

Rinko Kawauchi – A Retrospective

27 October 2022 – 11 March 2023

Christophe Guye Galerie is thrilled to announce the third solo exhibition of Japanese artist Rinko Kawauchi (*1972, Shiga, Japan) at the gallery. The retrospective includes works from eight different series – ‘Utatane’, ‘Hanabi’, ‘the eyes, the ears’, ‘Illuminance’, ‘Ametsuchi’, ‘Halo’ as well as her most recent series ‘M/E’ and ‘as it is’ – and features 40 prints from 2001 to 2021.

Inspired by Shinto, a Japanese religion devoted to the sacred essence of nature, Rinko Kawauchi considers that no subject is too brief or ordinary to be photographed. Since the beginning of her photographic career, Kawauchi's works have contained a unique aesthetic and mood, capturing intimate, poetic, and beautiful moments of the world around her. They often have brilliant and radiant light that gives them a dream-like quality. Her subjects can be ephemeral but somehow, they determine the fragility of existence. It is precisely because of this approach to reality in the smallest details - most of which often go unnoticed - that Rinko Kawauchi's works have repeatedly been described as visual haikus and a certain ‘Japaneseness’ has been attributed to her oeuvre. On the other hand, as photography critic and historian Kōtarō Iizawa points out, her photography does not necessarily fall smoothly into the category that would be called ‘Japanese style’. Rinko Kawauchi’s photography has gone beyond the confines of being Japanese and reached a level where it is representative of universal values.

In 2001, Kawauchi gained popularity on the international scene when she was awarded the Kimura-Ihei-Prize, Japan’s most important emerging talent photography prize, shortly followed by the simultaneous publication of three beautiful books: Utatane (Catnap), Hanabi (Fireworks), and Hanako, her very personal study of a young girl of the same name. Rinko Kawauchi is the winner of the prestigious Annual Infinity Award 2009 from the New York International Center of Photography, in the category Art, and was nominated for the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize in 2012. The artist has had numerous important solo exhibitions, including at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art Contemporain in Paris, the California Museum of Photography in Riverside, the Hasselblad Centre in Gothenburg, the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, the Metropolitan Museum of Photography in Tokyo, the ARGOS Centrum voor Kunst en Media in Brussels, the London Photographers' Gallery, and the Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum in Shizuoka. She has also shown her work in major group exhibitions such as in Huis Marseille in Amsterdam, Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal, Brighton Photo Biennial 2010, Toyota Municipal Museum of Art in Aichi and Art Museum NO-MA in Shiga.

– Utatane

Reminiscent of Japanese photography of the 1960s Rinko Kawauchi’s works from the series ‘Utatane’ (Japanese term for ‘Catnap’) are the search for the sublime amid the banal. A balloon flying into the sky, the reflection of the sun on a water surface, a pair of flying butterflies and a torn net. These are the details of everyday life that are too easily missed. Seen through the lens of Kawauchi’s camera however, the ordinary shines with bejewelled patterns of light. A graceful contemplation of mortality, which demonstrate the artist’s finesse and skill of telling a photographic tale.

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– Hanabi

Her series 'Hanabi' (Japanese term for 'firework') depicts the photographer's vision of a fireworks show. The breezes of summer nights, the footsteps of children running alongside a riverbank or clouds portending warm showers are nostalgic, beautiful, and melancholic at once. We are drawn in by a dance of lights and colours, and in the blink of an eye, an elegant and sensory party draws to a close, leaving us wondering what Kawauchi saw in the fireworks, and what lies beyond them.

– the eyes, the ears,

The main characteristic of 'the eyes, the ears,' lies in the perfect accordance between images and text. Throughout the book, images are presented along with short haiku poems written by the author herself. Those poems create a thin, delicate narrative that leads us through the images as gently as a butterfly's flutter on an afternoon of spring. The book, as displayed from the title and cover, is dedicated to the senses and it is an invitation to forget all preconceptions about the world and rather feel it on a deeper, more intimate level.

– Illuminance

In Illuminance, Kawauchi continues her exploration of the extraordinary in the mundane, drawn to the fundamental cycles of life and the seemingly inadvertent, fractal-like organization of the natural world into formal patterns. Inspired by the subtle aesthetic of wabi-sabi—a philosophy of reduction, modesty and the beauty of imperfection—these luminous images offer an enchanting gaze on the world around us.

