

# Ishiuchi Miyako

## POSTWAR SHADOWS

Born Fujikura Yōko in the aftermath of World War II, Ishiuchi Miyako spent her formative years in Yokosuka, a Japanese city where the United States established an important naval base in 1945. Attuned to the shadows that American occupation and Americanization cast over postwar Japan, Ishiuchi formed conflicting impressions of Western culture: her love of pop music and foreign films developed alongside her hatred of the base and what it represented.

Ishiuchi studied textile design at Tama Art University in Tokyo in the late 1960s, while the student-led anti-university protest movement swept across Japan. She quit school prior to graduation and ultimately pursued photography upon receiving a camera and photographic equipment in 1975. That same year she exhibited her first photographs under her mother's maiden name—Ishiuchi Miyako—which she adopted as her own. Her highly subjective series *Yokosuka Story*, exhibited in 1977, jolted the photography community and established her career.

For forty years, Ishiuchi has repeatedly woven together the personal and the political. Painful memories associated with Yokosuka inspired works made between 1975 and 1990. Subsequent projects transformed her interests in aging and death into universal concerns facing postwar baby boomers. Her current series *ひろしま / hiroshima* confronts war directly but addresses this challenging subject in delicate depictions of objects that survived the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. Seventy years after that event, Ishiuchi's work reveals the power of bringing the past into the present.



# YOKOSUKA STORY

In 1953 Ishiuchi and her family left their home in Kiryū for Yokosuka, a port city with a large U.S. naval base. Shocked by the prevalence of American culture there, she quickly developed fears of the base, its soldiers, and specific neighborhoods. Harboring these anxieties for years, Ishiuchi viewed Yokosuka as “a place that I thought I’d never go back to, a city I wouldn’t want to walk in twice” after leaving in 1966.\*

But Ishiuchi eventually returned on weekends between October 1976 and March 1977 to photograph the city for her first major project. Filled with emotion and fueled by hatred and dark memories, Ishiuchi traversed the city on foot and by car, chauffeured by her mother who worked as a driver for the U.S. military. Questioned by police multiple times while making this work, Ishiuchi experienced the danger she sensed during childhood.

Using a darkroom she set up in her parents’ home, Ishiuchi printed the photographs on view here for an exhibition at Nikon Salon in Tokyo in 1977. The work features black borders and heavy grain, which represent memories Ishiuchi “coughed up like black phlegm onto hundreds of stark white developing papers.”\*\* With money her father reserved for her wedding, Ishiuchi financed the production of prints, as well as the related publication, *Yokosuka Story*, named after the title of a Japanese pop song.

\*Ishiuchi Miyako, *Yokosuka Story* (Tokyo: Shashin Tsūshinsha, 1979).

\*\*Ibid.



# YOKOSUKA AGAIN

In 1980, feeling that her work in Yokosuka was unfinished, Ishiuchi returned to photograph places not represented in *Yokosuka Story*. For this new project she focused on Honchō—the central neighborhood where the presence of America felt especially concentrated, with the U.S. naval base and EM (Enlisted Men's) Club located there. She consciously targeted the places that terrified her most, including Dobuita Dōri (Gutter Alley), a street populated with bars where American soldiers and prostitutes fraternized. Forbidden to enter it as a child, this street represented the epicenter of Ishiuchi's anxiety—though she tried to photograph there multiple times in the past, she always ran away before she could make a single picture.

For six months Ishiuchi rented an abandoned cabaret on Dobuita Dōri, in which she set up her photographic enlarger to make large-scale prints too big to produce in her darkroom. Then, with the help of friends, she converted the cabaret into an exhibition space, where she displayed a selection of new work. Her project in Yokosuka continued intermittently until 1990, when the dilapidated EM Club was finally razed. The process of making *Yokosuka Again, 1980–1990*, akin to an excavation of deep-seated memories, represents Ishiuchi's final triumph over the conflicting emotions she had for the city where she spent much of her childhood and adolescence.



