

# RINKO KAWAUCHI

Interview

CHRIS VIDAL TENOMAA

Portrait

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Rather than just taking pictures, Tokyo-based photographer RINKO KAWAUCHI has developed a language so uniquely personal she might be the only one able to decipher it. For those willing to try, her enigmatic yet captivating images will transport you to a world of light, silence and most importantly inner dialogue. On a sunny afternoon, we meet Rinko at her studio to discuss over the therapeutic nature of taking pictures, social media and the right time to have a drink.

*Hello Rinko, let me ask you first of all, have you ever been to Finland?*

I have been to Norway but not to Finland yet. I have only transferred at the Helsinki airport so I haven't had the chance to visit the country.

*I think you would like it, the nature is so beautiful.*

Yes, I think so. Have you seen the aurora?

*No, I haven't. I live in Helsinki which is in the south and you need to travel to the north, closer to the arctic circle to be able to see it. So Rinko, can you tell me a little bit about your childhood? Did you grow up in an environment where there was a love for art and photography?*

There were no family members in particular who were into art. I spent my childhood till the age of four in Shiga prefecture, near Kyoto, and after that we moved to Osaka. Our family was under pressure and there was a bit of tension, and I felt it too, so to escape reality I did lots of reading at the library which really helped me. I wasn't really into pictures or images as a child, I was more into reading, but I do remember being quite impressed with Koro-pok-guru (a race of small people part of Japanese folklore).

*Was it easier to escape into the world of words than the world of images?*

It was not especially about the pictures or the words, it was more about the book itself. Books took me to another world and being aware of having somewhat of a different reality was of big help, a way to escape from it all which was very comforting.

*Can you remember the first time you took a picture?*

I think the first time I was consciously aware of taking a picture was when I took a photograph of the sea with my regular compact camera when I was in High School. The camera was a gift from my parents, I had asked them for one. I took pictures with this camera for over two years.

*Did you feel connected to the camera right away?*

No, it actually took a while. At the time I wasn't that serious about taking pictures, I was just doing it like any one else would, to remember things or just snapping things around me, but it wasn't really serious until years later when I took my first photography classes.

*How did that come about?*

When I was studying at University, my major was in Graphic Design, but you could take some photography classes and I was interested so I went to check it out and took some of them. After University I got a job at an advertising company, I worked in the graphic design and photography department and that's where I learnt about the technical side of photography, basically from working with photographers. At that time I didn't have a mentor or a role model or anything like that, I knew that working there was not the job of my life, but I learned a lot for sure, mostly the foundation of the job and the technical aspects. Back then I really didn't know any big names in photography, but it was the Nineties in Tokyo and it was kind of a trendy thing so I did know some of the names who were working. I felt it could be a nice job to do, and I felt inspired by them but mostly motivated to do my own thing.

*How did you start taking pictures?*

When I was working at the advertising agency I knew very well that I was there to learn as much as I could, taking advantage of the time I spent there and what the job could provide trying to make the most of it before my next move. During the week I would be focused on the job, doing what I was told, but on weekends I would be there doing my own thing, using the dark room and other facilities and that's when I started to build my body of work.

*Did you know at the time what kind of pictures you wanted to take? Did you have a plan or were you just following your instinct?*

Back then I wasn't thinking of the pictures that I was taking as art, it's something that I was doing more for myself.

*You started to do commercial work, how did you manage with it?*

I knew it was a good learning experience but at the same time I was aware that if I wanted to express myself in a more pure way I couldn't continue to do it as my main job. So for a while I was thinking whether to stop or continue. Back then all those photographers out there were doing commercial and personal work, it was not really like you could just be an art photographer all of a sudden and to be able to support one self. So I thought it would be the same way for me, to combine personal and commercial work, at least in the beginning.

*Was there a turning point?*

It wasn't an overnight thing, it was gradual, and I felt that's what I wanted so it was more like a smooth transition.

*In 2001 you simultaneously released three photographic books, Utatane, Hanabi, and Hanako which helped you launch your career. Was it a conscious decision to release all three books at once?*

By the time of the launch of the books I had accumulated a consistent body of work, before that I had maybe had a little exhibition at a small gallery once a year. The release of the the three books turned out to be more of a coincidence, at first the original idea was to release just one book, *Utatane*, but while I was working on it someone else said that there was a documentary film called *Hanako* and I was asked to take pictures for it, which became the second book. After that, I knew I was going to be working on a third book, *Hanabi*, and so it was more the eye of the editor thinking, "Why don't we publish all three at the same time?" The books were sold separately but released at the same time.

