

Japanese Amateur Photo Clubs of the 1930s

Sutezo Otono, Osamu Shiihara
— Tampei Photography Club, Osaka

Yushi Kobayashi
— K.P.S. (Kyoto Photo Society), Kyoto

Iwata Nakayama
— Ashiya Camera Club, Ashiya

Wataru Takahashi
— Société IRF, Fukuoka

MEM

We will introduce the works by five photographers from the 1930s.

Zen'ei Shashin (“Photo Avant-Garde”) developed primarily in Japan throughout the 1930s. Iwata Nakayama founded the Ashiya Camera Club in 1930, the Tampei Photography Club was founded also in 1930 as an affiliated organization derived from the Naniwa Photography Club founded in 1904, and Société IRF was founded by Wataru Takahashi in 1939. K.P.S. was established in the 1920s. These clubs were instrumental in the development of the Japanese photo avant-garde movement.

Zen'ei Shashin developed after the *Shinko Shashin* (“New Photography”) movement in the 1920s when Japanese photo magazines such as *Foto Times* introduced the works of key artists from various European photography movements of the time, including Neue Sachlichkeit, Neue Photography, and Bauhaus. In addition, the photo section of the *Film und Foto* exhibition, initially organized in Stuttgart, toured Osaka and Tokyo in 1931, showcasing the works by European artists from Bauhaus, Russian Constructivism, etc. Another key exhibition was *Kaigai Cho-Genjutsushugi Sakuhin Ten* (“Overseas

Surrealism Exhibition”), Tokyo, in 1937, which introduced the major Surrealist artists for the first time in Japan. The exhibition was organized by Shuzo Takiguchi, an art critic, who introduced the surrealism movement to Japan.

Through the 1930s, amateur photo clubs that advocated *Zen’ei Shashin* and utilized experimental photo techniques such as photo montage, solarization, collages, and photograms emerged in local cities across Japan. K.P.S. and Tampei hosted their exhibitions regularly, not only in Osaka and Kyoto but also in Tokyo. In addition, Nagoya Photo Avant-Garde, founded in Nagoya in 1939, and Zen’ei Photo Association, founded in Tokyo in 1938, were also key clubs actively participating in the movement.

This photo movement was short-lived as the approach of the Pacific war also brought censorship creating an artistic environment that paralleled the European theater. The nationalistic Japanese government considered the avant-garde artistic movement subversive and disapproved of its affinity with Western culture and European surrealism’s communist associations. The government eventually

dissolved all photo clubs in Japan shortly after the outbreak of the war in 1941. Accordingly, photographers were mobilized for state propaganda. In 1941, Takiguchi and Ichiro Fukuzawa, a painter, and other artists and poets were arrested for their continued advocacy of the surrealist movement in Japan, which became the definitive moment as the *Zen'ei Shashin* movement faded from the public. It was only after the war that these clubs resumed their activities amidst Japan's arduous postwar recovery. In 1948, the *Nami-ten* exhibition was held collaboratively by the Naniwa Photography Club, Tampei Photography Club and three others. Between 1947 and 1949, K.P.S. also resumed its activities and held 5 different exhibitions in Osaka and Kyoto, finally holding an exhibition in Tokyo in 1950. The speed at which they were able to resume their activities is a testament to their resilient creative spirit.

Sutezo Otono (1905–1988)

Born in Kishibe-mura, Mishima-gun, Osaka Prefecture (now Kishibe Kita, Suita City) in 1905. After graduating from Osaka Municipal Higashi Shogyo High School, he joined Yamaguchi Bank (later Sanwa Bank), where he was a member of the Sanwa Photo Club.

In 1930, he joined the Tampei Photography Club and the Zen Kansai Shashin Renmei (“All Kansai Photography Association”). He received numerous awards at the Nippon Dai Shashin Salon (“Japan Grand Photography Salon Competition”) and others.

