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# UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts

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## ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is based within the Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne, Australia. The journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

# Editorial

**Shalini Ganendra**

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Director, SGFA

Guest Editor

## INTRODUCTION

The ‘Contemporary’ embraces the dynamic of the current. Thus, contemporary thought should also ideally encourage multidisciplinary curiosity, encounter and engagement. This multidisciplinary dynamic, fuelled by creativity, is the platform for the Vision Culture Lecture program (‘VC Lectures’), launched in 2010 by Shalini Ganendra Fine Art (‘SGFA’), in Malaysia, with the endorsement of the UNESCO Observatory. Over this short and enriching period, the VC Lectures have developed an informing presence in the region, fostering meaningful global discourse and cultural encounter, to inform the Contemporary.

SGFA is a pioneering cultural organization, embracing an eclectic and quality sensibility for collecting, consideration, capacity building and place making. We value new visuals - whether for materiality, concept or culture - and multidisciplinary processes in their creation. In addition to the VC Lectures and exhibition program, SGFA has: an artist residency program (the ‘Vision Culture Art Residency’); an arts management residency for university students (the ‘Exploring East Residency’); and the PavilionNOW project which celebrates local architects, contemporary design and materiality. Through these programs and a growing interest in emerging regions, we delight in the increasing international engagement with our represented areas of South East Asia and Sri Lanka.

Over twenty three speakers have participated in the VC Lectures since their inception, each invited because of eminent reputations and notable contributions within respective fields. The lecture module involves free public talks at the SGFA's award winning green space (designed by Ken Yeang), Gallery Residence, with external lectures often hosted by other local institutions and organized by SGFA. Participating curators generally conduct portfolio reviews with local artists, learning more about regional geopolitics and art practices. Strong press coverage enables outreach beyond the urban populace, as does active social and digital media. Speakers stay at the Gallery Residence and enjoy vernacular space that embraces natural ventilation and cooling systems, elegant aesthetic and greening philosophies. The VC Lecture program is as much about cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary encounters as it is about content – all defining platforms for SGFA's exhibition programming as well.

The eleven luminaries published in this peer-reviewed UNESCO Observatory journal were selected for a variety of reasons including expertise. They are: Sir Roy Calne (award winning surgeon and artist, UK); Christopher Phillips (Curator, International Center of Photography, NYC); Anoma Pieris (Associate Professor at the Department of Architecture, University of Melbourne); Susan Cochrane (curator and authority on Pacific Art); Volker Albus (Professor of Product Design at the University of Arts and Design Karlsruhe, Germany); Michiko Kasahara (Chief Curator at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, Japan); Matt Golden (Artist/Curator); Gregory Burgess (Architect, Order of Australia); Beth Citron (Curator, Rubin Museum NYC); Oscar Ho (curator and academic, HK); and Brian Robinson (Torres Island artist and curator, Australia).

Sir Roy Calne speaks of personal experiences using art to nurture empathy in his medical practice and his own passion for creating. Christopher Phillips, the pioneering curator credited with introducing Chinese contemporary photography to the United

States, writes about an important exhibition that he curated at the International Center of Photography. Anoma Pieris considers the impact of modernism on architecture in South Asia, and analyses supportive political and social ideologies, while Gregory Burgess tackles the place of architecture in creating a sense of individual and community belonging. Volker Albus, playfully but seriously asks us to consider the role of designers as technical and social mediators. Michiko Kasahara adeptly reviews challenges faced by successful contemporary Japanese photographers in addressing and reflecting Japanese culture, real and perceived. Susan Cochrane explores cultural ownership of Pacific Art through the use of terminology and context. Brian Robinson writes about his personal cultural narrative as a Torres Island artist. Beth Citron shares insights on Francesco Clemente's acclaimed *'Inspired by India'* exhibition which opened at the Rubin Museum in 2014. Oscar Ho speaks to the challenges of curatorship and requirements to sharpen its impact and discipline. Matt Golden shares the visual journey of his art alter-ego, Juan Carlos, with special focus on experiences in Malaysia. We bring to you a wonderful mix of multi-disciplinary and cultural discussions that show the exhilarating impact of this program.

The Vision Culture Program enters its sixth year and we look forward to its continuing impact as a pivotal program to foster meaningful global discourse. We have forged strong friendships and benefitted from cross cultural discovery thereby building platforms for more informed understanding and appreciation of our world.

