

Photographic Expression in Japan (2009)

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Due to the impact of the simultaneous slowdown of the world economy in the autumn of 2008, 2009 was an exceptionally difficult year economically. Fields with deep ties to photography, such as advertising and publishing, were struck particularly hard, and I frequently hear stories, too, of how the livelihood of photographers is becoming threatened. However, the harsh economic situation and society's siege mentality cannot entirely be said to have been reflected directly in the sphere of photographic expression. Instead, it could be said that it is precisely in gloomy situations such as this that the fundamental strength of photography is freshly questioned. Looking at the situation regarding the publication of photographic collections or staging of photographic exhibitions in 2009, activity was in fact more vigorous than in the past, and of this we believe there were also much of high quality. The huge wave of "digitalization" that has exerted a clear effect since we entered the 2000s has also settled down, and works exhibiting firm mastery of the new media and technology are beginning to stand out.

Major Photographic Awards

The 34th Ihei Kimura Award was presented to Masashi Asada for his photographic collection "Asadake (The Asada Family)" (Akaakasha), which comprises two photographic series: "dress-up photographs" of the photographer, his parents, and elder brother in the costumes of various occupations, from fire fighters to rock'n rollers; and commemorative photographic poses from the Asada family album. The collection is an experiment in new "family photos" that physically and critically questions the image of the modern family within which lies a sense of danger. Moreover, this is the second year running that Akaakasha publications have received the Ihei Kimura Award, following the wins by Atsushi Okada and Lieko Shiga in 2008. This can be said to be quite a noteworthy event.

The 28th Ken Domon Award was won by Mitsuhiko Imamori for his one-man exhibition, shown at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, "Insects: On the move for 400 million years". Mr. Imamori has been active as a photographer of insects since the 1970s. Since the 1990s he has been focusing on the familiar environment of the "Satoyama" area around his hometown, where human activity and nature intermix, and has published works tirelessly. In particular, his lush, fresh

works themed on the four seasons of the Lake Biwa area where he grew up have been featured in the hi-vision film “Satoyama” and are also receiving attention from the perspective of environmental conservation.

The recipient of the Photographic Society of Japan Lifetime Achievement Award this year was Toshio Shibata. Since the 1980s Mr. Shibata has been meticulously photographing familiar scenes from around Japan, such as earth-retaining concrete walls and mudslide-control dams using a large format camera, publishing landscape photographs printed in deep, rich monochromes. In his one-man exhibition “Landscapes”, shown at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, Mr. Shibata breaks new ground with his latest works of color photography.

This year’s winner of the Photographic Society of Japan International Prize was Teizo Umezu, who was recognized for his contribution to the photographic world over many years. The Photographic Society of Japan Distinguished Contributions Award was presented to Ichiro Ueno and Norihiko Matsumoto; Kotaro Iizawa won the Scholastic Award, and Yasuhiro Ogawa and Shintaro Sato were presented with the Newcomer’s Award.

The 32nd Nobuo Ina Award, whose recipient is selected from amongst works exhibited at Nikon Salons, was presented to Junichi Ohta, a resident of Nara Prefecture, for his work “Father’s Journal”. Although the work consists entirely of photocopies of the pages of a notebook diary left by Mr. Ohta’s father, who had been living in a nursing home for the elderly, it is a unique documentary that redefines human dignity from an unexpected angle. The 11th Jun Miki Award, another prize targeting works exhibited by newcomers, was presented to Gim Eun Ji for “ETHER”.

In the Photo City Sagamihara Awards, Eiji Ina won the Sagamihara Photo Award for his photographic collection “Emperor of Japan” (Nazraeli Press); the Sagamihara Newcomer’s Award was presented to ERIC for “GOOD LUCK CHINA” (Akaakasha) and Osamu Funao for “Kamisama Hotokesama (Gods and Buddhas)” (Tosei-Sha).

The Higashikawa Japanese Artist Prize was awarded to Toshio Shibata, while Naoki Ishikawa received the Higashikawa Newcomer’s Prize.