In addition to regular exhibitions organized by the Tampei Photo Club and the Sanwa Photo Club, he also participated in international salon exhibitions.

Otono has pursued photographic expression through photograms, and his works are characterized by his use of plants and other living creatures collected outdoors. Before World War II, he contributed articles on the photogram technique to the photography magazines *Camera Club* (1) and *Shashin Bunka* (2). According to these articles, he would contrast opaque materials with semi-transparent or transparent materials such as flowers, leaves, paper, cloth, textiles, opaque glass, cellophane, and glassware to create a composite effect.

He also describes the works included in his photobook, *Light*, published by the Tampei Photo Club, as follows:

“The photogram can be encapsulated in the single phrase: light composition. If I were to explain further, it would turn into a tedious and useless discussion. The refraction of light renders various subtle forms on a photographic plate that are countless and astronomical in number. I believe that the essence of the photogram is how it handles the straightforward beauty of light in a three-dimensional way. Three-dimensionality has lines, faces, and volume, whereas two-dimensionality has no volume. Regarding volume, width and depth are deeply connected. When three-dimensionality is lacking, images become schematic (3).”

Although Otono was active primarily before World War II, he remained committed to the photogram and was known as one of the leading artists in this field.

(1) Otono, Sutezo. “Introduction to the Photogram” *Camera Club*, ARS (November 1936)

(2) Otono, Sutezo. “How to Make a Photogram” *Shashin Bunka*, ARS (November 1941)

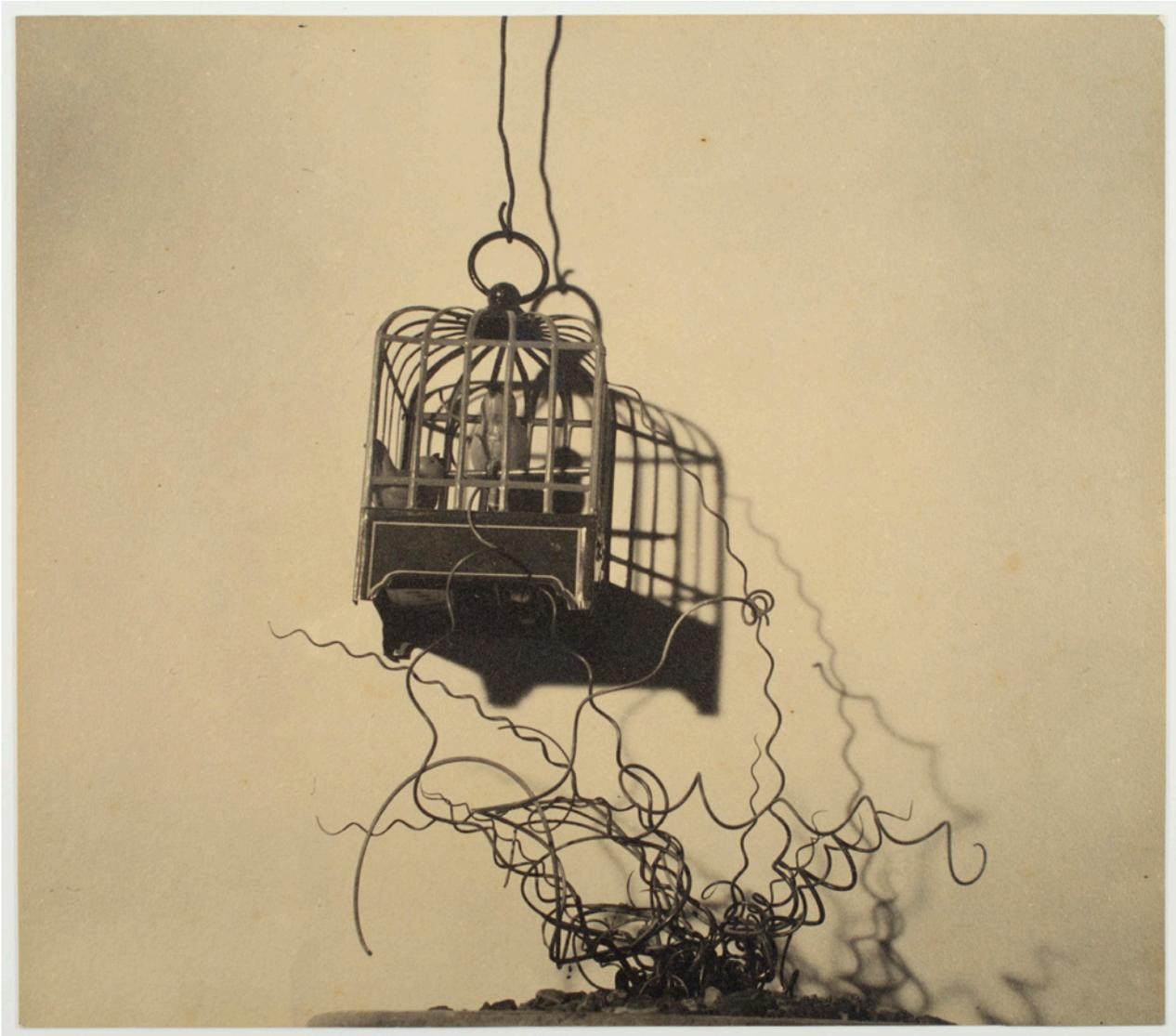
(3) Tampei Photography Club, *Hikari*, 1940