Many thanks to Lindy Joubert, Editor-in-Chief of the UNESCO Observatory journal, and her marvelous team, for supporting this project from its inception; to SGFA's Exploring East Residents who assisted with editing these texts and most importantly, the amazing Vision Culture Lecture participants who have fostered knowledge, encounter and consequently, the Contemporary.

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# somewhere between me and this world – contemporary Japanese photography

## AUTHOR

**Kasahara Michiko**

Chief Curator

Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography

## ABSTRACT

Japan is enveloped in gloom. I do not think it can be simply explained away as the result of the massive earthquake-tsunami and nuclear crisis. Rather I feel this is the end result of the system Japan adopted after the Second World War, which came to be symbolized by the bubble economy, a system of untrammelled capitalist values and economic performance, of bureaucratic control and focus on the construction industry, of politicians only interested in securing their vested interests. We are finally finding ourselves unable to keep up, unable to accept diversified values and their desperate struggles are what give rise to the feeling of despair that is gripping the nation.

Sharing this general unease and irritation, while unable to avoid questioning the merit of simplification, contemporary artists find themselves confronted with the problem of what form of expression they should aim for. If we accept that contemporary art should “reflect the present and offer a premonition of the future”, then what sort of work would it be?

This is the essay on contemporary Japanese photographers who confront and struggle working in somewhere between them and this world.

## BIOGRAPHY

Michiko Kasahara, an established authority in Japanese photography, began her work with the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography back in 1989 as a curator. After a four year term at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, she returned to the Metropolitan Museum as the Chief Curator in 2006, which she has been leading since.

People like to talk about the ‘two lost decades’ in Japan but this is not an expression I feel comfortable with. I realize that the ‘two lost decades’ refers to the last decade of the twentieth and first decade of the twenty-first centuries, when looked at from an economic viewpoint, but what I dislike about it is the feeling of nostalgia it seems to express for the period prior to the nineties. The stagnation of consumption and investment resulting from deflation; the deterioration of the job market, leading to a rise in temporary workers; the growing disparity in income; the vast government deficit; the decreasing birthrate and aging population; the sudden appreciation of the yen and falling stock prices, and as if that were not bad enough, the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake and the Fukushima nuclear accident. Every time I open the newspaper in the morning it makes me depressed and when I turn on the television I am confronted with politicians or senior officials from the power company, making me so angry that I immediately change channels. There can be no denying that Japan is in the grip of a sense of despair and unease, but I still do not believe that the last twenty years were ‘lost’. While I would much rather we did not experience the earthquake and particularly the nuclear accident, that is not to say that I would like to go back to the way things were twenty years ago.

Furuichi Noritoshi, a twenty-six-year-old sociologist, made a study of the Japanese young people who are reputed to be

‘unfortunate’ due to the wealth-gap that exists between full-time and temporary workers combined with the aging of the population, increasing the burden on the working population, but he has come to the conclusion that in fact ‘young Japanese are happy’. ‘[According to the government-sponsored ‘National Public Life Survey’] 70% of Japan’s young people are satisfied with their lives. This is a higher percentage than in any other segment of society. For thirty-year-olds it is 62.5%, for forty-year-olds it is 58.3%, and for fifty-year-olds it drops further to 55.3%. The elder generations who worry about young people are themselves much less satisfied with their lives than the young are themselves. Moreover, the current life satisfaction rate for young people is higher than it was in previous surveys of people in their twenties.’ Furuichi analyzed previous theories on young people and came to the conclusion that they look for small happiness with their friends and are satisfied with the ‘now/here’, but at the same time they feel trapped in the monotony of everyday life, and feel uneasy about society or the future. As a result, he refers to this generation ‘Happy Young People of the Despairing Country.’

What was ‘lost’ during the last two decades was trust in large organizations and systems with vested interests and the values upon which they are based. Finance capitalism, bureaucracy, the patriarchal system, the two-party political system, the big-business oriented society, globalization, market centricity... people began to question for whose sake these really existed. Politicians, business people, bureaucrats and the media, these people all have a vested interest in the status quo and increasingly, their words appear to be aimed solely at preserving their own positions. The ‘two lost decades’ is an expression coined in self-pity by the people who had enjoyed authority and economic superiority but have since been discredited, lamenting and reminiscing on the ‘good old days’. The entire system was designed for their benefit, but ‘women and children’ who were never in any position to enjoy authority or profit,

had nothing to lose. The system has not changed to match the changes in social conditions or people's consciousness and it is the desperate adhesion to the values of the old system that has lost all credibility that has led to people feeling suffocated and uneasy. Having become sick of the society and politics of the 'despairing country', young people have forsaken it, searching humbly and steadily for happiness in the 'now/here'.

