritualistically examine their dead.⁹ Many an anthropomorphising armchair twitcher has hypothesised that the crows are performing some kind of funeral. According to corvid researcher Dr Kaeli Swift, they “respond to unfamiliar dead crows by alarm calling, followed by recruitment of other crows to the area to form a raucous group called a mob. Then they disperse after about 15-30min.”¹⁰ Dr Swift deployed the non-invasive imaging technique FDG-PET to spy on the minds of crows.¹¹ FDG-PET exposes what parts of the brain the corvids were using, but not what they were actually *thinking* or *feeling*, leaving us, and Dr Swift, to speculate on the question of crows and grief. Swift does suggest, however, that this behaviour could be rationalised in a number of ways, including danger learning, a true sense of mourning or grief, as a foraging opportunity, or purely coincidence.¹² She concludes that “crow communication is quite complex and context dependent, therefore requiring a great deal of brain power to decipher and interpret.”¹³

The crows in Tokyo are quite literally murderous and, unlike the well-ordered place they choose as their home, the squadrons of jungle crows (*Corvus macrorhynchos*) can get a little out of hand. “Hungry crows have bloodied the faces of children while trying to steal candy from their hands. Crows have even carried away baby prairie dogs and ducklings from Tokyo zoos.”¹⁴ Since 2001 the corvids’ unsatisfactory behavior has led to the deaths of more than 93,000 of their kin by way of meat traps full of poison gas.¹⁵

In Shibuya, after one or two too many, hotel desk clerks will tuck you in, unwrap your drunkenly requested *tamago sando*¹⁶ and leave a note directing you to another one waiting in the fridge. Walking home in Shibuya, you can find salarymen slumped over in the streets with packages for their wives from boutiques at their side. Cellphone in one hand, wallet in the other. In Shibuya, one can sleep soundly in the knowledge that everything will be there when you wake from your alcohol-induced slumber. However, in Shinjuku, one has no such confidence in one’s fellow man.

Shinjuku is touted as the place where “Tokyo goes to have fun.”¹⁷ It is brimming with karaoke bars, batting cages and love hotels. Shinjuku Station is the busiest train station in the world, with 3.6 million people using it every day.¹⁸ In Shinjuku you can shop at the leading fashion houses of the world, eat the most fantastic food, see groundbreaking architecture and stroll through public gardens designed for a feudal lord in the Edo period.¹⁹ Shinjuku is beautiful, it is grimy, it is traditional and modern. It has seedy gay bars, cat cafes, giggle clubs and themed sex dens. It is where *Hamakaze* construct cardboard houses outside the government buildings, where *rikishi* (Japanese: 力士), *sumōtori* (相撲取り) or, more colloquially, *osumōsan* (お相撲さん), shop for their lunch at the Isetan,²⁰ and where coiffed



Figure 4. *sundown sumotori*, 2021,
digital inkjet print on Hahnemühle paper, 300gsm, 100 x 100 cm.

young men make serious bank at boyfriend clubs. At all hours of the day and night, guests and sounds of pleasure spill from love hotels, and riot police can be seen walking casually down the street.²¹ Men in motorcycle helmets deliver large amounts of cash to banks and shops, armed only with sticks. Salarymen and giggle girls mingle with tourists and *gaijin* (foreigners) stagger from one hostess club to another, unaware of the possibility of losing their wallet or a kidney.²² At 2am in Shinjuku, you will find smartly dressed *yakuza* depositing wads of cash into the ATMs at Lawsons,²³ as cooing couples purchase beer and egg sandwiches. The sound of aluminum hitting leather rings out from the batting cages and tone-deaf songstressess inhale cigarettes in the street. Shinjuku is my kind of place. A little bit dirty and a little bit dangerous.



Figure 5. *HONDA*, 2021,
digital inkjet print on Hahnemühle paper,
300gsm, 100 × 100 cm.

I never meant to fall in love with Japan, with the order, the crows and the neatly piled up rubbish. I see the women who quietly weep on the trains, the inequity, the inbuilt misogyny, the size shaming and the excessive drinking. The animal rights abuse, elder and disabled abandonment issues and the excessive demands placed on salarymen who are literally worked to death.

As I write this, it has been ... days since I was last in Japan.

I closely guard my incense that was created for the Emperor; I dream of the ground floor of Takashimaya, the insanity of Don Quijote²⁴ and the ecstasy of finding the Higashi-Shinjuku exit at rush hour. I long for the taste of *tsukemono* and my Uniqlo cashmere sweater is getting a hole in the elbow.

I miss the light, the order, the extremes, the tradition, the innovations, the toilets, the trains, the ceremony, the smells, the precision, the honour and, of course, the egg sandwiches.