Sutezo Otono, *Photogram A – Flower*

Vintage gelatin silver print, 1930s, 36.9x28.7cm

Signed, titled and stamped on verso



Sutezo Otono, *Still Life*

Vintage gelatin silver print, 1930s, 19.8x22.5cm

Osamu Shiihara (1905–1974)

Born in Osaka Prefecture. In 1928 Osamu Shiihara entered the Tokyo Fine Arts School where he studied under the painter Takeji Fujishima in the Western Painting department.

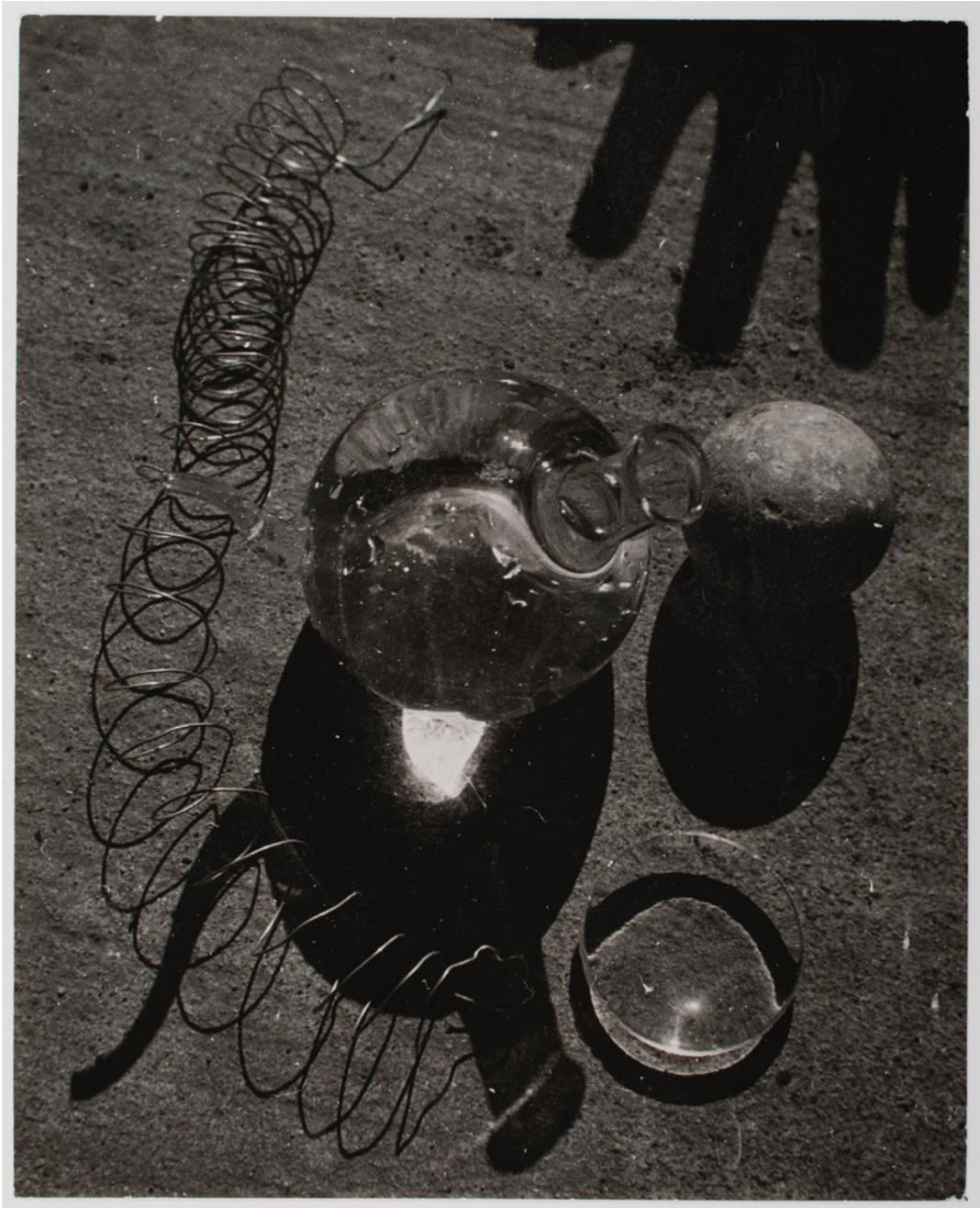
After graduating in 1932, he returned to the Kansai area and started photography. He set up a studio in Nishinomiya city in Hyogo Prefecture and joined the Tampei Photography club. He also was affiliated with the Shoei Kai (“Light and Shadow Association”) with Seiichiro Tokuda. In his studio there are remnants of his nude photo sessions for the Tampei Photography Club.

Critics say that his artistic education was academic because of the influence of his teacher, Fujishima who studied in western painting in France and Italy in the beginning of the 20th century. But his photographic works used cutting edge techniques such as photogram and photo montage that were considered avant-garde at the time. His photo peinture technique, where he would draw directly on glass plate negatives and then print those images on photographic printing paper, were unique to his background as a painter.

He has left behind many experimental works in the latter half of the 1930’s, just before the onset of the Pacific War. He fervently pushed the limits of the potential of the medium of photography through various methods like multiple exposure, deformation, solarization, photo montage and more. Female nudes, scientific equipment, lens, mirrors and carapaces featured prominently as motifs in his works.

He is also known for his 1941 documentary series, Wandering Jew where he and other members of the Tampei Photography club; Nakaji Yasui, Kametaro Kawasaki, Toru Kono, Kaneyoshi Tabuchi and Yutaka Tezuka took photos of Jewish refugees temporarily staying in Kobe during the Pacific war. This is one of the only examples where the plight of Jewish refugees outside of Europe has been photographed.

Shiihara’s work is included in permanent collections domestic and international such as The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum; the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art; the J. Paul Getty Museum; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and The Art Institute of Chicago. He also has two monographs; *Osamu Shiihara* (Only Photography, 2016) and *Shiihara Osamu* (Fine-Art Photography Association, 2018).