This text was written originally for the 'contemporary Japanese photography, *somewhere between me and this world*' exhibition in 2012 – 2013, which featured five women photographers who were born between 1972 and 1979. I revised the text adding one more artist Shiga Lieko. Although they do not belong to the generation above the 'Happy Young People of the Despairing Country', who are still in their twenties, they all reached adulthood after the collapse of the bubble economy and have only established their careers as artists during the last ten years. Today, when people are experiencing a feeling of stagnation and unease, faced by ever increasing problems while existing values are undergoing a tremendous transformation, these artists look around, struggle with the themes they have faced themselves and work to create their own unique worlds. We hope that by concentrating on the work of six of today's most active up-and-coming artists, we will be able to highlight an aspect of Japan's 'now'.



## **OTSUKA CHINO'S TIME MACHINE**

Otsuka Chino explores the relationship that exists between her and the world. In addition to luring the viewer into the past and present, her works represent the artist's personal confirmation of her past and present, functioning as a device by which we can gain a greater understanding of the world surrounding her.

At first glance, her 'Imagine Finding Me' series (cat. nos. xx) resembles the kind of travel snapshots that everybody has in their photo album. The faded 120 x 180 mm. prints all show a young girl and an adult woman—standing on a sandy beach, eating French bread outside a shop, lying on a bed together, they could be either mother and child or sisters, but when we realize that these are in fact double self-portraits of Otsuka Chino past and present, multiple levels of meaning suddenly rise up within the photographs.

These works are all based on photographs that she or her parents had pasted into the family album. Into these images of the past, she inserts the present-day Otsuka Chino, in a completely natural

fashion. She selects photographs of her younger self then slides in an image of her as she is now, traveling back into the past. Kamakura, Spain, France, Tokyo, Ofuna, London...when she was young, her parents had taken her on various overseas trips. She was a precocious girl and at the age of ten she voluntarily left her primary school in Japan to attend Summerhill free school in the U.K. Finding herself in a foreign country where she initially could not speak the language properly, she experienced living in a boarding school with children and staff from a variety of countries. She played, fought and dressed up to her heart's content, she suffered discrimination, experienced love, was taught the value of work and money, learned the reason for study, thought about the meaning of freedom, was hurt by her parents' divorce and developed her own views on the local atomic power station or war, struggling through each problem as she gradually built up her personal outlook on the world. Her daily conversation became English, she interacted with people of other nationalities and traveled between Japan and the U.K. numerous times, providing far greater opportunity to question her personal identity than if she had been living in Japan. She has written four books of essays describing her experiences from the time she left Japan at age ten, through graduate school in the U.K., until she became independent as an artist. These comprise of extracts from the huge number of letters she exchanged with her family, her diaries, and occasional essays. She must have found that writing allowed her to make clear the source of her problems, to organize her thoughts and to grapple positively with new struggles as they arouse.

Otsuka Chino utilizes the device of photography to produce refined works through which to come to grips with her relationship with the world. Her journeys into the past are not sentimental and do not display a nostalgic atmosphere. In these works, the slightly ill-tempered young girl stands as an independent figure, gazing straight ahead as she does her best to confront the world. The adult Otsuka stands to one side,

looking on affectionately, yet keeping a slight distance. She juxtaposes the young girl with her present self, both of whom are struggling against problems that differ only slightly. In her video work, 'Memoriography' the image of her previous self past fades into the scenery while her present form gradually appears, past and present alternating. Her latest work, 'Photo Album', presents an album devoid of photographs, containing just the triangular photo corners and memos written on the pages. Expressing the accumulation of time, the thoughts of the past that are stimulated by the missing photographs lead to the birth of new memories. What is meant by family, country, words, interpersonal relationships, oneself...? These are questions that nobody can escape from and she continues to confront them without evasions. It is true that as we grow and mature, we are able to find more effective ways of dealing with these problems, but at the same time, the world we are involved with or the breadth of our vision makes our relationship with the world more complicated and more profound. Our sufferings keep updating, they cannot be avoided so we have no choice but to confront them.