The “3.3 m²” exhibition, which has become a gateway to success for young photographers, was re-launched under a new name: the 1-WALL Exhibition. The winner of the first exhibition under the new name, which is open to members of the general public, was Shimai Nakayama, for her unique photographic style.

The Canon-sponsored New Cosmos of Photography Grand Prize was awarded to Misato Kuroda for “He is··· .”, while the Epson Color Imaging Contest 2009 Grand

Prix went to Ayumi Tanikawa for “Picture Book” . The 2009 Visual Arts Photo Award was presented to Jiro Nomura for “Faraway Eyes” . Mr. Nomura overcame a mental crisis by taking up photography, and he has published a photographic collection, also entitled “Faraway Eyes” , as well.

On the whole, open exhibitions showed a slight but noticeable trend towards settling into a groove. Perhaps the time is soon coming when a major shakeup will be necessary.

Publication of Photographic Collections

Over the past few years, Akaakasha has become a leader in the publication of photographic collections, and this momentum continued in FY2009. Shinryo Saeki’s collection, “Greetings” , is a photographic series developed over nearly ten years following the photographer’s debut in 2001, when he was awarded the New Cosmos of Photography Grand Prize. The viewer’s eyes are drawn to the work’s immense expressiveness backed by a bright sense of impermanence typical of Mr. Saeki, who is a certified Shingon Buddhist priest.

Two photographic collections by Kozue Takagi, “MID” and “GROUND” , project a sense of the photographer’s ability already to create large-scale works, despite her youth (she was born in 1985). However, of the photographic collections published by Akaakasha in 2009, Aya Fujioka’s “I Don’ t Sleep” left the strongest impression. Centering on family photographs taken in the photographer’s home town of Kure City in Hiroshima, the collection presents captures the bizarre texture of raw human behavior, projecting an impact power that hits you so vividly you wince reflexively.

Akaakasha also published two photographic collections intended as reviews of Japan’s modern photographic history: “Yasuzo Nojima Photographic Collection” and “Japanese Photobooks of the 1960s and 70s” . The latter is a particularly important publication that will provide basic material for future photographic research, presenting as it does a collection of photographs selected from the library of Ryuichi Kaneko (one of the world’s foremost collectors, possessing more than 20,000 photobooks) accompanied by detailed explanatory notes and data. There is also tremendous interest amongst overseas photographic enthusiasts in photographic collections from this era, which could be called the “Golden Age” of Japanese photobooks, and English and French editions of “Japanese Photobooks of the 1960s and 70s” were published at the same time. The year 2009 was also a year in which this movement to reevaluate and reconstruct Japan’s modern photographic history became clearly visible. Another work that could be described as invaluable was

“KOJIMA Ichiro SHASHIN SHUSEI” (Inscript) that shines the spotlight on Ichiro Kojima, who shot high-contrast images of the northern lands and the people who live there during the 1950s and 1960s. Similarly, “Photographers’ Gallery Press No.8: Kenzo Tamoto” (Photographers’ Gallery) —which records some 496 images centering on the “pioneering photographs” of Kenzo Tamoto, who was active in Hakodate, Hokkaido, during the late Edo Era and the Meiji Era — was also an excellent project presenting a comprehensive picture of the half-forgotten “Northern Giants” .

Various other high-quality photographic collections were also published in quick succession. From the perspective of photobook publication, the year 2009 was surely a most fruitful year. Ryudai Takanori’s “Otoko-no-Nori-kata (How to contact a man)” (Akio Nagasawa Publishing) is the culmination of a series of photographs portraying male nudity by a brilliant photographer who has been actively holding exhibitions of late and was the recipient of the 31st Ihei Kimura Award. His approach of staring straight at the men’s bodies and, moreover, meticulously rendering body details is something that surely has rarely been taken before. His work could also be called the discovery of a new beauty and eroticism. The same publisher also published two photographic collections, monochrome and color, of the works of Toshio Shibata: “A View” and “For Grey” . The printing in both these works is highly precise, making them especially impressive collections.

