

Rinko Kawauchi is little-known outside Japan but, argues Martin Parr, the refreshing and disturbing innocence of her work sees her destined for greater fame



All pictures © Rinko Kawauchi.

Big in Japan

Photography is a curious beast. Just when you think every permutation has been tried and that all new work looks like something we have seen before, along comes a photographer who can make us look and say: 'That's so simple, why hasn't any one thought of this before?'

Often critics dismiss this work as banal or just plain bad because, as with listening to new music, it takes a while to appreciate it. Memorable examples of this are Robert Frank's *The Americans*, 1959 and more recently William Eggleston's *Guide*, published and exhibited originally in 1976 to



damning reviews from the critics. Nearly 25 years later Eggleston's work is correctly hailed as being a milestone in colour photography and he is praised the world over.

The young Japanese photographer Rinko Kawauchi is another candidate for this role as her work is so distinctive. No other photographer takes images like hers and it is even difficult to work out her lineage and influences, as one can often do when viewing contemporary work.

I was so convinced about the importance of Kawauchi's work that I curated not just one but two shows of her work for the

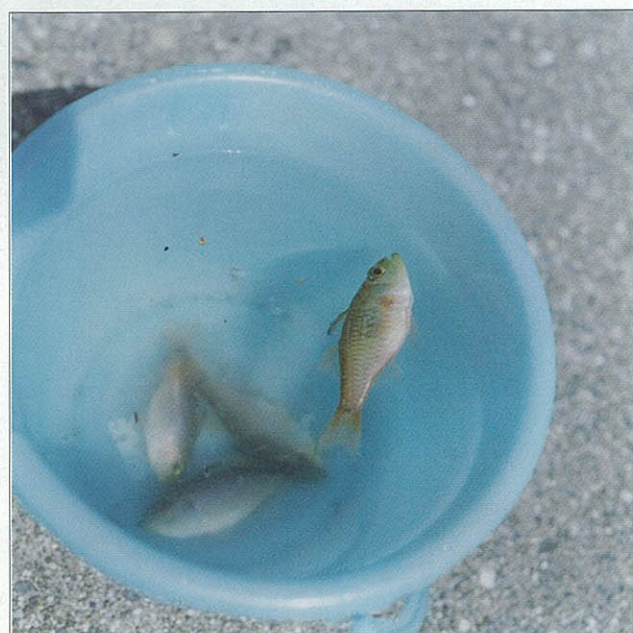
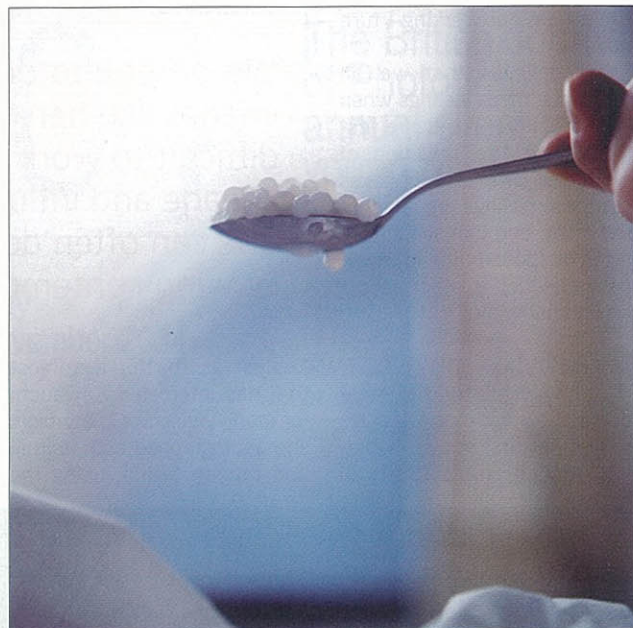
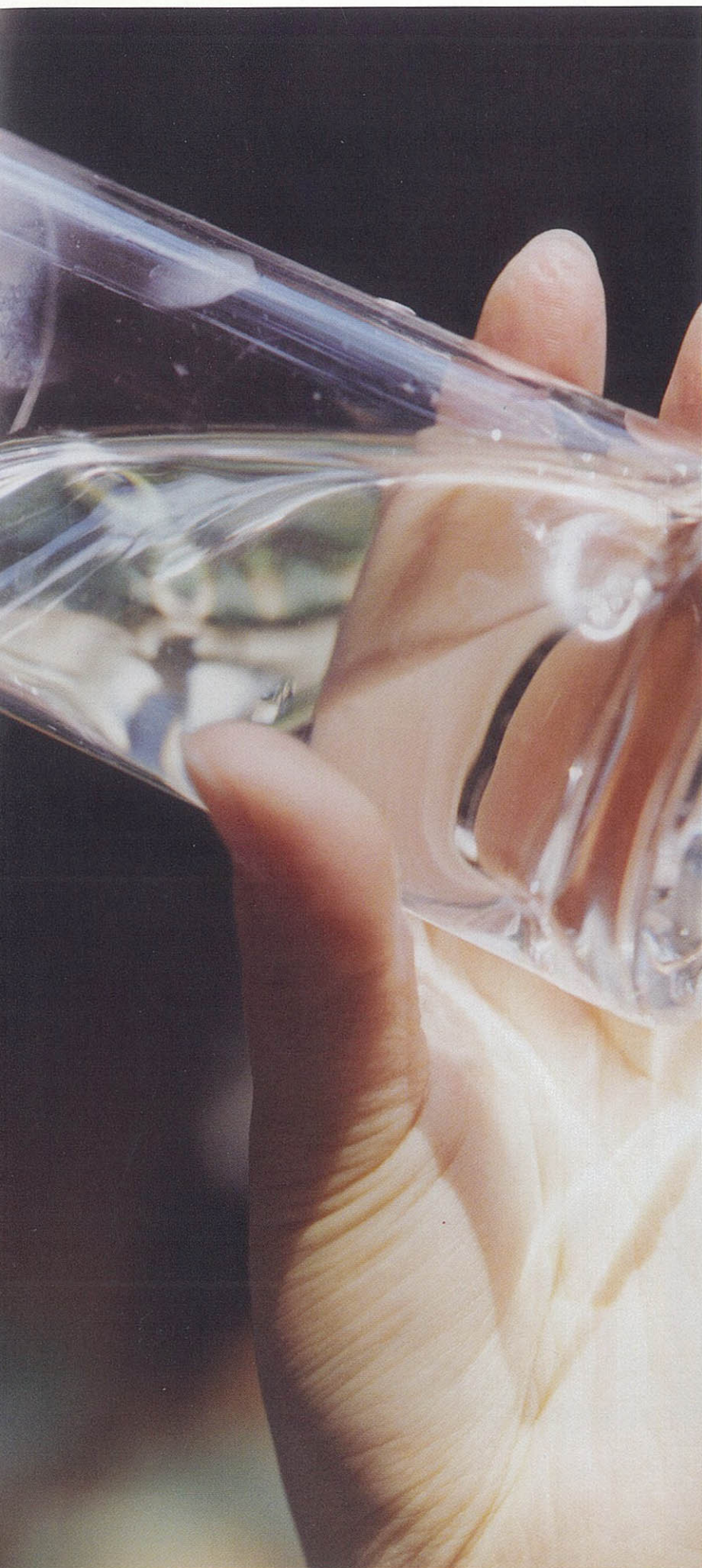
'She has a knack for photographing the simplest object, animal or person, revealing both a feeling of beauty and a sinister undertone.'

