

Local Color and the Avant-
Garde: Early postwar
photography by
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This exhibition introduces four photographers from the Chugoku region, the westernmost part of Honshu, the largest island in Japan. The region has two distinct areas: the San'in, known for its colder climate, facing the Sea of Japan to the north, and San'yo, which boasts year-round warm weather, facing the Seto Island Sea to the south.

These photographers pursued the possibilities of new photographic expression, shooting the local scenery, milieu, and people living in the different parts of the Chugoku regions throughout the prewar and early postwar periods.

Shoji Ueda (1913-2000) was born in Sakaiminato City, Tottori Prefecture, in the colder San'in region of Chugoku. Ueda is internationally renowned for his portraits staged in the Tottori Sand Dunes, such as *Young Girl in Four Styles*, *Papa and Mama and Children*, and *Dune Nude*. Before WWII, he started his career with artistic photography, focusing his camera on the landscape of the San'in region and its people. He produced many works in various styles,

always at the forefront of the movements of the times, such as Shinkō Shashin ("New Photography"), Surrealism, Subjective photography, and others.

Yoichi Midorikawa (1915-2001) was born in Okayama in San'yō. He practiced dentistry while moonlighting as a photographer and actively contributed to photography magazines. In addition to his well-known dreamlike seascapes, Midorikawa took many documentary photographs before the war until the 1950s. He focused his camera on the milieu of the Seto Island Sea, his photographs from this period feature local industry, agriculture, farmers, and fishermen. It was in the 1960s that he gradually shifted to his widely recognized experimental landscapes, for which he would shoot at precise moments of the day using various color filters, then later use photo montage techniques to superimpose his images. He earned the nickname "the magician of color" in the field of photography.

Ueda and Midorikawa were members of Chugoku Shashinka Shudan (the Chugoku Photographers Group), which focused on local color, documenting the lives and nature of the region.

Koichi Sako (1918-2010) was born in Hiroshima and was exposed to the atomic bomb's radioactive fallout. While taking photographic records of the

postwar reconstruction of Hiroshima, he also used experimental techniques to photograph the scenery and the people of the Seto Island Sea. A member of VOU, a group led by avant-garde poet and photographer Katsué Kitasono, Sako is known for contributing experimental photographs to the group's eponymous magazine.

Kaoru Ohto (1927-2020) was born in Hiroshima. Like Sako, Ohto was also exposed to radioactive fallout. The people of the Seto Island Sea region featured prominently in his works, and he produced abstract experimental photographs. Sako and Ohto studied under Kunio Masaoka of the Chugoku Photographers Group.

These four artists were also involved in the subjective photography movement that emerged in the mid-1950s. Ueda and Sako participated in the 1st *International Subjectivist Photography Exhibition* (1956), and Midorikawa participated in the *Exhibition of Japanese Subjective Photography* (1958). Sako and Ohto exhibited works in the *subjective photographie 2* in Saarbrücken, Germany, and Paris, France (1954-55). The Subjective Photography movement, initiated by German photographer Otto Steinert, advocated for subjective photographic expression in various fields. In

countries such as Germany and Japan, where avant-garde artistic expression was suppressed during the war, the movement was enthusiastically supported after the war and developed into an international photographic movement.

Local Color and the Avant-Garde focuses on these artists' lifelong pursuit of experimental photographic expression that cherishes the natural scenery of their local regions. This exhibition examines how their works transcend local and national boundaries to resonate with audiences from all over the world.

Postwar Japan's Subjective Landscape

Masako Toda (Photography historian)

Among the works of Saburō Hasegawa (1906-57) is a photographic work titled *Kyōdoshi* [Local Journal] (1939). Hasegawa was an abstract painter and a creator of photographic works [1] who, together with Usaburō Toyama, named the photogram works of Ei-Q 'Photo-dessin'. *Kyōdoshi* was first presented in 1939 in the art magazine, *Mizue* (no. 416, August 1939). It consists of twelve photographs taken in Hyogo Prefecture, where Hasegawa spent his youth (Figure 1). Hasegawa's sensitivity when uncovering abstract forms within natural scenery and everyday life, such as tree roots, nets, and *shoji* screens as seen in *Kyōdoshi*, can also be found in *Shitsunai* [Indoor], a photographic work produced in 1940. From the four sets of *Shitsunai*, only one remains today in which an object made from curled-up newspapers is carefully positioned on the cloth edges of a *tatami* mat. It is said that Minoru Sakata of the *Tampei Shashin Kurabu* [Tampei Photography Club] participated in the shooting of this work [2]. While both the *Kyōdoshi* and *Shitsunai*

series are works that extract forms found in the natural landscape and daily life of Japan, they seem a step short of complete abstraction. This tendency to strike a delicate balance between abstraction and the locality is, in fact, a sensitivity that can be linked to that of Japan's postwar Subjective Photography, which had become a trend in the late 1950s.