Masayuki Yoshinaga’s “Group Portraits of Japan” (Little More Books) is a work of exertion wrapping up a series of photographs of various groups of Japanese people in the form of commemorative photographs taken by Mr. Yoshinaga over these past 10 or so years. From biker gangs and nightclub hostesses to the staff of the Yokohama Museum of Art, the groups of people depicted in these photographs can be said to be direct microcosms of modern Japanese society. “House” (Foil), by Ichiro Ogata and Yu Ogata, was also a documentary work presenting a unique perspective. Comprising six sections — “Namibia: Internal Sand Dunes” , “China: Western-Style Village” , “Greece: Dovecotes” , “Okinawa: Constructivism” , “Mexico: Ultra-Baroque” , and “Japan: Samurai Baroque” — the collection seeks to uncover form of pathos and creativity contained within architectural structures.

Published posthumously, Yoshiko Seino’s “Everywhere/Gather Yourself/Stand” (Osiris) was another photographic collection that lingers in the heart. Although the photographs depict unexceptional, everyday scenes, images enter the eye at a borderline distance, the scenes suffused with a bizarre sense of tension that makes the viewer want to throw the images back. For her photographic collection “PARK CITY” (Inscript), Keiko Sasaoka turned her camera onto the area around Peace Memorial

Park in the center of Hiroshima, where she grew up. This collection of images in which the major part of the image has been obscured by a patch of dark shadow can be seen as an attempt by a member of the young generation born in 1978 to carry on the memory of “Hiroshima” .

Amongst photographic collections by mid-career and veteran photographers, Hiromi Nagakura’s “Crossing the Earth” and Kishin Shinoyama’s “NUDE BY KISHIN” (Asahi Press) drew attention. The former is the culmination of the work of a documentary photographer regarded as being at the peak of his prime, ranging from the 1980s up to the present. The photographer’s strongly felt mission to convey to readers the positive message of his own experiences is apparent throughout the collection. The latter is a tour de force that brings together all the nude works of the photographer, which could be called his life’s work since the 1960s, and overflows throughout with the message of the praise of life. However, due to the inclusion of photographs depicting nude models in the street in his latest work, “20XX TOKYO” (Asahi Press), which was published around the same time as “NUDE BY KISHIN” , in November Mr. Shinoyama’s office was searched (and the case subsequently sent to the public prosecutor’s office) on suspicion of public indecency. That the photographing of nudity in the streets could become more difficult when it was rarely treated as a problem previously can be seen as an expression of the siege mentality and insecurity shrouding society as a whole.

Staging of Photographic Exhibitions

Photography exhibitions at art museums featured many well-crafted projects and content was, I believe, rich compared to typical years as well. Japanese art museums began collecting and exhibiting photographic works in earnest in the late 1980s, and now, after some 20 years have passed, it seems that we have reached the point where an audience is finally growing and curators have finally acquired planning ability.

Particularly striking is the review of Japan’s modern photographic history, as mentioned in “The Publishing of Photographic Collections” section above. Representative of these are two retrospective exhibitions of the work of Yasuzo Nojima, “Modern Japan through Nojima’s Lens” (July 28th to August 23rd) and “Shozo no Kakushin (Core of the Portrait)” (September 29th to November 15th), which were held at the National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, and the Shoto Museum of Art, Shibuya Ward, Tokyo, respectively. These ambitious exhibitions not only review the work of Yasuzo Nojima on the 120th anniversary of his birth, but also shine the spotlight on new aspects of the photographer’s life, such as his friendships with other

artists of his age and his interest in modernism. The “Photographs and Paintings in Modern Japanese Art” exhibition (June 27th to August 23rd), held at the Museum of Modern Art, Hayama, was another exhibition for which planning ability was conspicuously high. With the theme of photographic and pictorial art exchange from the end of the Edo Period through the Meiji Period onwards, the exhibition has been held several times in the past, but this particular showing can be said to have been groundbreaking in both qualitative and quantitative terms. This was also true of the Yasuzo Nojima exhibitions and the “IWATA NAKAYAMA: Reconstructing a Master Heritage” exhibition held at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography (December 13th, 2008 to February 8th 2009), and the catalogs for these exhibitions will no doubt usefully serve as basic materials for research.