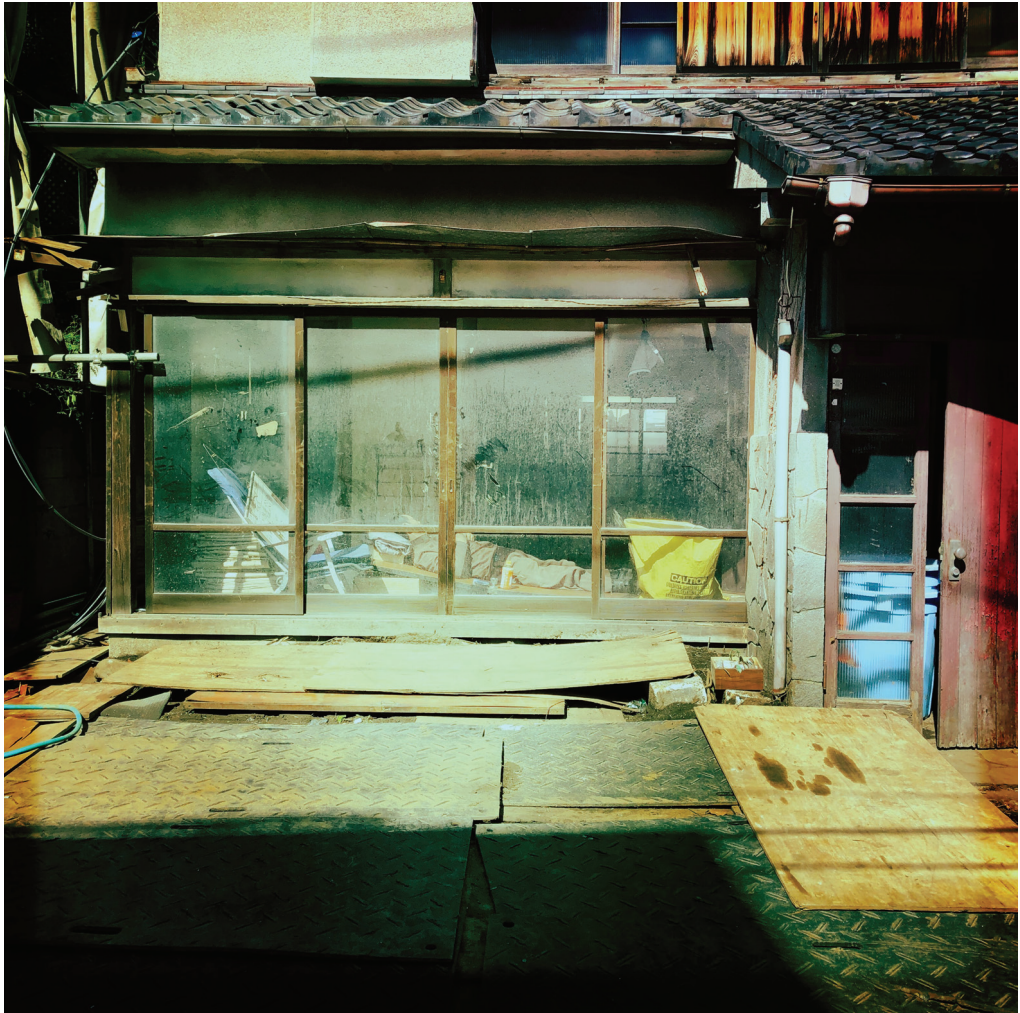


Figure 6. (*Sunlit Shimo Kitazawa*), 2021,
digital inkjet print on Hahnemühle paper,
300gsm, 100 x 100 cm.

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- 3 "Japan's Familymart Convenience Chain Apologises for Rats in Store," BBC News, 7 August 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-49260082>.
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- 5 Instagram, eggbabycake, https://www.instagram.com/eggbabycake/?utm_source=ig_embed.
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- 7 Alec Jordan, "The Misunderstood Crows of Tokyo: Why They Don't Deserve Their 'Bad Boy' Image," *Tokyo Weekender*, 28 July 2017, <https://www.tokyoweekender.com/2017/07/the-misunderstood-crows-of-tokyo-why-they-dont-deserve-their-bad-boy-image/>.
- 8 Michelle Nijhuis, "Friend or Foe? Crows Never Forget a Face, it Seems," *The New York Times*, 25 August 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/26/science/26crow.html> (accessed 20 May 2021).
- 9 BirdNote, "A Funeral For Crows," *Audubon*, podcast, 6 February 2015, <https://www.audubon.org/news/a-funeral-crows>.
- 10 Kaeli Swift, "What are Crows Thinking When They See Death?," *Corvid Research*, blog post, 17 March 2020, <https://corvidresearch.blog/2020/03/17/what-are-crows-thinking-when-they-see-death/>.
- 11 PET (Positron emission tomography) is a very expensive scanner. According to the Wikipedia page devoted to this scientific imaging technique, it "uses radioactive substances known as radiotracers to visualize and measure changes in metabolic processes, and in other physiological activities including blood flow, regional chemical composition, and absorption. Different tracers are used for various imaging purposes, depending on the target process within the body." Wikipedia, "Positron Emission Tomography," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Positron_emission_tomography#cite_note-1. While I don't begin to understand the science behind this technology, what I have learnt is that while PET is a common imaging technique used in nuclear medicine, it can also be used by animal researchers – one of the upsides being the subject's survival.
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- 13 Swift, "What Are Crows Thinking." "Crows that saw a dead crow didn't show more activity in the regions associated with affect, social behaviors or fear learning. Instead, what we found is that, like when they see a familiar threat like a hawk, it's their executive center that shows the most difference."
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- 16 They also refuse payment for said sandwich when you come to settle up the bill.
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- 24 <https://www.donki.com/en/>.