## **TAGUCHI KAZUNA'S IMAGES OF WOMEN**

Taguchi Kazuna thinks about looking at the world.

Her works present hazy, vague images of women, sometimes appearing ghostlike or at other times resembling Buddhist Mandalas, with numerous images of the same woman in one picture ('Look how long I've grown waiting for you' (cat. nos. 1). In 'blueness of the blue' (cat. nos. 2) even the outline is vague, the nude figure of a woman appearing in the depths of the blue picture like a ghost. However, the facial expressions and feeling of presence are unforgettable; even when they are vague and covered in a mist, they make a powerful impression. The women are all young, thin and beautiful. They are not Japanese, but again they are not Westerners, they are racially androgynous, but seem strangely mature, their expressions rather stiff, and they are enveloped in a chill atmosphere. It is as if they have undergone cryopreservation, that is the impression we receive when we look at their images, condensed within the chill atmosphere.

Taguchi Kazuna utilizes a variety of tricks in her work. First there is her production technique. She collects fashion magazines then uses the numerous photographs contained in these as a motif to create realistic oil paintings of women. She then photographs these paintings and after repeated experiments through trial and error in the dark room, she produces the finished print.

Her next trick lies in the title. 'At a dead end, in deep' (2009), 'Half in grey' (2009), 'Restoring the thing I've lost' (2009), 'You could call it unique, almost' (2009), 'I'm permeated by a particular thought' (2008), 'Or: overlap' (2008), 'I'll be your mirror' (2008), 'All of my lost memories are inside me' (2008), 'Hair and voice too' (2008), 'Look how long I've grown waiting for you' (2007), 'A bit of anxiety - if I can call it that' (2006), 'I was waiting for you' (2006)... She uses words that make us feel the delicate yet resilient self-confidence characteristic of a young woman. Regarding the titles of her works, Taguchi Kazuna had the following to say in an interview: 'For example, when I give my finished works titles I often use the words "I" / "you." The use of words that don't have fixed referents hints at the idea that humans themselves don't have fixed identities, that "I" and "you" are in fact interchangeable.'

Taguchi Kazuna's works undergo a process of multilayered fiction, leading her to refer to them as 'absent portraits'. By betraying the presupposition of reality inherent in photography, she forces the viewer to question the very act of viewing. Then, as the artist intends, the image created by the media flows out, real and virtual intermingling. The viewer is struck by a fear that they will disappear, and the work become an optical illusion showing a real world in which 'I' and 'you' are interchangeable.

However, at the same time, these works are also undeniably portraits of Taguchi Kazuna. As a woman, she uses her eyes, that she has trained throughout her life from childhood to her late twenties, to select multiple images from fashion magazines which combine to create the motif of her work, these evoke a

sympathetic response in the thoughts and emotions of other women her age, appearing as a portrait of their composite consciousness. Of course, as these portraits are derived from fashion magazines, which represent the basis of the consumer society's image of women, they can also be described as social portraits. As she herself says, just as in life, her method of working resembles staring into the corners of a cave that the light does not reach.



## KIKUCHI TOMOKO'S CHINA

Kikuchi Tomoko has witnessed the rapid changes in China's society and social awareness while simultaneously exploring her own situation.

In her series, 'The way we are' (cat. nos. xx) she focuses on the subject of transgender and drag queens. After graduating from art school in Japan she soon moved to Hong Kong, then in 1999 she moved her base to Beijing where she worked as a photographer, mainly for magazines such as Newsweek or the New York Times. From 2002 she began to work as a still photographer with the famous Chinese film directors, Christopher Doyle and Peter Chan, then in 2005 she became friends with a drag queen named Meimei, allowing her to enter into the private lives of the drag queens and capture them with photography.