Osamu Shiihara, Title unknown

Vintage gelatin silver print, 1930s, 30.2x24.4cm



Osamu Shiihara, Title unknown

Vintage gelatin silver print, 1930s, 30.2x25.2cm

Yushi Kobayashi (1898–1988)

Kobayashi moved to Kyoto at the age of 9 to live with his uncle who ran a photographic studio in the city then later studied photography at the Tokyo Fine Arts School (present-day Tokyo University of the Arts). After graduation in 1923 he returned to Kyoto where he worked with his uncle in his studio, the Kobayashi Photo Studio. He later inherited the studio, renaming it the Yūshi Kobayashi Photo Studio.

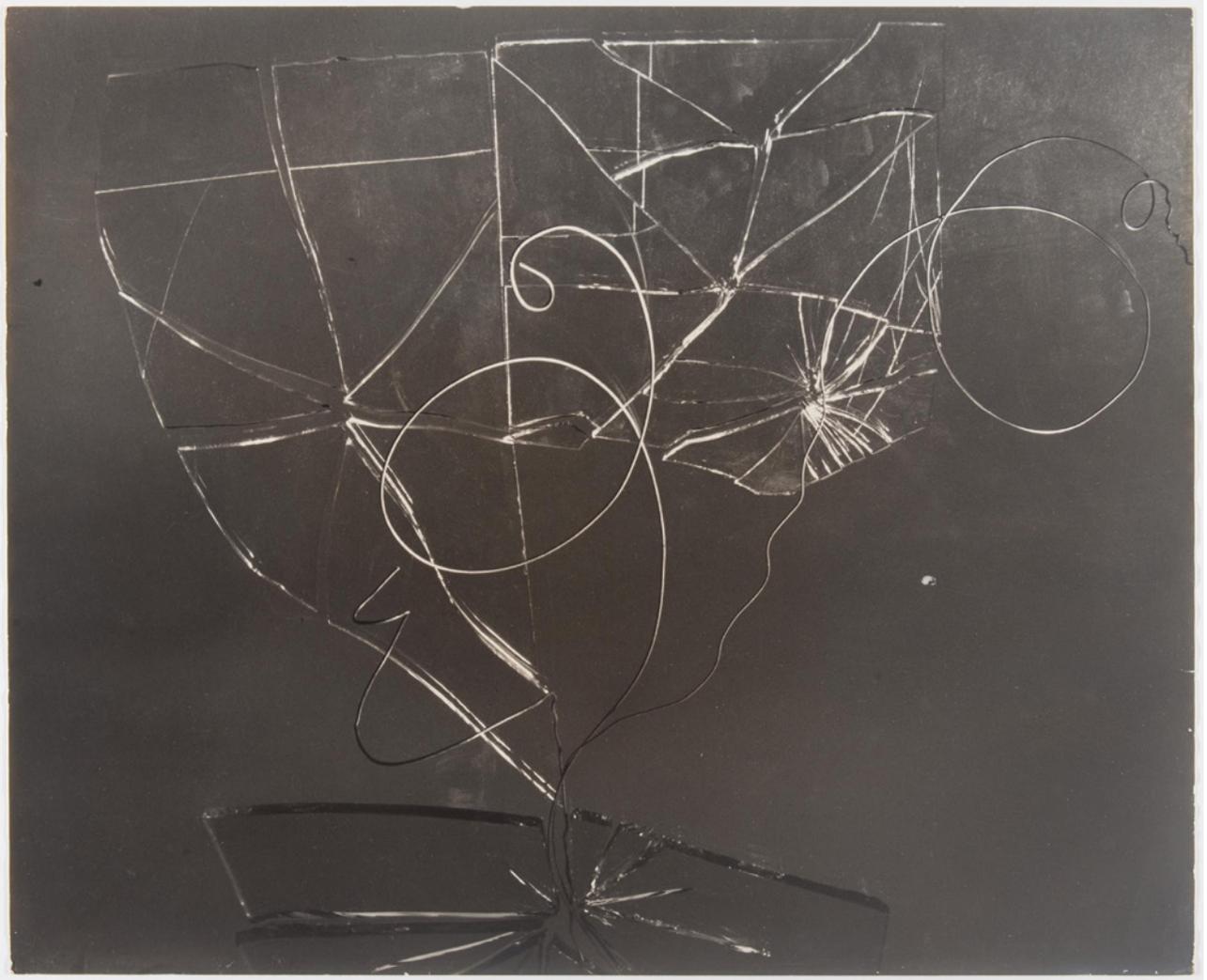
From around the end of the Taishō period (1912–1926) he opened a studio in the resort town of Karuizawa every summer where he took portraits of many famous people, including Yukio Ozaki, Bertrand Russell, Sessue Hayakawa, Inazō Nitobe, etc. He became a leading member of the K.P. S. (Kyoto Photo Society), working actively with Noboru Ueki, etc., to produce new works. In the beginning, he employed so-called ‘art photo’ techniques, creating landscape photographs using oil pigment prints, such as Bromoil, or portrait photographs using deformation, becoming active as a member of the Nihon Kōga Kyōkai, which was one of the art photography societies of the day. From the 1930s he began to publish works and editorials in *The Photo Times*. Through this journal he became acquainted with other photographers who shared the same ideology and style of ‘new photography’ as well as avant-garde painters, ‘becoming released from the doubts of the long-established art photography to shine a light on his own works.’* From around this time his work changed from art photography to an avant-garde style employing various experimental techniques.