Breaking out of the frameworks of Japanese photographic history and art history, the Hiroshi Sugimoto exhibition “History of History” (April 14th to June 7th), which traveled from the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa to the National Museum of Art, Osaka, tackled the epic theme of examining the history of humankind’s “watching” . In addition to Mr. Sugimoto’s original photographic works, the dynamic venue structure exhibited paleontological fossils dating back several hundred million years and antique art collected by the photographer himself, showing the ever-widening breadth of his interests. Nonetheless, in his latest work, a photographic series entitled “Lightning Fields” , Mr. Sugimoto fixes artificial lightning bolts using a photogram, attempting an experiment to confirm the origin of photographic expression. His versatile abilities have also been displayed in the field of architecture; he designed the interior and inner courtyard of the newly constructed Izu Photo Museum in Clematis-no-Oka on the outskirts of Mishima City in Shizuoka Prefecture. For the museum’s inaugural exhibition, “Nature of Light” (October 26th to March 16th 2010), the latest works in Mr. Sugimoto’s “Lightning Fields” series as well as “Photogenic Drawings” created by reprinting negatives left by William Henry Fox Talbot, a pioneer of photography. Hiroshi Sugimoto’s reputation for his proactive endeavors is growing both in Japan and abroad, and in 2009 he was the first photographer to win the Praemium Imperiale in honor of His Imperial Highness Prince Takamatsu in the painting category.

This year was also big with exhibitions by other mid-career and veteran photographers featuring rich, deep content. The Yutaka Takanashi exhibition “Field Notes of Light” was held at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo (January 20th to March 8th). This rich, extensive exhibition follows the trail of this exceptional “seeing pedestrian” from his debut work “Somethin’ Else” (1960) to his latest

work, “Silver Passin’ ” (2008), a collection of photographs shot from bus windows, in approximately 250 works. Miyako Ishiuchi’s “Infinity: Where the Body Goes” exhibition (shown at the Museum of Modern Art, Gunma from April 25th to June 14th) was also the culmination of a photographer’s work that persistently pursues the body and traces left thereon, from “1 · 9 · 4 · 7” (1997-1999), which was a turning point for her, to the “Hiroshima” series (2008-2009). The Kazuyoshi Nomachi exhibition, “Pilgrimage to Sacred Places” (March 28th to May 17th) and Keizo Kitajima exhibition “1975-1991” (August 29th-October 18th) were both held at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography. Although the styles of these two exhibitions contrasted sharply — a documentary of outlying regions versus urban snapshots — they also shared an approach of confronting their photographic subjects front-on. Also shown at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography was the Koichi Inakoshi exhibition “Mind’s Eye” (August 20th to October 12th), a profound exhibition of monochrome snapshots that seemed somehow melancholy, a feeling perhaps intensified by the fact that Mr. Inakoshi passed away in February. Another fascinating exhibition was “Perception - Changes in Time and Field” (held at the National Art Center, Tokyo, from May 27th to July 27th) by Hitoshi Nomura, a photographer frequently praised for his work in the sphere of modern art. In these works, which visualize the movement of the moon and sun through photography, photographs are used as devices for receiving messages from the cosmos.

However, of all the photographic exhibitions shown in art museums this year, the one that probably stood out the most was Shomei Tomatsu’s “Hues and Textures of Nagasaki” exhibition (held at the Nagasaki Prefectural Museum from October 3rd to November 29th). Since the 2000s, Mr. Tomatsu has changed over completely from analog to digital in all aspects of his work, from photographing to printing. In this exhibition, a powerful force to rattle and tear up viewers of the works has been created by taking snapshots “walking around” Nagasaki City photographed over a 30-year span beginning in the 1970s and interspersing them with photographs of relics of the atomic bombing preserved at the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum, displaying them in a disorderly manner and rearranging them so as to break up groups based on year photographed and themes. The digital prints emphasizing primary hues, bright to the eyes, were also startling, but Mr. Tomatsu attempted an even more radical experiment in this exhibition: he took photographs from “Bamboo Showing Heat Imprints” and other works photographed in the 1980s and digitally combined them with contemporary scenes. It is extremely difficult to imagine that this drive to take huge steps away from conventional documentary methodology is that of a photographer fast

approaching 80 years of age.

