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Re: Japanese photography history

Yokosuka Storytelling

An Interview with Miyako Ishiuchi

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Though part of one of the Provoke generation, Miyako Ishiuchi nevertheless stood alone as a unique talent: one of the few female voices in 1960s and '70s Japanese photography, Ishiuchi brought to her work a deep examination of life in Japan following World War II. Growing up in Yokosuka in the shadow of a substantial American naval base, Ishiuchi found herself in consistent contemplation of the clash of cultures that dominated her community. She

channeled this contemplation into her first major series, *Yokosuka Story* (1976-1977), which paved the way for her ongoing exploration of the themes of time, memory, and the scars, or imperfections, of human existence. This energy has been maintained into her most recent work, including *Mother's* (2000-2005), which was showcased at the Venice Biennale exhibition in 2005, and in the exhibitions of her work, such as the recent show *Postwar Shadows* (J. Paul Getty Museum, 6 October 2015 – 21 February 2016). Tsuyoshi Ito of A/fixed spoke with Ishiuchi about her pursuit of photography and how she found such a fascinating field of exploration.

Miyako Ishiuchi, *Yokosuka Story* #126, from the series *Yokosuka Story*, 1976-77 © the artist

Tsuyoshi Ito (Ito): You were in Yokosuka until I was 19 after graduating from high school, correct?

Miyako Ishiuchi (Ishiuchi): I lived in Yokosuka from elementary school through high school. After my class graduated from high school, my friend got engaged to a sailor. We went to the EM Club to watch a movie and to get to know him. It was my first time going into the naval base there, as an escort of her fiancé. The United States national anthem started playing and everyone in the theater stood up; I felt awkward, though, because I was in Japan but felt out of place.

Ito: Did this cultural disconnect prove discomfoting for you?

Ishiuchi: Incredibly so. I felt out of place living in Yokosuka because I was surrounded by American culture by being close to the base; at the same time, though, I adored American culture.

Ito: What was it like living so close to the naval base? How did this impact your identity?

Ishiuchi: Bases symbolized men to me because of all the assaults that happened to the girls in my city. The fact that I was a woman was carved into my because of this. Women were not allowed to walk along certain streets; why this was the case was not clear, but we assumed it was an unspoken rule to avoid assaults. Photography allowed me to step out of the cage in which these experiences had trapped me.

Miyako Ishiuchi, *Yokosuka Story* #12, from the series *Yokosuka Story*, 1976-77 © the artist

Ito: How long did it take for *Yokosuka Story* to be formed?

Ishiuchi: I was able to debut *Yokosuka Story* quickly. Yokosuka was a very photogenic locale, in part because it had developed much quicker than neighboring cities. Many men came to take pictures of what they saw as the social advancements of the city. I believed, though, that I was the only one that could take photos of the true Yokosuka, the city that men overlooked but that I truly saw given my experiences.

Ito: What made you pick up the camera?

Ishiuchi: I was inspired to start taking photographs around age 26. I was inspired to start in part because my boyfriend at the time was into photography and had all the equipment. I told him “I don’t have money, but I have plenty of time”. Me and my friends would hold galleries, and my photography was praised there. I decided to photograph Yokosuka to face my younger days and to not avoid any longer the harsh truth of what it was.

Ito: How does time and feeling factor into your photographs?

Ishiuchi: To me, photography was the way to connect the realms of the past and the present. I spent half a year taking photography of Yokosuka. Then, I decided to move on from my past and to go travel the world. My next project

was to photograph an apartment house to reflect my past when I lived in one with my family. My photographs are somehow all connected through personal pain and bad memories. Especially my first three projects. I believe that photography can capture time even though none of your five senses can materialize it. I never learned photography from anyone. I was and am very interested in the materialization of time. Time embraces your body, and your body is a cumulative of time.

Ito: In that sense, there is a feeling or meaning in all of them?

Ishiuchi: I don't like to explain my photographs; the photographs should speak for itself. I want people to have their own interpretations of my photographs. It's impossible for people to understand my individual photographs personally because they are from my past and my experiences. I just want people to appreciate the art of my photography as an individual work rather than my personal memento.

Miyako Ishiuchi, *Apartment #50*, from the series *Apartment*, 1977-78 © the artist

Ito: You mentioned the shared theme in your first three projects; what changed for your fourth?

Ishiuchi: By the end of my first three works, I was around 40 so I decided to

photograph the aging of the body. I did not prefer self-portraits, so I began looking for women my age. I ended up working with housewives, and as I photographed them I focused on feet and hands as they showed 40 years of age the most. As I made these photographs, I realized scars were a figment of time, whether on people or a scar in history.

Ito: Tell us about your connection with Kijuki Kawada.

Ishiuchi: I was influenced by Kikuji Kawada's photobook *Chizu (Map)* (first published 1965). I found it to be very beautiful; I later found out it was Hiroshima. I was so enamored I went to Kawada's house to see *Chizu* in person. At that point, I felt a new hope for photography. I realized that photography had merit as an art form; today, I believe it also has a great future.

Ito: How did being a photographer impact your worldview?

Ishiuchi: I campaigned against the Japan-US security treaty through university activist groups behind the barricade for about half a year. I learned much in those four years at university. I quit school in the fourth year to embark on what I wanted to do with my life. Enter my boyfriend's photography equipment, which was just lying around, and I decided to try photography.

Even after only a brief period, I realized the power of conquering every opportunity and making each my own. I believe in taking responsibility and ownership of actions. Although this is a political term, I applied it to my personal self. It made my face my life more seriously. For example, I went to Mexico for a photography trip, and I made the trip for my own advantage. Photography allowed that to happen. Thus my photos became artwork.

Ito: When you were active, I think that the number of female photographers was overwhelmingly small in Japan. What do you think of these small numbers at that time?

Ishiuchi: As a female photographer, I was nearly one of a kind. The beauty of this rarity was that I had freedom to photograph what I wanted. I worked to create my own standing point. I made it a clear point not to forget that I am a woman. I did not have any experiences, good or bad, about being a female photographer. I had to show others that I was a strong woman even though it made me seem harsh and mean. I did not care for how others thought of me.

Miyako Ishiuchi, *Yokosuka Story* #125, from the series *Yokosuka Story*, 1976-77 © the artist

Ito: What are your thoughts on the world of Japanese photography? As an artist, do you feel you must go abroad to succeed?

Ishiuchi: I am not very connected with the Japanese photography world. I once heard someone describe the Japanese photography scene as “boy’s club.” Japan is more domestic; it has a preconceived frame of what photography should be and how it should look. Overseas, this “boy’s club” is less of a hassle. People view photographs very differently there; it is more free and easy-going. Photographers there are seen as artists rather than photographers. People there have more respect and understanding for us.

Ito: What would be your advice for the young artists of Japan today?

Ishiuchi: I see younger people as rivals as well so I do not want to give much advice. I think they can be more free. The history of photography is still very young so it’s possible for them to become a part of it. Do not be trapped in what photography should be. See the world and do not stay in Japan, experience different cultures and people/experiences. The world is very large.

Who We Are



A/fixed is a production of The Japanese Photography Project (JPP), a collaborative effort between Philadelphia-based Project Basho and Kyoto's

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