– Ametsuchi

In her series 'Ametsuchi' the artist shifts her attention from the micro to the macro, focusing on the volcanic landscape of Japan's Mount Aso – a renowned site of Shinto rituals. The title 'Ametsuchi' is comprised of two Japanese characters meaning 'heaven and earth', and is taken from the title of one of the oldest pangrams in Japanese – a chant in which each character of the Japanese syllabary is used. In this group of works Kawauchi brings together images of distant constellations and tiny figures lost within landscapes, as well as photographs of a traditional style of controlled-burn farming (Yakihata) in which the cycles of cultivation and recovery span decades and generations. Punctuating the series are images of Buddhist rituals and other religious ceremonies – a suggestion of other means by which humankind has traditionally attempted to transcend time and memory.

– Halo

Rinko Kawauchi's series 'Halo', where the artist expands her exploration of spirituality started in 2013 with the series 'Ametsuchi', is made up of three interwoven sections, focusing on differing spiritual traditions. One of the three sections depicts the countless numbers of migratory birds to appear throughout Europe in wintertime, with their movements almost resemble a dance, where smaller flocks, one by one, come together to create a massive, collective body – a phenomenon that comes to resemble human society itself, feeling the unidentifiable power brought about by being part of a great crowd. Another part of the series depicts the ancient festival 'DaShuhua' in the Hebei province in China, originated when people began to throw molten iron against the city walls as the poor people's equivalent to beautiful yet expensive fireworks – a yearn to witness beauty, even in the direst conditions. The third part is dedicated to the Japanese festival 'Kami Mukae Sai' in Izumo. During the 10th month of the Japanese lunar calendar ('Kannazuki') the Shinto gods are believed to come together in the Izumo region. People welcome them with sacred flames lighting up the shores as spectators

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watch. 'The lights strobe and refract against the raindrops, and they glitter. The thoughts of the people in prayer, invisible to the human eye, too, take form and reflect in the drops' – Rinko Kawauchi

– as it is

A blue sky. A shimmering river. The birth of a new life. These are the first three photographs from Rinko Kawauchi's book 'as it is'. This new body of work returns to Kawauchi's earlier photographic focus on her personal universe through family, memory, and time. This book presents a succession of mundane moments and gestures — a spider's web, a bowl of rice, a small hand pointing at an insect — along with more significant ones — her daughter's first steps, family outings, the passing of a close relative. The personal narrative of the book is punctuated by a photograph of a kitchen window witnessing the passing of the seasons, and short texts by Kawauchi herself interspersed in the sequence. The pages navigate between the inside and the outside, always within close distance as, through her unique eye, Kawauchi effortlessly catches the fleeting beauty of the in-between moments, telling the story of an ordinary family going through life just as it is.

– M/E

M/E is a new series Kawauchi began shooting in 2019. The letters stand for 'Mother' and 'Earth', combining to form both 'Mother Earth' and 'Me'. Immediately, the series' images of Iceland's volcanoes and ice floes and Hokkaido's snowy landscapes may seem distant and unrelated to the everyday scenes from the COVID-19 pandemic that accompany them in the series. However, both types of images depict events now taking place on the planet we live on, and Kawauchi's artistry alerts us to the connection between them. This series invites the viewer to reconsider a range of questions about the workings of human life and our relationship with nature.

Artist's Statement on M/E

'Some things can only be obtained through moving my body to face my photographic subject head-on. I have found this an effective way to approach, however incrementally, the unanswerable question of why I find myself alive right here and right now. After living this way for more than thirty years, I felt the desire to once more confirm the ground on which I stood. Not in terms of regional or national bounds, but the fact that I was on a planet. When I visited Iceland in the summer of 2019—I had been there only once before, some twenty years ago—that desire was fulfilled. I saw geysers like the planet's breath and glaciers far beyond any human time. And what I saw seemed to illuminate my own existence. One experience inside a dormant volcano left a particularly strong impression. When I looked up, I saw light spilling in through the crater above, and its shape was reminiscent of female genitalia. As I gazed at this sight, I had the sense of being a foetus enveloped by the earth, and I felt a connection to this planet I have never felt before. My plans to visit Iceland again in winter to probe these connections more deeply were thwarted by COVID-19. Partly as a result of this, I visited Hokkaido many times in the winter of last year. There I saw things that could only be seen in the bitterest cold and recalled how small and frail my own body truly was. Take the initials of 'Mother Earth', and the result is 'M/E'. When I wrote out those two letters, I felt a connection between all things, from those so vast their full form cannot be surveyed with the naked eye to the tiniest individuals—and was reminded of that mysterious sensation I experienced beneath the volcanic crater of inversion and unity between the planet and myself.'