Artists who had been involved in the Subjective Photography movement in the postwar Japan period were also featured in this exhibition, like Yoichi Midorikawa (1915-2001), Shoji Ueda (1913-2000), Koichi Sako (1918-2010), and Kaoru Ohto (1927-2020). But what are the actual connections between pre-war local and abstract expression and postwar Subjective Photography?

In the context of the history of photography in Japan, the expression of 'homeland' (郷土 : Kyōdo in Japanese) or 'local' is actually a photographic approach that gained attention during the war, as Japanese authorities suppressed expressions and thoughts that did not conform to national policy, or that clearly showed the direct influence of Western culture. While avant-garde photography influenced by Surrealism was curtailed due to censorship by the authorities, photographers persevered through the war by focusing their expression on their

native land. One such artist was Hiroshi Hamaya. Hamaya's *Yukiguni [Snow Land]*, which he began photographing in 1940 during the implementation of the national mobilization scheme, is considered a photographic ethnography based on the Japanese Ethnology that was emerging at the time. The work was able to survive the period of suppression by focusing completely on locality and 'homeland.' A similar approach was taken by the *Chugoku Shashinka Shūdan [Chugoku Photographers Group]*, which was formed in 1937 by nine artists from the Chugoku region, including Kunio Masaoka, Ryosuke Ishizu, and Shoji Ueda. The group members advocated 'local color' photography, taking photographs with attention to regional landscapes, things, events, and people. They even exhibited their works in Tokyo. When Midorikawa, who joined the group in 1940, discussed the future direction of his photography works with Ishizu, the artist advised him, "Remain silent like a stone. Otherwise, set your sights on the local cultures, and document them faithfully. Perhaps that is the only remaining path to survive as a provincial artist." [3] The idea of 'homeland' was the last aesthetic that photographers could rely on in an age where avant-garde photography had been stifled. The title of

Hasegawa's work, *Kyōdoshi*, bears the imprint of such times.

After the defeat in the war, the aesthetic of 'homeland' played an important role in the postwar revival of the photography scene. Hamaya's *Yukiguni*, which documented the folk customs of provincial regions, was compiled in 1956 as a photobook and was highly acclaimed as chronicling the 'classics of life' [4] that remained unchanged, both before and after the war. Meanwhile, Shoji Ueda attempted to recreate the aesthetics of local color in 1949 through *Papa to Mama to Kodomotachi* [Papa, Mama, and Children], a self-portrait of Ueda and his family with the Tottori Sand Dunes in the background [5]. In the postwar revival of photographic expression, 'homeland' was the key that connected the pre-war and postwar periods.

On the other hand, avant-garde photography that had been suppressed during the war also experienced a revival at the end of the 1940s. Around this time, Noboru Ueki of K.P.S. (Kyoto Photo Society) produced a series of works in which Surrealist objects were colored using his unique method, giving the impression of a revival of avant-garde photography. The Bijutsu Bunka Association (1939-present), which had been suppressed for

practicing Surrealism and suspended its activities during the war, resumed in 1946. Kiyoji Ōtsuji joined the association in 1949 and also started to delve into Surrealist expression. The autumn special issue of *Shūkan Asahi* weekly magazine (September 1949) featured the works of Kansuke Yamamoto, Keiichirō Gotō, Noboru Ueki, Yūshi Kobayashi, Kiyoji Ōtsuji, and Nobuya Abe as representative artists of this movement. It was here that surrealist photographic expression was revived in the postwar era. However, it seems Japan had to wait until the 1950s, with the advent of Subjective Photography, to see the revival of abstract expression, which, along with Surrealism, was another trend in pre-war avant-garde photography.

Designer Yūsaku Kamekura's "Modan Yūropian Fotografā no Shukanshugi Shashin" [Subjective Photography of Modern European Photographers] (*Camera*, May 1954) is often mentioned as the article that introduced Subjective Photography in Japan. However, Saburō Hasegawa actually took up Subjective Photography earlier than that. The November 1953 issue of the art magazine *Atelier* was a special on "Photographies et Peintures," and Hasegawa contributed an article titled "New Photography and Painting," in which he introduced

photographs by the Surrealist Man Ray and Otto Steinert, who advocated for Subjective Photography. This article discussed expressive trends of the same period, where art and photography were developed interactively, covering the abstraction in photography once pursued in avant-garde photography. The revival of avant-garde photography began when painting and photography intersected and were connected to Subjective Photography. This process may explain why Subjective Photography spread across boundaries from the 1950s to the early 1960s, not only among photographers but also designers, painters, and poets.

