

Shimabuku

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Berlin-based global rover Shimabuku has long been recognized in his native Japan as a pioneer of social and relational art. This first extensive international retrospective offers a satisfying overview of his gently humorous musings on everyday life and community, usually in the form of videos, installations, and photographic narratives about the places he visits and people he meets. Birmingham's neo-gothic late-Victorian Ikon Gallery—a kind of kunsthalle in a former school—offers an elegant backdrop, its various spaces allowing for an appropriately roomy show, which puts a special emphasis on narrative works made over the years in the UK.

Cucumber Journey, 2000, was just that, the story of a leisurely canal journey from London to Birmingham in which the artist learned how to make “slow food”: in this case, cucumber pickles, given to friends on arrival. In *Swansea Jack*, 2003, the artist invented and organized a memorial competition in which dogs retrieved objects from the sea in memory of a heroic local black retriever who saved many people from drowning. In *Fish and Chips*, 2006, a dreamy underwater video with music documents the blind date of a potato suspended on a fishing line “meeting” live fish in the River Mersey. And, in the one work conceived specifically for this show, a small catalogue was made available on the streets of the city, but only as a free supplement to the *Big Issue*, a magazine sold by homeless and unemployed vendors.

The ideas can be hit-and-miss, and the works collectively demand a suspension of sophisticated critical habits. Nowhere is irony intended; Shimabuku seeks a pure kind of artistic wonder, devoid of the edge so often sought in social art. Ikon director Jonathan Watkins has a long track record of selecting important Japanese contemporary artists who confound our expectations about the country's popular culture or high-tech futurism. In Shimabuku he has found the perfect ambassador.