Immediately after the war, he began to submit his work to photographic magazines, such as *Photography* and *Shashin to Gijutsu* (Photography and Technology). In 1948 he joined the Bijutsu Bunka Kyōkai (Fine Art and Culture Association), a society for avant-garde artists, where he was put in charge of the photographic section and submitted works in society’s exhibitions in both Tokyo and Kyoto. He also interacted with avant-garde painters from the society, such as Gentarō Komaki, Nobuya Abe, Noboru Kitawaki, etc., saying that they ‘opened his eyes to avant-garde developments in art and new aesthetics in photography.’* In 1975 he joined the Panreal Art Group, which was established by avant-garde artists, as a photographer and continued to submit mainly large-scale, color experimental photographs to the group’s exhibitions well into his old age.



Yushi Kobayashi, Title unknown

Vintage gelatin silver print, 1930s, 55.7x45.5cm



Yushi Kobayashi, Title unknown

Vintage gelatin silver print, 1930s, 45.5x55.9cm

Iwata Nakayama (1895–1949)

Nakayama was born in Yanagawa City, Fukuoka Prefecture. He was a student in the first generation of the photography department of the Tokyo Fine Arts School (now Tokyo University of the Arts) and graduated with top honors in 1918. In November of the same year, he went to the United States as an overseas business trainee for the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce. After studying at California State University, he moved to New York City and worked as an assistant at Kikuchi Toyo's photography studio. In 1921, he established his own studio, Lacan Studio. While in New York, he interacted with traditional Japanese Butoh dancers, painters, and other artists, taking many stage photographs and portraits. He also took many photographs of Manhattan buildings, street corners, and Central Park. He met a French Indian dancer and choreographer, Nyota Inyoka, who encouraged him to go to France.

In 1926, Nakayama sold Lacan studio and moved to Paris with his wife, Masako. Nakayama was associated with social circles that included many artists who were attracted to Paris and its growing influence as the center of modern art including Foujita Tsuguharu, Ebihara Kinosuke, Man Ray, and Kiki, who were living there at the time. He also became acquainted with the Futurist writer Enrico Prampolini and photographed his theater performances. In 1927, Nakayama returned to Japan after crossing the continent on the Trans-Siberian Railway, and in 1929, he opened a studio in Ashiya, Japan, modeled after his Paris studio. In 1930, he founded the Ashiya Camera Club in collaboration with Hanaya Kanbei and Beniya Kichinosuke, amongst others. The club and the Tampei Photo Club in Osaka were pivotal hubs for the Kansai region's avant-garde and New Photography Movement. He solidified his recognition when his *Fukutsuke Tabi* won first prize at the inaugural International Advertising Photography Exhibition sponsored by Asahi Shimbun newspaper. In 1936, he was appointed to the photography office of the Kobe Daimaru Department Store.

