

HOLIDAY

INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL AND STYLE REVIEW

THE JAPAN ISSUE

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by Ivan Vartanian

IN BETWEEN BLACK AND GRAY

Japanese Photography after World War II

● Japan's defeat in the World War II not only left the country's economy in tatters but also radically redefined its position on the global stage, fundamentally altering its self-image. The Empire of the Sun once expanded its dominion to various territories of Asia with an aggression that was akin to Manifest Destiny. This all came to an abrupt and sobering halt with the close of the war. What had once been sacred now became mortal, and the doctrines of expansion were replaced by the credos of U.S. occupying forces in post-war Japan. It is in this climate that legendary photographers Ken Domon and Ihei Kimura espoused a definitive purism in photojournalism, jettisoning any sense of the propaganda that had been quite visible in printed media up until then. For post-war photographers of Japan, the unfiltered, unadulterated presentation of truth became the prime directive of their craft.

It was some 20 years until photographers such as Shomei Tomatsu, Eikoh Hosoe and Kikuji Kawada were able to address the war, the country's culpability in it and how a new Japanese identity had taken shape. In the work of these three photographers, the distinction between *record* and *document* is important. For hardliners, such as Domon, the photographer needs to remain an omnipresent eye recording events without involvement in the world that is happening before him. The subject of his photography must remain oblivious to the presence of the camera and the photographer. The resulting images are windows into otherwise inaccessible worlds. Decades later, when Shomei Tomatsu took images of the American military base in Japan, he presented photographs that were deeply infused with his own ideas and feelings, plainly positioning himself in the center of his pictures. This was not an egocentric move; rather, Tomatsu was presenting a fragmentary view of the world. Instead of trying to capture and contain the world in one frame in one moment, Tomatsu introduced the idea of presenting multiple moments, which successfully communicated the complexity of telling any story, especially one involving matters of national identity.

The documents that Tomatsu presented in his epic photo book *Nihon* (1967) show the extent to which the nation was indelibly changed by the presence of the American military. While the infrastructure that MacArthur introduced did modernize Japan, a considerable degree of Japanese-ness was lost in the process. But this loss was a mere lament; it was a convoluted matter, as Kikuji Kawada draws out in his seminal photo book *The Map* (1965). Japan's role in the war and the repercussion of the ensuing years was not a simple, linear narrative. Kawada's photograph of a muddied flag of Japan is a symbol



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1. Shomei Tomatsu, Card Game, Zushi, Kanagawa, 1964
Gelatin-silver print. © Shomei Tomatsu - INTERFACE. Courtesy of Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo



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2. Kiyoji Otsuji, *Pierrot lunaire*, 1955
 © Seiko Otsuji. Courtesy of Musashino Art University Museum & Library, Tokyo,
 Taka Ishii Gallery, Seiko Otsuji, Musashino Art University Museum & Library, Tokyo
3. Shigeo Gocho, *Self and others*, 1977
 © Hiroichi Gocho. Courtesy MEM, Tokyo
4. Nobuyoshi Araki, *Sentimental Journey / Winter Journey*, 1991
 © Nobuyoshi Araki. Courtesy of Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo

of how vexed and entangled the political narrative had become as well as what it meant to be Japanese in the first place.

In Eikoh Hosoe's photographs, from the series *Embrace*, there is certainly some degree of solace and comfort. As a child during the war, Hosoe was relocated from Tokyo to Japan's north to be kept safe. It is there that he learned firsthand about the nation's agrarian and the story of *kamaitachi*, a weasel-like creature that lives among the rice fields. As an adult, Hosoe returned to Japan's north with the Butoh pioneer Tatsumi Hijikata, and they created a series of work titled after the invisible creatures. Hijikata enacted the embodiment of the *kamaitachi*. Even though these creatures are mythic, Hosoe was able to reconstruct a document of his childhood experience of the war and use photography to see what is otherwise invisible. The photographs from *Embrace* extend this function of photography to capture the unseeable. The stark contrast between dark and pale skin tones represents a dynamic balance between Dionysian and Apollonian impulses. The use of a dichotomy to create tension was also employed in his series *Man and Woman*, which also cast dancer Hijikata as the symbolic man of the series. These pictures of Hijikata are what prompted Yukio Mishima to invite Hosoe to photograph him as well.