Amongst young photographers, the joint exhibition by photographer Rika Noguchi and painter Yoko Matsumoto entitled “The Light” (held at the National Art Center, Tokyo from August 19th to October 19th) and the “Taisho (Contrast)” exhibition by Masafumi Sanai (held at the Taro Okamoto Museum of Art, Kawasaki, from October 10th, 2009 to January 11th, 2010) also drew attention. Rika Noguchi is a female photographer who has been steadily advancing her career, receiving the Japanese Education, Science and Sports Minister’s Art Encouragement Prize for New Artists in 2002 and other awards. She creates large-scale scenic photographs that seem to free and expand the imagination of humans to outer space. The “Light” exhibition presented approximately 100 of Ms. Noguchi’s representative works ranging from her 1990s-era “Fujiyama” (1997) to her most recent collection, “Insects and Light” (2009), including installations using light tables. Masafumi Sanai is one of the most popular photographers amongst the young generation today, including his photographic work for magazines and advertising. The “Contrast” exhibition is centered on works from a series published under Mr. Sanai’s own “Taisho” (“Contrast”) label, which he founded in 2008. Its unique composition features large wooden tables placed in the large space within the art museum and scattering over them approximately 700 photographic prints. Since the prints could be touched and looked at directly, exhibition visitors were able to experience a rhythmical dynamism that seemed to draw the body into the photographs’ world.

Various exhibitions were held, not only in art museums, but also in gallery spaces. Particularly striking were galleries specializing in modern art and other exhibition spaces with a slightly different taste from conventional manufacturer-operated photographic galleries. The Rat Hole Gallery, operated by the apparel manufacturer Hysteric Glamour, held heavyweight exhibitions one after the other, showing Daido Moriyama’s “Hokkaido” (December 19th, 2008 to February 8th, 2009); Keizo Kitajima’s “Portraits” (May 22nd to July 5th); and Nobuyoshi Araki’s “POLART 6000” (July 17th to August 20th) and publishing thick photographic collections for each exhibition. Elsewhere, increasing number of galleries has been actively organizing displays of photographic works, such as the TARO NASU GALLERY, Gallery Koyanagi, and SHUGOARTS. Photographic works have settled completely into the “modern art” category and new layers of viewers and customers are developing.

International and Other Activities

In 2009, few exhibitions held overseas introduced the works of Japanese

photographers. This was no doubt a symptom of the continuing aftershocks in the wake of the global economic downturn. The 53rd International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale included Miwa Yanagi's photographic work "Windswept Women" . This series was also shown at the National Museum of Art, Osaka in a solo exhibition, also entitled "Windswept Women (Po-po Nyang nyang!)" (June 20th to September 23rd). Ms. Yanagi has a notably active year in 2009, holding another solo exhibition, entitled "My Grandmothers" , at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography (March 7th to May 10th). Moreover, Rinko Kawauchi won the 2009 ICP (International Center of Photography, New York) Infinity Award for Art Photography, while Lieko Shiga was the 2009 ICP Infinity Award Winner for Young Photographer. These awards are known as the Academy Awards of the photographic world, and this was the first time that two Japanese photographers have received Infinity Awards simultaneously.

The following people who were significant contributors to the world of photography passed away in 2009: Hisae Imai (photographer; passed away on February 17th aged 78); Osam Hiraki (photographic critic and Kyushu Sangyo University professor; passed away on February 24th aged 59); Koichi Inakoshi (photographer; passed away on February 25th aged 68); Issei Isshiki (photographer; passed away on April 10th aged 73); Kon Sasaki (nature photographer; passed away April 13th aged 90); Katsumi Sunamori (Okinawa-born photographer; passed away on June 23rd aged 57); Kenshichi Heshiki (Okinawa-based photographer; passed away on October 3rd aged 61); and Naoya Sugiki (advertising photographer; passed away on December 18th aged 80). May they rest in peace.