Nakayama's unique aesthetic and skillful composition using multiple negatives, objects,

and materials is evident through his world of works. He excelled in photo montage techniques with images generated from diverse materials such as photo print cut-outs, daily objects, plants, flowers, butterflies, and shells, which were meticulously compiled through his custom-made photographic apparatuses. In an article titled “Decoration” in the January 1938 issue of *Camera Club*, he wrote, “I have a deep appreciation for beauty. But in moments where beauty may seem elusive, I am driven to create it and bring it into existence, even if I am forced to fabricate it. For me, a photograph is not a part of nature, nor is it a slice of reality... It is merely just a single photograph.”

In 1932, Nojima Yasuzo approached the notable photographer to collaborate with Kimura Ihei on a groundbreaking project – the first issue of *Kōga*, a publication dedicated to promoting photographic art. Over a year and a half, Nakayama devoted himself to the editing process, imbuing his deep passion for the medium into each of the 18 issues released. Not only was he deeply involved in the editorial aspect of the project, but he also showcased a significant number of his works within its pages.

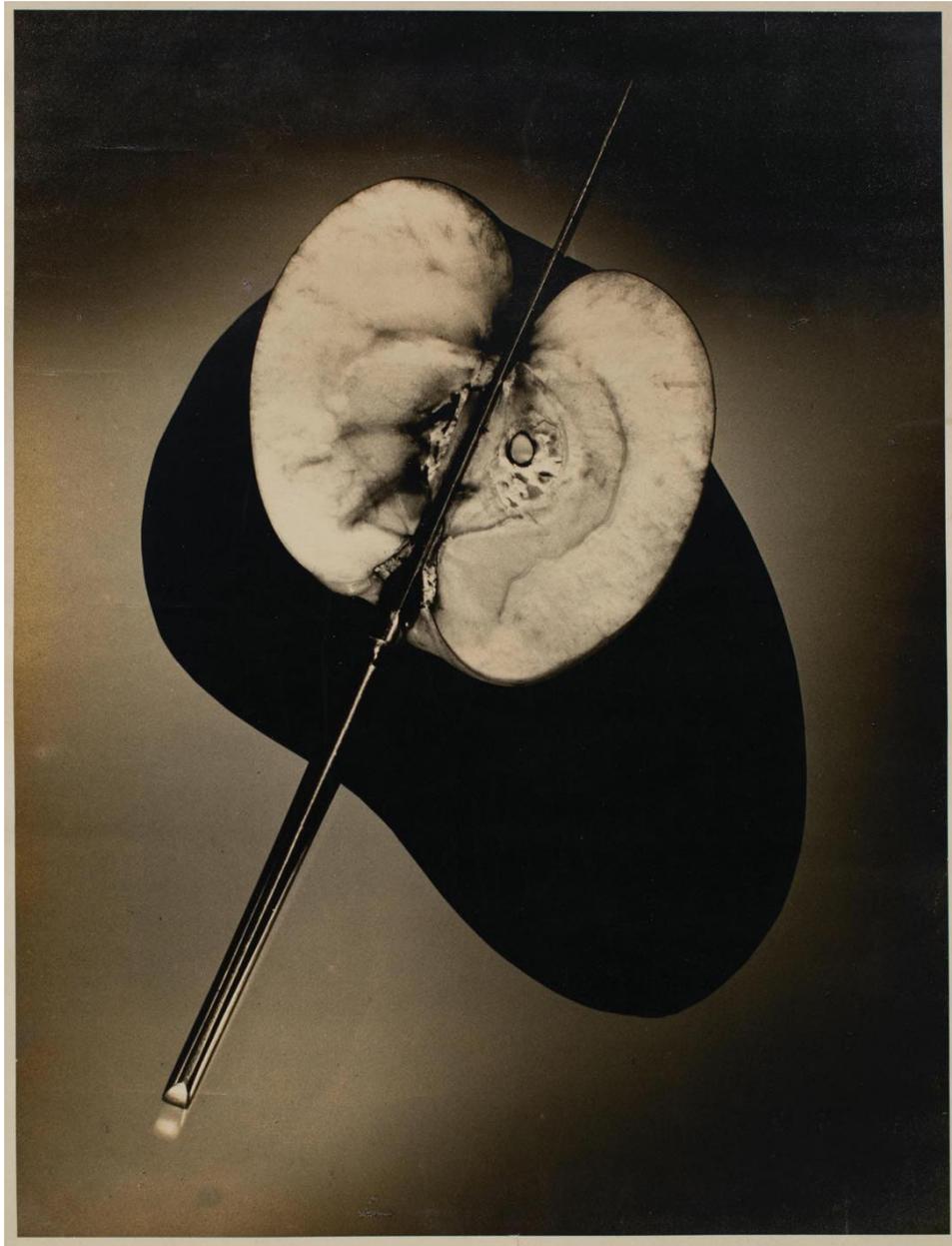
During the war, the Japanese government conscripted numerous photographers to produce national propaganda, sending Nakayama and Kimura to Manchuria. However, according to the testimony of Kimura Ihei, Nakayama defied expectations and returned to Japan without capturing images that perpetuated the Japanese government’s political ideology. This bold display of independence and refusal to be beholden to official narratives. Tragically, he passed away in 1949 at the age of 53 due to a sudden cerebral hemorrhage, leaving a legacy as a photographer steadfast in his convictions.