The images of Mishima were multiple exposures and heavily staged productions that clustered the male nude with layers, textures and dreamlike compositions that had little resemblance to everyday reality. Indeed, the absurd was prevalent in the arts at this time. Hosoe's assistant on the shoot with Mishima was a young Daido Moriyama, who would also later become a regular photographer for the performance and theater troupe Tenjo Sajiki, led by the playwright and artist Shuji Terayama. In a way, as performance spaces were no longer localized solely on the stage but spread out to the streets, back alleys and—in the case of Hosoe's *Kamaitachi* series—the countryside, the camera became not only a tool to document the actions of the performers but also a part of the production. The performative quality of theater was seeping into the very fabric of the photography itself.

In the midst of this carnival of forms and ideas, photography became both a tool for documentation as well as an expressive means of creativity. Several photographers helped to blur the line between realism and non-realism, including Daido Moriyama and Issei Suda. In Moriyama's photographs of everyday scenes, ordinary views of city centers look like alien planets. There was now a sense of the world around us not being as it appears, and of the camera as a tool to tease out the difference between our socially reinforced self-perceptions and whatever reality there is to be seen in its true form. This yields some slightly awkward compositions that are at times out of focus or grainy. The photograph and the process of making the photograph is a self-aware event and part of the image's composition. The significance to the viewer is that it keeps us aware that an image is in itself a fabrication and self-awareness may be our one saving grace. Unlike the self-contained completeness of cinema, for example, the complicated structuring of a photograph points



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back to reality. It is a bit paradoxical: seemingly absurd images reference reality more closely than so-called finished compositions. Issei Suda's photographs of in-between moments also get at this. His no-finder approach (taking exposures randomly and then later making selections from his contact sheets) was a way to prevent himself from pursuing pre-conceived and pre-determined pictures. What could the camera see that we miss?

In Hiroshi Yamazaki's series *Heliography*, the sun is like a knife cutting a line in the composition, providing an "interruption" and a focus of organization. Yamazaki's use of extended exposure time to record the movement of the sun across the sky is only possible with the use of the camera apparatus and photosensitive chemistry. Photography permits us to see something that the human eye cannot directly access and, by extension, Yamazaki's work points to natural phenomena that are not only beyond our ability to perceive but also to comprehend in a direct manner. By keeping the components of his composition to a minimum, Yamazaki is able to incorporate time and a meditative quality of persistence and patience. Nonetheless, there is an anti-human quality to his photographs; despite the seemingly tranquil horizon line, the absence of man draws on a dystopian impulse that is underscored by the sun's slash across the sky.

Kiyoji Otsuji is best known for his writing on and teaching. While his background is based in commercial photography and design, he founded the experimental collective Jikken Kobo, an interdisciplinary avant-garde assembly of artists, musicians and thinkers. His photography is infused with an experimental practice that leads to some surprising choices of subject and formations in composition. Otsuji clearly sets the stage for inviting a metatextual dialogue about photography with images that are simultaneously strong and lack resolution. One of Otsuji's students was Shigeo Gocho. Where Otsuji worked in a terrain prescribed by concepts and ideas, Gocho's work was direct and grounded in the everyday. His compositions draw their strength from the photographer's established closeness or distance with his subjects. In that dynamic, there is a tinge of melancholy because the people of his immediate surroundings have a slightly ambivalent stance toward the photographer.

On the other hand, Nobuyoshi Araki's relationships with his subjects go to an opposite extreme. Araki's physical presence in his own compositions makes him not only the observer but also the observed. He took this idea further by using his camera as a tool to insert himself, both metaphorically and literally, into the subject of his work. In this sense, the vast majority of Araki's work can be seen as autobiographical. His use of digitally imprinted dates in his images has many functions. It not only returns photography to its original purpose as a tool to record events, it also cheapens it. Elevated images that are made for the purpose of serving as art are less powerful than the immediacy of images that are made for loved ones. One's immediate reality—the love of a wife, the death of a family member, one's own mortality—is the ultimate subject for this photographer whose signature is the passionate belief that photography can be a vessel for the heart to express itself simply and powerfully. **THE END**



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5. Shomei Tomatsu. Untitled (Henoko, Okinawa), from the series *Chewing Gun and Chocolate*, 1969. Gelatin-silver print. © Shomei Tomatsu - INTERFACE. Courtesy of Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo

6. Shuji Terayama. From the series *Inugamike no hitobito*, 1975. © Shuji Terayama, Terayama World, Henrix Terayama

7. Issei Suda, 1976. © Issei Suda. Courtesy Artist/Miyako Yoshinaga Gallery, New York and Zen Foto Gallery, Tokyo