

# THE YOUNGER GENERATION

## Contemporary Japanese Photography

Japanese photography, historically dominated by men, experienced a dramatic change in the 1990s and 2000s. Challenging the tradition that relegated women to the role of photographic subject, a number of young female artists rose to prominence during this period by turning their cameras on themselves. The resulting domestic, private scenes and provocative self-portraits stunned the Japanese art world.

Despite their disparate interests, aesthetics, and intentions, these female photographers who emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century were often viewed collectively, their work labeled as *onnanoko shashin*, or “girl photographs.” This term, coined by critic Iizawa Kōtarō, was widely considered derisive, though some felt it celebrated these young women.

Countering the idea that “girl photography” could define a generation of practitioners, this exhibition highlights the breadth of work made by five midcareer women photographers during the past twenty years: Kawauchi Rinko, Onodera Yuki, Otsuka Chino, Sawada Tomoko, and Shiga Lieko. Mavericks in their field, these artists also carried the torch for the relatively few successful women photographers from Japan who preceded them, the foremost being Ishiuchi Miyako, whose work appears in the adjacent exhibition. *The Younger Generation: Contemporary Japanese Photography* serves as a laudatory showcase of Japanese women who use the medium to break new ground.

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# SHIGA LIEKO

Born in 1980 in the Aichi prefecture, southwest of Tokyo, Shiga Lieko graduated from Chelsea College of Art and Design in London in 2004. Integral to her practice, Shiga works with local communities, immersing herself in them and incorporating their histories and myths into her photographs. This methodology informed her early projects *Canary* and *Lilly* (published as books in 2008), for which she subsequently earned the Kimura Ihei Memorial Photography Award and the ICP Young Photographer Award.

In 2008 Shiga moved to the Tōhoku region in northern Japan, a largely rural area historically linked with Japanese folklore. Working out of a small prefab studio in Kitakama, she became the official photographer of the town. In this capacity Shiga documented local events, festivals, and residents. After much of Kitakama was devastated by the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, Shiga continued to photograph, recording the impact on the land and people. Made between 2008 and 2012, the series *Rasen Kaigan* (Spiral Shore) showcases the chaos and mysteriousness of this strange place associated with mythology, natural disaster, and trauma. The dreamlike, postapocalyptic quality of the images in *Rasen Kaigan* is amplified by Shiga's utilization of flash, which produces bright, iridescent colors.



# ONODERA YUKI

Onodera Yuki, born in Tokyo in 1962 but based in France since 1993, worked as a designer of accessories until her disenchantment with the fashion industry compelled her to pursue photography instead. After experimenting with her father's camera and exploring various subjects, Onodera earned the 1st New Cosmos of Photography Award in 1991 for work that utilized darkroom manipulation. Interested in countering the notion that photography represents the world accurately—the Japanese word for photography, *shashin*, translates as “to copy reality”—Onodera continues to use the medium to generate surrealistic images that defy reality.

Shortly after relocating to Paris, Onodera created the series *Portrait of Second-hand Clothes*. Repurposing apparel she collected from *Dispersion*, an installation by the artist Christian Boltanski that contained large piles of clothing for visitors to take home and “disperse,” Onodera photographed each article against an open window in her apartment in Montmartre. She intentionally cropped the bottom hem of each shirt from view, making the pieces appear to float through the gray skies of Paris. Her use of flash enhances the ghostlike quality of the items and echoes Boltanski's sentiment toward *Dispersion*: “I see a garment as the equivalent of a body. It is like a photograph of someone, their heartbeat.”



# KAWAUCHI RINKO

In 2001, after working as a freelance photographer for five years, Kawauchi Rinko (born 1972) burst onto the Japanese photography scene with the simultaneous release of three photo books: *Utatane*, *Hanako*, and *Hanabi*. She earned the prestigious Kimura Ihei Memorial Photography Award the following year, establishing her as one of the most influential photographers in Tokyo.

With her signature snapshot style, Kawauchi photographs moments of everyday life that frequently escape notice. Using color film and often employing a 6×6 cm Rolleiflex camera, she presents the world around her in quiet, fragmentary scenes, as if suspended in a dreamlike state. For the project *Cui Cui*, named after the French onomatopoeia for the twitter sound made by birds, Kawauchi concentrated on the passage of time as it relates to her family and hometown. Taken between 1992 and 2005, the photographs feature ordinary objects that seem to exist outside of time, such as sleepy landscapes, prayer beads, a pincushion, and flowers. Other images record significant events that constitute turning points in Kawauchi's life, such as her grandfather's death and the birth of her nephew. Combining mundane and momentous scenes, Kawauchi constructs a poetic, hypnotic narrative that presents the cycle of life from an intimate yet universal perspective.



# SAWADA TOMOKO

Born in 1977 and raised in Kobe, Japan, Sawada Tomoko graduated from Seian University of Art and Design with degrees in media design (1998) and photography (2000). For the past fifteen years, she has used self-portraiture to explore identity. Most projects require her to adopt multiple personas. She transforms into various characters with the help of costumes, wigs, props, makeup, and weight gain, all of which drastically alter her appearance. Her work—a cross between portraiture and performance—plays upon stereotypes and cultural traditions in order to showcase modes of individuality and self-expression.

*OMIAI*♡ comprises thirty self-portraits, each one made in the same photo studio but intended to represent a different kind of woman. These images mimic photographs typically produced as part of the Japanese custom of *omiai*, or a formal meeting that occurs as part of the arranged marriage tradition. Over time, *omiai* has become more casual but continues to involve the exchange of photographs, which families use to facilitate the search for spouses for their children. This unique set of *OMIAI*♡ includes vintage frames selected by Sawada to represent how such portraits would often be displayed in the windows of local photo studios in Japan.



# OTSUKA CHINO

At the age of ten, Otsuka Chino (born 1972) left Japan for the United Kingdom, where she eventually studied photography at the University of Westminster and the Royal College of Art. Caught between two cultures for much of her life, Otsuka draws upon the intersection of her Japanese and British identities for many of her photographic projects.

The “double self-portraits” from Otsuka’s series *Imagine Finding Me* were motivated by her curiosity about the prospect of speaking with her younger self. Otsuka worked with a digital retoucher to seamlessly insert contemporary self-portraits into old photographs from a family photo album. The results combine pictures from different ages and moments in her life. In this context, the photograph acts as a portal to the past, a time machine that allows the artist to become a tourist in her own memory. Otsuka intends for the project to trigger memories in those who view it, inviting people to participate in the journey of self-discovery, which she encapsulates in the following poem that accompanies *Imagine Finding Me*:

*If,  
again  
I have a chance to meet,  
there is so much I want to ask  
and so much I want to tell.*



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