

Gen Otsuka's expression and his place in Japanese photography

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The photographic world of Gen Otsuka (1912–1992) is supremely difficult to sum up or characterize, comprised as it is by works that span all manners of styles and approaches, varying wildly in purpose, choice of motif, method of expression.

Take his photographic record of Emperor Showa's visit to Kansai (1947), or his portrait of actor Toshiro Mifune (1949); his romantic landscape photography such as *Tokyo Snowscape* (1951); montage works that range from tableaux of contemporary life as in *Performers of the Casino Theater* (1953) to the dynamic landscape expression of *Mt. Fuji and Its Trails* (1952). Then there are the photographic compositions that employ specialized techniques to achieve distinctive visual effects, such as the long-exposure *Falling Stars* (1951) or *Flowers* (1951), which was shot through a condenser lens from an enlarger. Even narrowing the scope to his works devoted to Tokyo, one encounters examples as disparate as the splendid *Ryogoku Fireworks Display* (1951), an image achieved through long exposure and montage, and the *Tokyo Pastoral* series that documented cross-sections of life in the capital through a super-telephotographic lens. Though not included in this exhibition, there are also countless photographs of the stage – from straightforward records of performers to montage works that superimpose multiple layers of time and space onstage. Even these haphazardly chosen samples from Otsuka's oeuvre should be sufficient to demonstrate the sheer diversity of theme and methodology present in his photography.

For a better understanding of Gen Otsuka and of how he came to develop such a breadth of expression, one should first look to his upbringing and early life.

Gen Otsuka was born in Tokyo in 1912 as the eldest son of Masayoshi Otsuka, a major pioneer in photography retouching techniques. Choosing the path of photography partly at his father's encouragement, he enrolled as a photography student at the Tokyo Industrial Arts High School (part of present-day Chiba University), graduating in 1933.

There was at the time a magazine titled *Koga* (1932–33) that was a driving force in modern Japanese photography. Its coterie, among whom were Yasuzo Nojima, Ihei Kimura, Iwata Nakayama and photography critic Nobuo Ina, held regular meetings at which attendees would discuss photography and critique each other's works. Though still a student, Otsuka frequented these meetings, where his talent drew the attention of the members. They printed his work in

Koga and even submitted his work, along with their own, to the British almanac *Modern Photography Annual 1934–35*. As a result, *Gecko*, one of the highlights of Otsuka's early career, made its way into the publication's pages (the original print has since been destroyed by fire), appearing alongside the works of modern American and European photographers such as Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Martin Munkácsi and Lee Miller. At his tender age, Otsuka had already won recognition on the world stage.

After graduation, he joined the Social Affairs Department at the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper's Osaka headquarters in 1934, and began there to establish his career as a "reporter who could both write stories and take photographs." In 1937, he was sent as a special correspondent to Northern China and worked as a reporter in Beijing and its environs, serving in the army for a time. It appears, however, that he had limited interest in documenting the heroism of soldiers on the battlefield, preferring instead to photograph everyday scenes of Chinese life that captured his heart. He was later dispatched to Singapore and other South Asian countries before finally returning to Japan in 1944. In 1945, his family's house burned down in the air raid of Wakayama, and his parents were killed.

After the end of the war in 1945, Otsuka became the deputy chief of the Photography Department at the Asahi Shimbun Company's Osaka headquarters. He set about documenting the post-war turbulence in Osaka through the perspective of a press photographer, while on the side he also started producing his own work, capturing the cityscape in the process of reconstruction with his unique eye for a shot.

In 1948, he was transferred to Asahi's Tokyo headquarters, becoming deputy chief of the Publications Photography Department, which supplied photographs for the company's non-newspaper publications such as the *Asahi Graph*, *Asahi Camera* and *Shukan Asahi* magazines. Finding himself in his element there, Otsuka set out to cultivate his own style of photographic expression. Working with fellow team members Senzo Yoshioka and Katsu Funayama, and freelance photographer Jun Miki, Otsuka launched the *New Views of Tokyo* series (1950–51) and *Present-Day Senses* (1952–) series in *Asahi Camera*, a photography magazine headed by editor-in-chief and noted film critic Hideo Tsumura. These photography series garnered attention with their expression that addressed journalistic themes through a humanitarian perspective and fresh visuals.

