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"Hiroko Inoue: Inside-Out"

BY DANIELLE DEMETRIOU – Apr 17, 2009



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The view out of the windows of mental institutions is the provocative starting point for “Inside-Out” (¥2,500), a new photographic book by the German-based artist Hiroko Inoue. A selection of Inoue’s images are on display till April 25 at Foil Gallery, which is also publishing the book. For more than 13 years, the artist has tried to see the world through the perspective of a mental patient while photographing asylums, hospitals and other confined spaces across Germany, Japan, Austria, the United States and Yemen.

In one, a window is hazily lit by morning sun, and, on a crumpled bed, security bars have cast a geometric grid of shadows. With fragmented snatches of the “real” world just beyond reach, the window is a portal through an otherwise solid barrier, poignantly suggesting the frailty of the boundaries between those on the outside who are classed as sane — by the conventions of society — and those who lose their grasp of reality and are locked up.

“People from the outside can go inside these institutions any time but patients can’t leave,” says Inoue. “It is a one-way system. The view from inside and outside is quite different.

“For me, it is a question of borders. The window is a visible border, but these images question how firm a border it really is.”

The images are as visually arresting as they are subtly unnerving: An angular expanse of geometric white balcony bars is contrasted against a cloudless blue sky in a Kochi mental hospital; a green forest is glimpsed beyond the vaulted windows of a derelict former sanitarium in east Germany; a tap drips in a gray bathroom in a Viennese Institution.

But just as windows let the light in through the inescapable walls of an asylum, the beautiful imagery, composition and colors of the photography ensure that the overriding feel of the images in the gallery and the book is not one of despair. As Inoue says, “It is important to have hope.”