Arles festival this summer, where I was guest artistic director.

Although they were her first major shows outside Japan, she has gathered a strong following at home over the last few years.

Her first book *Utatane* was originally published in 2001 but is already in its seventh edition. Over 20,000 copies have been sold – though bear in mind that the Japanese are the biggest photography book-buying public in the world. *Utatane* and the follow up book *Hanabi* won the coveted Ihei Kimura prize for new photography.





Primal fear

So what is her subject matter and why are so many people excited by her work? Well the simple answer is that it concerns the pleasures and terrors of everyday life. She has a knack for photographing the simplest object, animal or person, revealing both a feeling of beauty and a sinister undertone.

I talked to Kawauchi in Arles and we discussed her work and career. Her start in photography was pretty conventional, picking up a camera for the first time on a school trip and finding herself drawn to the medium. But it took her a time to realise she was a photographer not a cameraman – Kawauchi's rather charming definition of boring or commercial photographers (to put it bluntly).

When I asked how many

photographers she thought there were in Japan, she hesitated and said 'a few'. But, surprisingly, Kawauchi also does quite a lot of commercial work, including a whole book to accompany a film. As she says: 'It's the final use of the image that counts, not the reason it was taken.'

Her work is distinctively Japanese, so I asked her if she liked to shoot outside Japan. 'Absolutely,' she replied. 'My subject matter is spiritual, not factual so I can photograph anywhere.'

For me the most compelling aspect of her work is the everyday terror she finds, and I ask if she is frightened by the world. She says she is, but adds: 'I have a switch in my head that I can turn on when I am working and this is how I can locate these feelings.'

When I am not working I turn it off.'

She believes that we all experience these feelings when we are children, and are first questioning the meaning of existence. She also believes that these feelings are latent in everybody, and that she almost has a responsibility to show these qualities to other people through her work.

Rebirth

At Arles I exhibited her most recent show and book *Alia*, as well as her first body of work. *Alia* roughly translates into

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English as 'birth', a subject that has interested Kawauchi for many years. For the project she photographed both animal and human births, using the

internet to make contact with a small group of midwives who put her in touch with some expectant mothers. She won their confidence, and arranged to photograph the upcoming births.

Kawauchi says that birth contains a fascination for her, adding: 'It is something you don't see when you walk down the street, and I wanted to see it and photograph it.'

Asked if she wants a baby herself, she replies: 'Of course, doesn't everybody?'

In Arles the installation for *Alia* was very distinctive, a

scatter of small full bleed, frameless images on the wall, while the *Utatane* exhibition showed larger images placed mainly in a row. Kawauchi insisted on installing this exhibition herself, aided by her agent and book publisher.

But she is humble about her success, only stating that she must be a real 'photographer' now because so many people are interested in her work. Kawauchi has a refreshing and disturbing innocence and I believe that we will hear her name much more frequently in the years to come. **BJP**