Iwata Nakayama, *Rose Hip*

Vintage gelatin silver print, 1947, 26.5x21.4cm

Titled on verso



Iwata Nakayama, *Still Life*

Vintage gelatin silver print, c. 1948, 45.5x37.2cm

Wataru Takahashi (1900–1944)

Born in Fukuoka, Takahashi joined the Fukuoka Shayukai in 1935, after graduating from the law department of Kyushu Imperial University. While aiming to become a lawyer, he also began seriously engaging in photography. In 1936, he, Hisashi Hisano, and Wataru Yozo founded the Fukuoka Rollei Club. He was actively engaged in organizing exhibitions and inviting photographers to participate. He also submitted his work and his writings to camera magazines such as *Shashin Bunka* and *Camera Art*. Société IRF was founded in 1939 by seven members: Takahashi, Hisashi Hisano, Giichiro Konomi, Zentoku Tanaka, Hitori Yoshizaki, craftsman Iwataro Koike, and painter Ito Kenshi. Takahashi guided the group's activity as a theorist and contributed a manifesto to *Foto Times* (October, 1939). He photographed clowns, actors, dancers and objects from daily lives, sometimes making use of overlays of negatives and positive images. As the IRF's activities ended around 1941, Takahashi shifted his subject to ethnographic issues and local documentaries in Gokanosho, Kumamoto and Miyakojima, Okinawa.



Wataru Takahashi, *Landscape with a Flower Basket*

Vintage gelatin silver print, 1937, 26.5x24.3cm

Literature:

Avant-garde Photographers in Fukuoka—Société IRF, Fukuoka Art Museum, 1987, p.18

Société IRF Moves Forward, Fukuoka Art Museum, Fukuoka, 2021, exhibition catalog, p.44

Avant-Garde Rising, Tokyo Photographic Art Museum, 2022, exhibition catalog, p.119



Wataru Takahashi, Title unknown

Vintage gelatin silver print, 1936, 35.7x30.1cm

Literature:

Avant-garde Photographers in Fukuoka—Société IRF, Fukuoka Art Museum, 1987, p.13