# APARTMENT

When Ishiuchi exhibited *Yokosuka Story* at Nikon Salon in 1977, the chairman of the Salon's steering committee asked about her next project. Without hesitation, she responded "apartments." Although she had only photographed a few apartment buildings in Yokosuka, Ishiuchi recognized the potential of this subject. For thirteen years she and her family lived in a cheaply constructed postwar building in Yokosuka, inhabiting a tiny apartment with an earthen floor and communal bathroom.

In 1977 Ishiuchi began to seek out similarly derelict apartments in Tokyo and other cities. With the permission of residents, Ishiuchi photographed rooms and interiors in the buildings, occasionally portraying the occupants. Her images inside these cramped quarters reveal the grim condition of each building—peeling paint, dimly lit hallways, and stained walls "steeped in the odor of people who move about"\*—and suggest many stories housed within these living spaces.

Ishiuchi wanted the disparate interiors featured in *Apartment* to feel as though one building contained them. Her desire to create a fictitious place—with different apartments from various locations presented together as one residential complex—met with criticism from traditional documentary photographers, but Ishiuchi ultimately earned the prestigious 4th Kimura Ihei Memorial Photography Award for her book *Apartment*.

\*Ishiuchi Miyako, *Apartment* (Tokyo: Shashin Tsūshinsha, 1978).



# ENDLESS NIGHT

While photographing for *Apartment*, Ishiuchi sensed something “eerie” inside several buildings. She later discovered that those particular locations had formerly functioned as brothels. In 1958 the Japanese government began to enforce an anti-prostitution law, and as a result many red-light districts closed and some brothels became private accommodations or inns. Growing up in Yokosuka, where she passed through a red-light district on her way to school and where her identity as a woman was shaped by the masculine energy that emanated from the U.S. naval base, Ishiuchi felt particularly drawn to this subject.

Intent on photographing red-light neighborhoods across Japan, Ishiuchi started in Tokyo and eventually traveled to Sendai and Ishinomaki in northern Japan, as well as to Osaka, Kyoto, and Nara in the Kansai region. Entering these buildings proved an emotional experience for Ishiuchi, which she described as follows: “The space of the entryway froze me, the intruder, in my tracks. Inhaling it, I felt ill, as if I might vomit.... Though I had only come to take photographs, all of the women who had once inhabited this room came wafting out from the stains on the walls, the shade under the trees, the shine on the well-tread stairs.”\*

\*Ishiuchi Miyako, *Monochrome* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1993), 62.



# 1·9·4·7

1947 is the year of Ishiuchi's birth. It also serves as the title of a series that features other women born that same year. The idea for the project began when Ishiuchi celebrated her fortieth birthday. That occasion prompted her to contemplate how time and experience left traces on her body and the bodies of women her age. She approached friends born in 1947 and asked to photograph them—specifically their hands and feet, as well as their faces. As news of the project spread through word of mouth, Ishiuchi expanded the series to include women she did not know.

Ultimately Ishiuchi chose to eliminate the facial portraits from the series, enhancing the anonymity of the project, to focus on extremities that are exposed to the world but often overlooked. In intimate, close-up views, she draws attention to the calluses, hangnails, wrinkles, and other imperfections that develop on the body during a lifetime. Ishiuchi includes the occupation of each sitter in captions published in the book *1·9·4·7* but excludes that information in exhibitions. Though the women remain anonymous, their body parts, photographed with great sensitivity, appear very distinct.



# SCARS

In her book *Scars* (Tokyo: Sokyū-sha, 2005), Ishiuchi explains her interest in this subject as follows: “Scars themselves carry a story. Stories of how each person was very sad, or very hurt, and it is because the memory remained in the form of the scar that the story can be narrated in words.” As reminders of past trauma and pain, scars are memories inscribed onto the body and retained into the present moment. Yet rather than view scars only as blemishes or manifestations of injury, Ishiuchi perceives them as battle wounds and symbols of victory over possible defeat. She likens them to photographs, which also serve simultaneously as visible markers of history and triggers of personal memory.