When they first met in 2005, China was not willing to accept queens. Many of them were scared of their families learning of their sexuality and had fled their homes in the country to travel to Beijing where they eked out an existence working in gay bars. 'In those days, the queens were shunned by mainstream society, spending their days together in cheap basement apartments before coming out at night to make a living as dancers, singers or comedians in underground gay bars. Many of them were so-called *Beipiao* (Beijing drifters), who had fled their hometowns for Beijing in order to prevent their families from learning their gender identity disorder, but competition was intense and if they could not achieve success, there was nothing left for them but to become a prostitute or the mama-san of male prostitutes. The competition was so fierce that the queens find it difficult to make close friends with each other and successful love affairs are rare; they are cut off from family, work, love, and friendship, numbing their unexpressed emotions through alcohol, sex and drugs.' A few years later, their position underwent a dramatic change, whereas they had once had to eke out a living, hiding in the fringes of society, the next generation were proud of their sexuality and strode boldly down the streets in women's clothing. Kikuchi Tomoko had managed to enter into the underground society in Beijing, then in 2008 she travelled to Chongqing, following a queen who had left Beijing and was now living there with the new generation of queens.

Kikuchi Tomoko's work follows a traditional style of photography. Documentary photographs can be divided into several categories, those that utilize the objectivity of the medium to strive for social improvement; photojournalism that has a high news content, and mainly appears in magazines; photo-documentaries that value the subjectivity of photography, such as those pioneered by Robert Frank; and private documentaries, that focus on the life of the photographer and were originally developed by Nan Goldin or Larry Clark. Kikuchi Tomoko's technique of tracing her subject over a period of several years, carrying out a multi-tiered survey of their situation and recording it in an objective fashion, places her work in the realm of the traditional documentary, but her closeness to her subjects, depicting them as her favorite people, brings it into the realm of the private documentary. The subjects of her work often invite her into their personal space, sometimes even living together, introducing their relatives and revealing their true selves, which are usually hidden behind a mask of thick makeup and gaudy dresses.

They are at the mercy of Chinese society, which is changing at an amazing rate, and their image, as they struggle to come to terms with their own sexuality, may be the same as that of Kikuchi Tomoko. The reason why they have accepted her, revealing their innermost thoughts is because her gaze is the opposite of those who treat them as something 'from a different world'. She sympathizes with them and is bewildered and distressed by their loneliness, the conflict they have with their families, the problems they have in love and interpersonal relationships, the difficulties caused by poverty, drugs or AIDS, and the emptiness felt by the young people. For Kikuchi Tomoko, who left Japan to try and become independent as an artist, as a woman and as a human being in a place where the language, values and customs are completely different from her own, the emotion she feels towards her subjects may well be a kind of camaraderie. She looks through them to see herself. Also, through them she is

able to not only learn about China, but also to think about Japan and see the world.



## KURA MASUMI'S PILGRIMAGE TO ISE

Kura Masumi takes photographs as a way of understanding her own way of looking at things. Sometimes her own viewpoint causes her pain, sometimes its difference to that of others results in confusion, so she pauses to take photographs and find a way forward. In Japan, where society demands a high degree of conformity, it is an act of going against the flow.

Tokyo, Kanagawa, Shizuoka, Aichi, Mie, Shiga, Kyoto, Osaka. 'I gradually began to work westwards from Tokyo, starting with a

day trips until I reached a little way beyond Atami, then making numerous trips of a few days each' She referred to this action as 'Kura's Pilgrimage to Ise'. During the Edo period (1603-1868), travel for the common people was very restricted, but if they said that their object was to make a pilgrimage to the Great Shrine of Ise, it was comparatively easy for them to receive a travel permit. Therefore, the 'pilgrimage to Ise' to find salvation in the next life, was in fact a pretext to go sightseeing. Having become discouraged with her photography, Kura thought 'travel' would provide a new outlook, but at the same time, she was aware that she could not go without her camera so she decided to make a 'pilgrimage' in order to reascertain her eye. It was for this reason that she named the work, 'Pilgrimage to Ise'.

The subjects she captures with her camera are ordinary people who she happens to pass in the street. She uses the techniques of the street snapshot in an artless fashion, while avoiding the trap that it is so easy to fall into when using this style of photography. By this, I refer to the tendency to take a picture for the sole purpose of making it interesting, for instance, to adhere to strange subjects in order to create a photogenic effect. Kura Masumi's snapshots represent the opposite extreme to this kind of intentionality.