Most of Otsuka's above-cited works date from the 1950s, a decade in Japanese photogra-

phy that was dominated by the photographic realism movement spearheaded by Ken Domon. Photographers such as Domon and Ihei Kimura who embarked on their careers in the 1930s as war photojournalists had had no alternative during the war but to have a part in state propagandism. Their movement, which undertook to look squarely at social reality and gained a wide following among amateur photographers, can be said to have emerged out of regret over this dark past.

Otsuka's photography is clearly distinct from that of the adherents of the photographic realism movement. Indeed, one might trace the roots of his work to the modernistic pre-war fine-art photography that Domon and his fellows sought to renounce.

His works that deploy montage and other special techniques can be regarded as examples of the novel visual expression pursued by the *Shinko Shashin* ("emerging photography") movement of the early 1930s. The critical difference, however, between Otsuka's expressions and this pre-war movement is the humanist sensitivity to societal issues that runs through Otsuka's oeuvre, informed by a journalistic insight into the times in which he lived. Despite his methods that sought to innovate visual expression, his themes demonstrate a critical stance toward society.

The photography critic Teruo Okai made the following remark on Otsuka:

It was no doubt Otsuka's deep and undying empathy with the "real world" which prevented him from fully realizing his modernistic ambitions. In the end he was a born photojournalist, never tiring of the journalist's task of exploring and interpreting the workings of human society.

("The Hirohito era through the eyes of Japan's first photojournalist," *The Tracks of Gen Otsuka*. Heibonsha, 1996. Trans. Jeremy Angel)

As a student among the *Koga* circle, Otsuka had soaked up the overwhelming power of modernism under the wings of Iwata Nakayama; but then he had joined a newspaper company to spend a career on the front lines of journalism. As such, Otsuka was a photographer torn between the two poles of modernism and journalism, ever seeking to locate his identity as a photographer; one may credibly attribute to this background the variety found in his expression. Between the late 1950s and the 1960s, the challenge for Japanese photography was to find a way to "get over" the Realist Photography Movement. This aim can be observed in the trajectory of Vivo, a photographic collective (or, as it styled itself, a "Self-Agency") formed in 1959 by participants of 1957's *Eyes of Ten* exhibition, who included Shomei Tomatsu, Ikko Narahara, Eikoh Hosoe and Kikuji

Kawada. While still upholding the strong awareness of social reality that the photographic realism movement espoused, the Vivo photographers established a new mode of delivery that was wholly distinct from the realists' methods. Their photography, monikered *Eizo-ha* ("the image school") by their contemporaries, broke away from the framework of modern photography and its quest for expression unique to photography. Their vision of photography was of a form of expression independent of, yet on a par with, art forms such as painting, cinema, music, literature.

It was presumably amidst these trends that Gen Otsuka's expression found itself torn apart. Granted, Otsuka was very much a photojournalist, as Okai stated. But on the other hand, his work can also be located within the "subjective photography" movement advocated by the German photographer Otto Steinert; indeed, *Snow Fantasy* (1953), one of his best-known works which is currently owned by New York's Museum of Modern Art, had attracted attention precisely in that evaluative context. Expression such as this, whose subject is not immediately identifiable to the viewer, appears a clear departure from the purport of photojournalism. This work, which offers a glimpse of the possibilities of pure image, seems to fly in the face of the conventional historical account of post-war Japanese photography that suggests a straightforward shift from realism to Vivo.

Gen Otsuka retired from his post as head of Asahi's Publications Photography Department in 1967, though he continued to serve as director of the All-Japan Association of Photographic Societies, championing and mentoring amateur photographers. He passed away in Tokyo on December 4, 1992.

The wealth of works and resources that Otsuka left behind are now preserved primarily by the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, but also by the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum and other institutions. The vintage prints in his family's possession – mostly works dating from the 1950s – are resources whose collective value surely exceeds the sum of their individual worth, as they offer new evaluative coordinates based on which we may reconsider and reorganize the history of Japanese photography.