

# APERTURE



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# RINKO KAWAUCHI UTATANE

BY CHARLOTTE COTTON

One of the great effects of the West's burgeoning cultural interest in contemporary art photography has been a reappraisal of photography's histories, including those generated from non-Western centers. Until recently (and still, among many people), the great majority of non-Western photography has been considered solely in its capacity as precursor, correspondent, or result of Western photographic practice.

The country whose photography has perhaps suffered least from such reductive characterization is Japan. The history of Japanese photography reveals a profoundly different positioning of the medium within the country's visual culture than that in the West. Whereas early photography in Europe was from the outset part of a much broader picture-making enterprise in the modern era, there was no real parallel context in Japan, where photography remained distinct from its traditional art and craft counterparts. In Japan, photography has been—simply and eloquently—photography. Up until the recently published and exhibited surveys of Japanese photography since the mid nineteenth century, it had been chiefly the photographers who emerged in the 1950s and 1960s—among them Daido Moriyama, Shomei Tomatsu, Eikoh Hosoe, and Nobuyoshi Araki—who represented to Western eyes the liberated and expressive capacities of photography in Japan.

The West has, however, been more widely influenced by the Japanese *understanding* of the medium, as seen in particular in Japan's innovative graphic use of photography in book form. Japanese photographic books are by and large typified by a lack of preciousness about single images or reproduction quality, and are concerned more with dynamic sequencing and a sense of the wondrous immediacy of the medium. Books remain the principal vehicle for the dissemination of Japanese photography in the West—in part because Japan continues to expand this context for photography, but also because of brutal economics, which allow few but the most celebrated to transport and exhibit their work internationally. Unfortunately, however, only the most insightful book distributors and promoters have brought a selection of new visions from Japan to the West.

So perhaps it should not be surprising if this is likely the first time many readers have seen the sentient, breathtaking photographs of Rinko Kawauchi. This artist's trilogy of books—*Utatane* (Nap, 2001), *Hanabi* (Fireworks, 2001), and *Aiia* (Family, 2004)—reveals Kawauchi, in her early thirties, as an invigorating force in the photography book form. She shapes subtle, elegiac narratives without the aid of interpretative or endorsing text, leaving the reader nonetheless fully nourished by the extent of exquisite and intriguing sights to be found on



this earth. *Utatane*, from which the selection in these pages is drawn, is the most open-ended sequence of the three books. Here, Kawauchi interweaves (with particular emphasis on the juxtapositions on facing pages) sensitized ways of perceiving the world around her, with fleeting confluences of forms that make you wonder how one photographer managed to be present, attuned, and ready to photograph so many pungent observations. *Utatane* is lyrical, even musical in the sounds it recalls: the whirr of a sewing machine, the pop of a party streamer, the sizzle of frying eggs. The narrative (of sorts) that runs through *Utatane* explores the way that everyday objects and occurrences can possess an unpretentious visual charge; it speaks quietly of the profundity in quotidian things.

Such a fluid way of photographing, of course, has international currency that links diaristic photography of intimate life to casually photographed sculptural forms and performances observed on the street—images that have had some prominence in art photography over the last fifteen years. Kawauchi's photography may be both internationally relevant and informed, but defining her practice too closely—aligning it with conventions that allow scenes of, say, an unmade bed or street trash to serve as photography's iconography for human emotions and experience—would not tell the full story.

The scope and ambition of Kawauchi's approach to photography is especially evident in *Aiia*, her most recent book, in which her images revolve (perhaps) around a theme that is far removed from the poetic yet gritty realism of much instamatic art. In this series, animals and humans are shown being born and giving birth; hives of insects and matrices of fish eggs, dewdrops, waterfalls, rainbows, and tree canopies staccato through the image sequence. How can a photographer take such a vast, overworked, potentially saccharine subject as "the miracle of life" and do it such justice? But this is precisely what Kawauchi does, and with a confidence and subtlety that marks her as a new and important voice in contemporary photography. The culmination of this set of photographs reveals far more than a developed way of editing informally observed moments; it is a reflection of what Kawauchi has actively sought out in the world. Not only do her photographs intentionally encourage us to engage with the infinite wonders of life, they also point out a way of seeing how and where these wonders occur. And, as is the case with all great and expressive photographers, the influence of the profound gesture she makes in her books is that we come away from the experience of her imagery with some hope that the beauty and the magic of this world is still there to be found. ▣



All photographs, *Utatane* (Nap), 2001.  
Photographs courtesy Cohan and Leslie, New York / © Rinko Kawauchi