A sensitive composition in which a young girl stands in front of a large column, holding down her hair in the strong wind while a man peers around the column from behind to look in this direction. A young woman changing from high heels to sports shoes in the street, a street-seller lost in thought with the bags she is selling spread in front of her, a brief look shared between a young couple lying on the beach...her works all feature sights that can be seen anywhere in daily life, people captured in the moment of doing something that everybody is able to relate to. However, they are all moments that would simply disappear if she had not noticed and captured them on film. They are the result of a chance moment which arises between Kura Masumi's gaze and her subject. She looks back on these chance moments

as a way of confirming her gaze.

Kura Masumi's gaze is definitely not gentle but it is not as cold as she might believe. She loves the people or moments she catches in passing, that she will never meet again. In their simple gestures, expressions or the atmosphere these create, she discerns the strength, difficulty and danger of life today. No two moments, expressions or emotions are the same, they are all different, she is trying to come to terms with an incorrigible 'human', which is to say, herself.



## **SASAOKA KEIKO'S FISHING**

Sasaoka Keiko searches for a type of ideal within the landscape.

In her representative work, 'Park City', she used the city of Hiroshima, where she was born and raised, as her material. She says that after she left the city to go to university, she realized what a strange place Hiroshima was. 'Hiroshima Park is like the Imperial Palace; it is situated in the middle of the city with

everything else built around it. When I thought about it I realized for the first time that this was strange.’ She worked on the ‘Park City’ series for a period of nine years from 2001. Starting with the city during daytime, she moved on to the Peace Memorial Park during the day, then at night, before finishing with photographs of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. The featureless concrete buildings that fill the streets are a sight common to regional cities throughout Japan. Children on school outings can be seen sitting in the park, forming lines while occasionally security guards cross the park, but no matter how many schoolchildren there may be, the photographs of the park during the day possess an atmosphere of emptiness. The same atmosphere is present in the pictures of the park at night, but with an added flavor of danger. The same is true of the Peace Memorial Museum; even though visitors can be seen in the pictures, a feeling of emptiness prevails. In her ‘Park City’, Sasaoka Keiko presents her hometown of Hiroshima as it is today. It is a city like any other in Japan, an empty space, standardized and lacking in distinct personality, but at the same time, it carries the burden of being postwar ‘Hiroshima’ and this results in it presenting a somewhat distorted aspect.

Another series that she worked during the same period does not share the same feeling of emptiness or danger, instead it stands out for a stinging limpidity. Whereas ‘Park City’ consisted of black-and-white photographs, these landscape photographs, that change their title each time they are displayed as a series, are in color. In all of them she has moved away from the city, showing desolate forests, the sea or agricultural scenes. They are beautiful, but cannot really be described as places of scenic beauty—felled trees lie on the ground, a deserted pier enshrouded in mist—they are all intangible views. In her series entitled ‘Fishing’ (cat. nos. xx), we see distant views of fishermen standing in a composition consisting of cliffs, sea and sky. Within the tense atmosphere, the fishermen do not appear special; they merge into the sea, the sky and the cliffs. ‘He swings his rod and casts

his line. His whole being is focused on the slightest movements of the line. A splinter of sunlight runs down the length of the transparent line. The taut line corresponds with the invisible darkness of the sea. Even though it be for only a brief moment, the image of the angler is separated from past and future to become one with the sea.’ In the moment that memories and history envelop her, all the daily events, and anxieties have been cut away, when even her self-consciousness disappears, an ideal landscape that exists somewhere between me and the world emerges and this is what she depicts in her photographs.



## SHIGA LIEKO'S 'RASEN KAIGAN'

Shiga Lieko was born in Aichi Prefecture in 1980 and graduated from London's Chelsea College of Art and Design in 2004. In 2006 the Sendai Mediatheque invited her to visit the city of Sendai to create works there for the 'Re:search' exhibition; this was her first experience of the Tohoku region but it was to determine the future direction of her career. She acted as an artist in residence in Australia and Singapore, resulting in her 'Canary' series (2007); the work she had created while a student was compiled to produce a photo-book entitled 'Lilly'

(2007); in 2008 she received the Kimura Ihee Commemorative Photography Award for promising Japanese photographers, and the following year she received the ICP Award, which is given to young photographers of whom great things are expected internationally. After spending time in London from 2007 to 2008 as part of the Agency for Cultural Affairs' overseas study program for upcoming artists, she found herself drawn back to the 'Tohoku' region.