*Scars* developed as a sideline interest when Ishiuchi noticed old wounds on some of the men she photographed for a project called *Chromosome XY*. The stories associated with each scar are distilled in the titles, but Ishiuchi provides only the year that a wound was inflicted and its cause—such as accident, illness, suicide, and war. Photographing scars since 1991, Ishiuchi believes that some kind of wound—healed or open—exists on every body.



# MOTHER'S

Following the death of her father in 1995, Ishiuchi began to strengthen her relationship with her mother, ultimately utilizing photography to forge that bond. Though reluctant to be photographed, Ishiuchi's mother eventually acquiesced, serving as a model for the series *Scars* and *Body and Air* in 1999. She allowed her daughter to take pictures of her face and skin, including parts of the body disfigured by a severe scald sustained in 1955.

Ishiuchi's mother died in 2000, about one year after Ishiuchi began photographing her. Unsure if she should keep or dispose of her mother's personal effects, Ishiuchi decided to photograph them. She taped worn chemises and girdles to the sliding glass door in her parents' home, allowing the sun to backlight the undergarments when photographed. Old shoes, dentures, used lipstick cases, tattered gloves, and other accessories owned by her mother also feature as subjects. Combining these images with the pictures of her mother made before she died, Ishiuchi generated a somber, gentle portrait with the series *Mother's*. When exhibiting this work at the Venice Biennale in 2005, Ishiuchi realized that sharing these intimate views of her mother's life resonated with many visitors, thus transforming the work from a private expression of sorrow into a powerful, universal eulogy.





# BODY AND AIR

An essential aspect of Ishiuchi's photographic process involves work that must occur in the darkroom: developing film and printing negatives. The tactile nature of the medium immediately appealed to her, in part because it related to her training in textile design but also because it offered room to express her emotions via the contrast, grain, and texture she controlled in the print. She has noted that "photographs are my creations. I create them, brooding in the darkroom, immersed in chemicals."\*

Polaroid film cameras, which could process film internally and instantaneously, fascinated Ishiuchi because they operated as portable darkrooms that required no handiwork. Invited to use a large-format Polaroid camera in 1984, Ishiuchi enjoyed the experience and, fifteen years later, purchased her own Polaroid SX-70 camera. Involved in the *Scars* series at that time, she photographed her models with both color and black-and-white film; some of the same figures from *Scars* reappear in the series *Body and Air*.

For this project, perhaps due to the more playful interaction between photographer and sitter, Ishiuchi's camera-shy mother agreed to let her daughter take her picture for the first time. Their brief collaboration for *Body and Air* laid the foundation for Ishiuchi's next major series, *Mother's*, on view in the adjacent gallery.

\*Ishiuchi Miyako in an interview with Kokatsu Reiko and Nakajima Izumi, December 20, 2010.

# ひろしま / HIROSHIMA

Ishiuchi first visited Hiroshima when commissioned by a publisher to photograph there in 2007. She chose as her principal subjects artifacts devastated by the U.S. atomic bombing of the city, now housed at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. Aware that others previously photographed some of the same objects, Ishiuchi nevertheless wanted to record this material in order to present it from a different, distinctly feminine perspective.

The title of the project, *ひろしま / hirosshima*, includes the word Hiroshima written in Hiragana, a Japanese writing system that women used extensively in previous eras. Images in this series typically feature objects once owned by women, primarily garments that had been in direct contact with their bodies at the time of the bombing. Ishiuchi sometimes speaks to the objects while photographing them and initially used a light box to illuminate fabrics, conjuring the ghostlike auras of the victims—which the artist reinforces by “floating” the photographs on the walls—and alluding to the “artificial sun” of the bomb. But the effects of irradiation—visible in the holes, stains, and frayed edges—are offset by the fashionable textiles, vibrant colors, and intricate, hand-stitched details. Included in the titles are names of individuals who donated each article to the Peace Memorial Museum, further animating the stories these photographs tell.



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