Viewed in the context of this background, it becomes clear why the expressions of artists in this exhibition, Yoichi Midorikawa from Okayama Prefecture, Shoji Ueda from Tottori Prefecture, and Koichi Sako and Kaoru Ohto from Hiroshima Prefecture, tend towards abstraction in which forms are found in local things. Ueda and Midorikawa used to be committed to local color as advocated by the Chugoku Photographers Group. Furthermore, Sako and Ohto were taught by Kunio Masaoka of the Chugoku Photographers Group; therefore, their local color mainly focused on local customs and scenery in Hiroshima. However, it was not until the

mid-1950s that they achieved a creative style that combined local color and abstraction. Until then, they used local color that revolved primarily around the documentation of provincial localities. With the arrival of Subjective Photography in the mid-1950s, abstraction through high-contrast and long-exposure technique combined with local color expression. Shoji Ueda's *Sekkei 1* [Snow Scene 1] (Fig. 2) and Koichi Sako's *Form C* (pp. 61) are representative works of the combination of local color and abstraction. Similarly, works by Kaoru Ohto in the late 1950s also show abstraction that retains traces of Hiroshima's landscape and other features.

The combination of local color, which photographers chose as a means of survival during the war, and abstraction, found at the interface between photography and painting, was favorably received in the context of the international photographic movement of Subjective Photography. The photographs by Yoichi Midorikawa and Koichi Sako, shown in the exhibition, *The Land*, curated by Bill Brandt at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1975; both combined such local color and abstraction. This "subjective landscape" was indeed one view of a landscape that showed Japan's postwar recovery.

Figure 1: Saburō Hasegawa, *Kyōdoshi* [Local Journal], *Mizue*, no. 416, August 1939

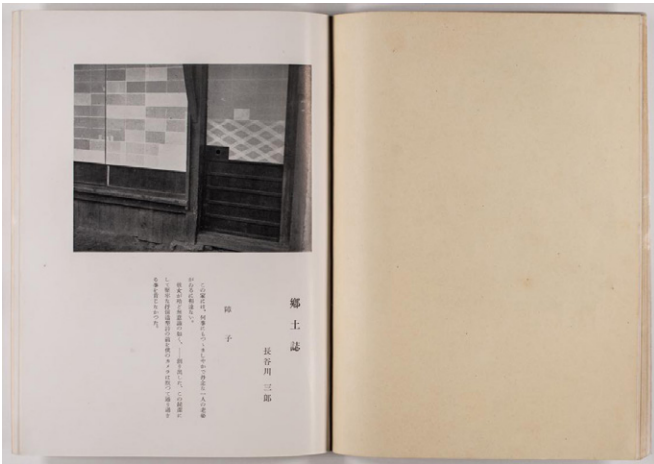


Figure 2: Shoji Ueda, *Sekkei* [Snow Scene], *A Special Number Atelier: New Photography*, no. 34, May 1957



[1] Saburō Hasegawa frequently traveled between the U.S, Europe, and Japan since his arrival in the U.S. in 1929. He was known for his abundant knowledge of the overseas art scene and his interaction with Isamu Noguchi. In 2019, the exhibition “Changing and Unchanging Things: Noguchi and Hasegawa in Postwar Japan” (January 12 - March 24, 2019) held at the Yokohama Museum of Art introduced *Kyōdoshi* along with other photogram and collage works that had previously been unknown. *Shitsunai* is known to have been photographed by Kiyoshi Koishi.

[2] Eri Taniguchi, <*Shitsunai Series*> (1940 nen) no Shūsaku Purinto to Hasegawa Saburō no Shashin Sakuhin [The ‘Study Prints’ of the *Shitsunai Series* (1940) and the Photographic Works of Saburō Hasegawa], “Bulletin of the National Art Center, Tokyo,” no. 3, 2016.

[3] Ryosuke Ishizu, *Sakka Shōkai: Midorikawa Yoichi no Ashiato* [Artist Introduction: Footprints of Yoichi Midorikawa], in *Nippon Camera*, July 1950.

[4] The term ‘classics of life’ is headlined in the article featuring Hiroshi Hamaya’s *Yukiguni* (Mainichi Shimbun, 1956). The article states that the book “records the classics of Japanese life.”

[5] Shoji Ueda, *Tsuzurikata: Watashi no Kazoku* [Composition: My Family], in *Camera*, October 1949.

This book is the accompanying catalog for the following exhibiton:

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