While she was searching for somewhere to live and work in Miyagi Prefecture, she happened upon a place called Kitakama. In November 2008 she moved to 'Kitakama' in Natori City, Miyagi Prefecture. It was a small, rural village, suffering from depopulation and only about 380 people in 107 families lived there. The average age was between 60 and 65, 60% of the people were involved full- or part-time in agriculture and nearly everybody over 70 lived on land that had belonged to their families for generations. When she first moved into this tightly-knit community, the people described her as being, 'an alien, an extra-terrestrial'. To them, her language was different, her upbringing was different, her age was different, and her experiences were all different. In Japan, the occupation of 'artist' is not widely recognized even in the cities, to say nothing of country villages. They obviously did not know what to make of her. After various complications she set up a studio among the pinewoods and gradually began to build up a relationship with the local people. Looking back over the struggles she went through during her first year, she says, 'I was fascinated by the "Image" of the pinewoods and I tried to see if I could tie my whole body and soul to them.' For the people of Kitakama, this alien being who had suddenly appeared among them became their exclusive photographer, recording the village's various festivals and customs, she did whatever communal tasks were required of her and gradually she began to be accepted. As she made photographic records of the meetings held to 'show respect to the aged' or other village ceremonies, people began to

ask her to take personal, memorial photographs. They treated her to meals. They told her stories about the old days and gradually she began to hear the personal histories of more than 50 people. Stories about the war, old customs, about Kitakama, their personal experiences... 'Don't go anywhere', "My belly is as flat as a field", she picked up all these moving words, listening to them repeatedly on a tape recorder, transcribing the spoken words, sometimes copying them all down by hand then reading them out. She emptied herself and then filled the space with 'Kitakama'. She internalized 'Kitakama' and connected it to her images.

Two years and four months after she moved to Kitakama, on March 11, 2011, a tsunami swept away not only her small studio, but also the whole village of Kitakama. Fifty-three people died and some are still missing. She managed to escape with just the clothes on her back, she initially lived in an emergency shelter with the other local people and even today she remains in temporary housing there.

It was four months later, in July or August after she had moved to her temporary housing, before Shiga Lieko was able to start work again. In June she started a series of ten monthly lectures that were being held in advance of the exhibition that had already been scheduled for the following year at Sendai Mediatheque. This time she involved not only the people of Kitakama, but also the audiences from these lectures in the creation of work for this exhibition.

The greatest impression left by Shiga Lieko's 'Rasen Kaigan' is created by the photographs of huge, luminous white pine tree and rock, set against a black background. The tree or the rock, shining white like a meteorite against a pitch-black space, serve as a boundary between this world and the world of the 'Rasen Kaigan'. The exhibition employs various devices to enhance its visual effect. The people who view it are given a map at the entrance. The work is divided into nine sections that have

names and explanations applied: 1. Photo of the departed; 2. Me, Me, Me; 3. Smile; 4. Where is this? 5. Goodbye (to me in the photograph); 6. Sleep; 7. Skin; 8. Mirror; and 9. Message. The floor of the exhibition space has numbers written on it indicating which section a particular work belongs to. The captions of each work also serve as a key. “portrait of cultivation” (2009), “I lived with a monster” (2012), “I was an alien, 1” (2012), “rasen kaigan 3” (2011), “rasen kaigan 27” (2012), “still unconscious” (2010) “1 whale calf 1” (2012) “where’s the secret” (2010), “meat is meat, fish is fish” (2010), “scarecrow party” (2010), “world map” (2011), “silver haired man” (2012), “going back eating azaleas” (2010), “a wolf” (2011), “I can no longer see” (2011), “garden of tears” (2010), “green tunnel” (2012), “17 rasen kaigan 17” (2012).

However, these captions are not affixed to the actual exhibits, and even if you do not read the explanations on the map and interpret them as the author intended, each overpowering image will summon forth a variety of thoughts.

Each individual work presents a soaring image that contains its own story, while together, they form the single coherent world of the ‘Rasen Kaigan’. Quiet, yet bursting with vigor, coquettish yet pure, fresh yet nostalgic, presenting a sublime sight while retaining their humor, covered in a chill atmosphere while containing heat, resembling a fantasy while keeping their feet planted on the ground. That is the kind of photographs they are.

I believe that Shiga Lieko’s ‘Rasen Kaigan’ represents an epic poem that was created jointly by the artist, Kitakama Village, and the people who live there.