

# Mariana Lemos “*sticks and stones won’t ever break our bones*, a film by Grzegorz Stefański”

The black-and-white film ‘sticks and stones won’t ever break our bones’ (2023) opens with a figure lying sideways on the floor, submerged in darkness. Light filters from another room, accentuating his outline against the blurry, grey backdrop. It is in shadow that the film begins, and it is there that it dwells.

Grzegorz Stefański filmed “sticks and stones” during his residency at Tokyo Arts and Space (TOKAS), where he became absorbed in Jun’ichirō Tanizaki’s writings on Japanese interiors. In his 1933 essay *In Praise of Shadows*, Tanizaki writes, “In total darkness, poetry was still there, taking its time, illuminating traces of the past.”<sup>1</sup> For him, shadow is not the absence of light; it embodies

endurance and emotional insight, evoking deeper psychological reflection. Unlike the shiny aesthetics of the West, Japanese aesthetics celebrate the hidden beauty within shadow. In the darkness, one can look backwards and, most importantly, inward. Stefański’s use of shadow in this film—the first of a triptych about relationships, memory, and the home—reflects this, turning to the subtle forces that shape the interior world.

The nameless figure down in the dark is a fitting entry into Stefański’s wider practice. His previous films depict the male body falling asleep or falling on the floor, capturing moments of perseverance and vulnerability. He explores how these moments are performed or perceived within masculinity. Working across film, photography, and performance, he often repeats or prolongs gestures, making close studies of the body. Techniques such as repetition, close-ups or slow motion enlarge these moments. In ‘choke’ (2017), for instance, two Jiu-Jitsu fighters hold and constrain each other. Their skin is exposed, zoomed in, their veins and muscles bulge sensuously, making the scene of violence, intimate. His subjects, though outwardly strong, inhabit a space between

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<sup>1</sup> Jun’ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows* (1933), translated by Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker, Leete’s Island Books, 1977, p. 18.

control and collapse, as if the body itself is too much to bear. In another work, ‘spill’ (2018), men fall one by one to the ground in high-definition, the impact on the skin rippling like shimmering waves. His bodies, like shadows, remain silent yet hold more than they disclose. Through body language—movement and gesture—Stefański exposes the violence of embodied experience.

As ‘sticks and stones’ progresses, the camera glides through a traditional Japanese interior, revealing sliding doors with circular cutout handles and a woman cocooned inside a tokonoma (a cabinet). Her fingers tap against the wood—a rhythmic knocking. Everything else is still. Light and shadow oscillate, alternately revealing the room and concealing the woman. Her body, like the cupboard, becomes a site of introspection. Stefański focuses not on dramatic contrasts but on the soft unfolding of shade, which, like memory, occupies space in ways both visible and hidden. As Tanizaki notes, “shadow is where things are preserved”—it is where pain lingers, long after words have faded.<sup>2</sup>



Stefański's new direction explores how the body musters what is left unsaid, like archives of past sores and unarticulated feelings. Ann Cvetkovich, in *The Archive of Feelings*, states, “Trauma is embedded not only in narratives but in bodies, gestures, and affects; it resides in the everyday, in those spaces and moments where language fails.”<sup>3</sup> The slow, measured movements of the

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<sup>2</sup> Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *The Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Duke University Press, 2003), p. 7.

camera remind us that trauma is not linear; it loops and resurfaces, hiding in motion. The body remembers when the mind cannot.



At one point, it lingers on a close-up of an eye, a finger slowly approaching, creating unbearable tension. Hovering, the finger reflects on the eye's surface—a mesmerising image of intimacy and distress. How close do we come before flinching? The eye, raw and exposed, feels too much—its iris sliced by shadows.

Stefański uses beauty to disarm and unsettle, contrasting lush imagery with the potential for harm.

Peering from around the corner, the camera takes its time to arrive at the scene. Now, the man and woman are playing children's games—thumb-fighting, hitting red hands, play-wrestling—but something feels wrong. The innocence of these rhythms is undercut by an unsettling pressure. Their breathing is heavy; the sharp sounds of slaps reverberate, and the absence of laughter is palpable, turning playful movements cold and ominous. The struggle for dominance unfolds in each gesture, transforming these games into something menacing. The simplicity of their movements suggests a dislocation—a mislaying of time. What should be innocent feels loaded with darker meanings. These events do not feel entirely real but like projections of memories—spectres from the past haunting the present.

The games serve as a metaphor for misunderstandings and unspoken battles in relationships. The repetitive, intimate movements in Stefański's work are not just physical actions but reenactments of deeper emotional wounds. Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk asserts in *The Body Keeps the Score* that “traumatized



people chronically feel unsafe inside their bodies.”<sup>4</sup> The characters embody this turmoil. “The past is alive,” van der Kolk continues, “in the form of gnawing interior discomfort.”<sup>5</sup> Stefański’s camera captures this affliction, revealing how suffering is continually relived in the body.

The background sound is a mechanical, atmospheric white noise, constituting what I have called silence. As the film nears its end, this muteness is shattered by the roar of a storm—a rush of

sound like a waterfall crashing in, unleashing a torrent of emotion. The camera frames the female character, who sits introspectively, eyes closed and breathing deeply. The sudden transition from slapping hands to overwhelming cascades of sound arouses a surge of feelings. The camera waits, capturing the unspoken sentiments that remain in her mind, somewhere between touch, breath, and shadow.

In ‘sticks and stones’, time shifts between recollection, hurt, and present. The fragmented narrative invites viewers to navigate these temporal layers, where past wounds echo through every movement. Stefański’s previous work often focused on singular actions—like falling—enlarging and emphasising those moments. But in ‘sticks and stones’, he adopts a narrative-driven approach, delving deeper into psychological complexity. The narrative remains non-linear, much like trauma itself, which defies the boundaries of time.

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<sup>4</sup> Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Penguin Books, 2014), p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> Bessel van der Kolk, p. 102.

Stefański's work taps into the deeply human experience of how past tribulations can haunt us, replaying in our interactions, even when we don't fully understand them. 'sticks and stones' time-travels through the body's memory, revealing how the past is always present, even in the smallest gestures. It portrays a sense of unsafe intimacy, akin to having the rug pulled from beneath us. It confronts trust and explores the painful truth of what happens when those meant to care for us end up causing the most harm.

Ultimately, 'sticks and stones' encapsulates a world where light and shadow transcend mere aesthetics, becoming emotional and psychological landscapes. As Tanizaki wrote, "Were it not for shadows, there would be no beauty."<sup>6</sup>



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<sup>6</sup> Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, p. 16.



***no sticks and stones can ever break our bones,***  
2023

film installation, 4K film with sound, screen dimensions variable, 4'58", black and white, aspect ratio 4:3, lopped, pendant light of temperature 2600K, audio speakers on pedestals, dark-grey carpet

Production: Ayumi Uno (Tokyo Arts and Space)

Participants: Sayuri Iimori, Yoshiya Yoshimitsu  
Director of Photography: Rosie Taylor  
Sound: Gerhard Funabiki-Senz

Shot on location at Edo-Tokyo Open Air Architectural Museum

trailer and installation view [here](#)  
festival edit [here](#) (password: tokyo2023)





installation view, TOKAS Hongo Gallery, Tokyo, 19.08-24.09.2023





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