



Life: Untitled

タイトル、拒絶

2019/98min/Colour/English Subtitles

Distributor: Third Window Film

Director: YAMADA Kana

Cast: ITOH Sairi, TSUNEMATSU Yuri, KATAOKA Reiko

Exeter Phoenix screening information:

Wed 2 Mar	Kiba: The Fangs of Fiction	6.00 pm
Wed 9 Mar	Ora, Ora Be Goin' Alone	7.00 pm
Wed 16 Mar	Life: Untitled	6.00 pm
Sun 20 Mar	Aristocrats	3.00 pm
Wed 23 Mar	Iwane: Sword of Serenity	8.00 pm
Wed 30 Mar	The House of the Lost on the Cape	8.00 pm

In her directorial debut in feature films, YAMADA Kana recounts the daily lives of a group of call girls and those who work with them, as they struggle to survive and to give meaning to their existence. For most of *Life: Untitled*, the camera remains in a dismal apartment in Tokyo, where the women idly wait for the next customer to call. This is the *deriheru* business, one of the most profitable and inconspicuous categories of sex work in contemporary Japan. In *deriheru*—an abbreviation of 'delivery health'—escorts are dispatched to the customers' homes or to hotels to provide sexual services that officially exclude intercourse (which is banned under the Prostitution Prevention Law in Japan). After failing to become a call girl, Kano (ITOH Sairi) decides to remain in the business working as the escorts' caretaker, in an attempt to escape what she sees as a mediocre and aimless life. It is through Kano, who functions as a surrogate for the audience, that we start to see what is brewing under the surface.

Life: Untitled is adapted from a stage play YAMADA wrote and performed in 2013 with *Rojikku* (ROJI9), the theatre company she leads. In the film, the carefully choreographed compositions and the frontal, fixed camera evoke the experience of watching a stage play. After directing music videos, short films, and television dramas, YAMADA has recently gained recognition as co-writer of the popular Netflix series *The Naked Director* (2019), which tells the story of adult video director MURANISHI Toru. Sharing YAMADA's interest in exploring Japanese society through its commercialisation of sexuality, UCHIDA Eiji, co-scriptwriter and co-director of the Netflix series, became the producer of *Life: Untitled*.

The number of films focusing on the lives of sex workers throughout the history of Japanese cinema is extraordinary, and *Life: Untitled* draws on this rich tradition in several ways. For instance, similarly to classic films such as *Street of Shame* (dir. MIZOGUCHI Kenji, 1956) and more recent works such as *Dawn of the Felines* (dir. SHIRAIISHI Kazuya, 2017), YAMADA's story unravels through a multi-strand narrative. By depicting the personality, background and life choices of different women, the multi-strand narrative structure works to challenge monolithic stereotypes about what kind of women sell sex and why. Moreover, like in *Street of Shame* and other prostitution films such as *Fallen Blossoms* (dir. ISHIDA Tamizo, 1938) and *Sakuran* (NINAGAWA Mika, 2006), indoor settings predominate in YAMADA's work, emphasising the lack of freedom and the claustrophobic

Dates & Venues:

4 – 13 February
ICA, London

5 – 22 February
Phoenix, Leicester

5 February – 26 March
Firstsite, Colchester

6 – 27 February
Eden Court, Inverness

6 – 27 February
Watershed, Bristol

8 – 23 February
Depot, Lewes

9 – 27 February
Storyhouse, Chester

12 February – 1 March
Cambridge Film Trust, Cambridge

13 February – 2 March
Aberystwyth Arts Centre

13 February – 27 March
Hyde Park Picture House, Leeds

13 February – 27 March
Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff

15 February – 3 March
HOME, Manchester

16 February – 16 March
Brewery Arts Cinema, Kendal

21 February – 31 March
Tyneside Cinema, Newcastle

26 February – 20 March
Queen's Film Theatre, Belfast

28 February – 28 March

Macrobert Arts Centre, Stirling

1 – 30 March
Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry

2 – 15 March
Dundee Contemporary Arts, Dundee

2 – 30 March
Exeter Phoenix, Exeter

4 – 6 March
QUAD, Derby

7 – 28 March
Cinema City, Norwich

7 – 28 March
City Screen Picturehouse, York

8 – 31 March
Showroom Cinema, Sheffield

12 – 20 March
Belmont Filmhouse, Aberdeen

15 – 29 March
Plymouth Arts Cinema, Plymouth

18 – 24 March
Broadway, Nottingham

18 – 24 March
Filmhouse, Edinburgh

atmosphere of the brothel or similar premises of organised prostitution. In this way films tend to avoid passing judgement on the sex workers while pointing at the exploitative nature of the industry.

It is often the case that the portrayal of sex work in cinema functions as a dramatic metaphor of society, serving as a vehicle to explore social, economic, and political concerns that affect the entire population. In different historical periods Japanese prostitution films have, in line with contemporaneous concerns, focused on issues such as economic inequality and necessity, women's emancipation, or the crisis of sexual morals. They have been interpreted as allegories of the national quest for modernity, of an occupied nation, or of the exuberant Japan of the bubble economy, resonating with widespread feelings and concerns of the population. In recent years, social and emotional alienation of the individual stands as a central theme of Japanese prostitution films. Such is the case of *Side Job* (dir. HIROKI Ryuichi, 2017) and *Call Boy* (dir. MIURA Daisuke, 2018), and indeed of *Life: Untitled*. Most of the characters in the film feel a lack of connection with others, with themselves, and with society. Hiding behind different facades, they all struggle to come to terms with the breach between the expectations they had for their lives and the reality they live in. As Kano's character illustrates, this problem is not exclusive to those who inhabit the underground world.

YAMADA explained in an interview that her own alienating experience in dealing with the expectations, pressures, and limitations associated with the ideal of femininity in Japan inspired her to depict the experiences of sex workers who she saw as confronting the same problem from different perspectives. The repeated inclusion of television footage in the film seems to underscore how we are bombarded with prescriptive ideas about how to succeed in life while soothed with escapist entertainment. As suggested in the original title of the film, which could be translated as 'Rejecting titles' (『タイトル、拒絶』), Yamada invites us to refuse labels and fixed narratives. There is no judgement of the characters' situation or of the coping mechanisms they come up with. Despite their feelings of meandering through life, they are all determined to survive. It is their resilience that we are made to respect.

Dr Irene González-López
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