*How was the process of designing and creating the books?*

My background in graphic design was very useful during this process. We were a very small team, it was basically a graphic designer, the editor and myself working on the design of the books.

*Do you think your work will always be connected to the release of a book?*

Yes, I think so.

*Are you thinking of new ways in which books can be done? Do you think about the shape and design of books as much as you do about the content in them?*

The content comes first through a need to express







my feelings, it's only later that the book will take shape accordingly to the editing process. The idea is that the book should showcase the work the best way it can. Trying new ideas and ways is very interesting as well. I will seek and explore as many options as I can but it's about the content in the end, not about an "idea" of the book itself dictating the content. Ideally both should come together, the book and the work, but the first priority is to present the work in the best way possible.

*You often describe your photographs as whispers, do you like to work in silence?*

In the early stages of creating I am aware of silence and the beauty in it as my aesthetic, but it's more my aesthetic mind which has an underlay of quietness. There is a beauty in silence but it's not like I want to express that consciously.

*Can you describe a little bit how a normal day works for you?*

It has changed over the years, when I was in my twenties it was part of my routine to take pictures every day, that was my rhythm then which kept me moving and motivated. Later in life I have come to enjoy taking breaks and have learned to take time off. Maybe I am just getting old! I had so much physical and mental energy when I was young, back then I thought things were not happening fast enough. I was so into that mood, either taking photographs all the time or in the dark room, I couldn't be still. Whenever I had to rest I would need to have a drink. [laughs]

*We all do! When do you feel most inspired?*

Ordinary things, books, cinema, etc. I think it's a natural thing as a photographer to be very inspired by light.

*What kind of equipment do you use?*

I put a lot of focus on equipment, most of the time I use a Rolleiflex 6x6 which is a looking down camera and I also sometimes use a large 4 by 5 camera, but it really depends on the subjects I choose which camera I should use. The equipment always depends on the project. It's all about making the right work, which is the priority, so it's not going to be about a camera to make it right, it's the other way round.

*How does taking pictures make you feel, is it therapeutic?*

It's more like a healing feeling, it's really hard to choose a word. It's not about feeling happy nor calm, it's more about talking to myself and looking at my work. It's almost like meditation.

*Do you ever feel sad when working?*

I am aware of it but I don't really feel sad, in general the feeling of sadness or depression are essential feelings to any human. I am not concentrating on it, but I know it's there. It's more about accepting it. In a way photography has helped me keep that on toe as it helps me understand and accept the world is full of positive and negative.

*When developing your pictures, how do you deal with accidents, mistakes or when things just don't turn as you expected.*

I like it when there's surprises and mistakes. When something unexpected happens it can give another level of depth to the work.

*Does it make you question a picture if the reaction to it is the opposite you expected?*

I don't really question myself when this happens cause I know what I like. But I must say it does make me happy when people like my work.

*The whole process of taking a picture is about question everything, how do you feel when in doubt?*

Doubt itself can be a motivation, but doubting everything is certainly not good. So it's about balancing believe and doubt and process them together. This conflict can help the work be more interesting and stronger.

*Has your methodology changed since the start of digital photography? Are in the end analog and digital, just mediums?*

Certainly analog and digital are two total different things and the experience of each of them is different too. Of course digital is a new thing and with new things there's more choice, but it's just another tool to express oneself. I try to think of digital in a positive way and I just hope film will not totally vanish. I work with both digital and film, often at the same time.

*Can you describe your editing process?*

In general, if I am in the mood, I can fully focus on it and go to the dark room and print everything out, this process I do totally alone. I also take the initiative for layouts, but once I know I am publishing a book I bring the idea to the editor, and then I listen to his feedback and if he has any comments and if I agree with them, then I will make the changes needed. Most of the time I edit alone, but I have a manager and sometimes I might consult with her if I want to have an external opinion.

The process of photographing and editing is a lonely one, you are holding tight on a project before releasing into the world. In a way it's like having a baby, once it's out in the world it's going to be its own thing.

Of course it's not exactly like having a baby but it kind of feels like it. The process of working on a book is very intimate and as it grows it develops its own character and personality and once it's out there

it's no longer mine. Once the baby is out in the world I can finally let go.

*Two themes that are present in your work and in constant dialogue are nature and city life.*

I don't think of them as themes that I seek, simply cause those are human themes that we have no choice but to face.

*What is your relationship to abstract photography?*

I think even when the subject is represented in an abstract way it has a meaning. A part I really enjoy, when editing and working on a group of images, is finding the right balance between abstract and figurative photographs.

*Do you think abstract photography is an expression of the subconscious?*

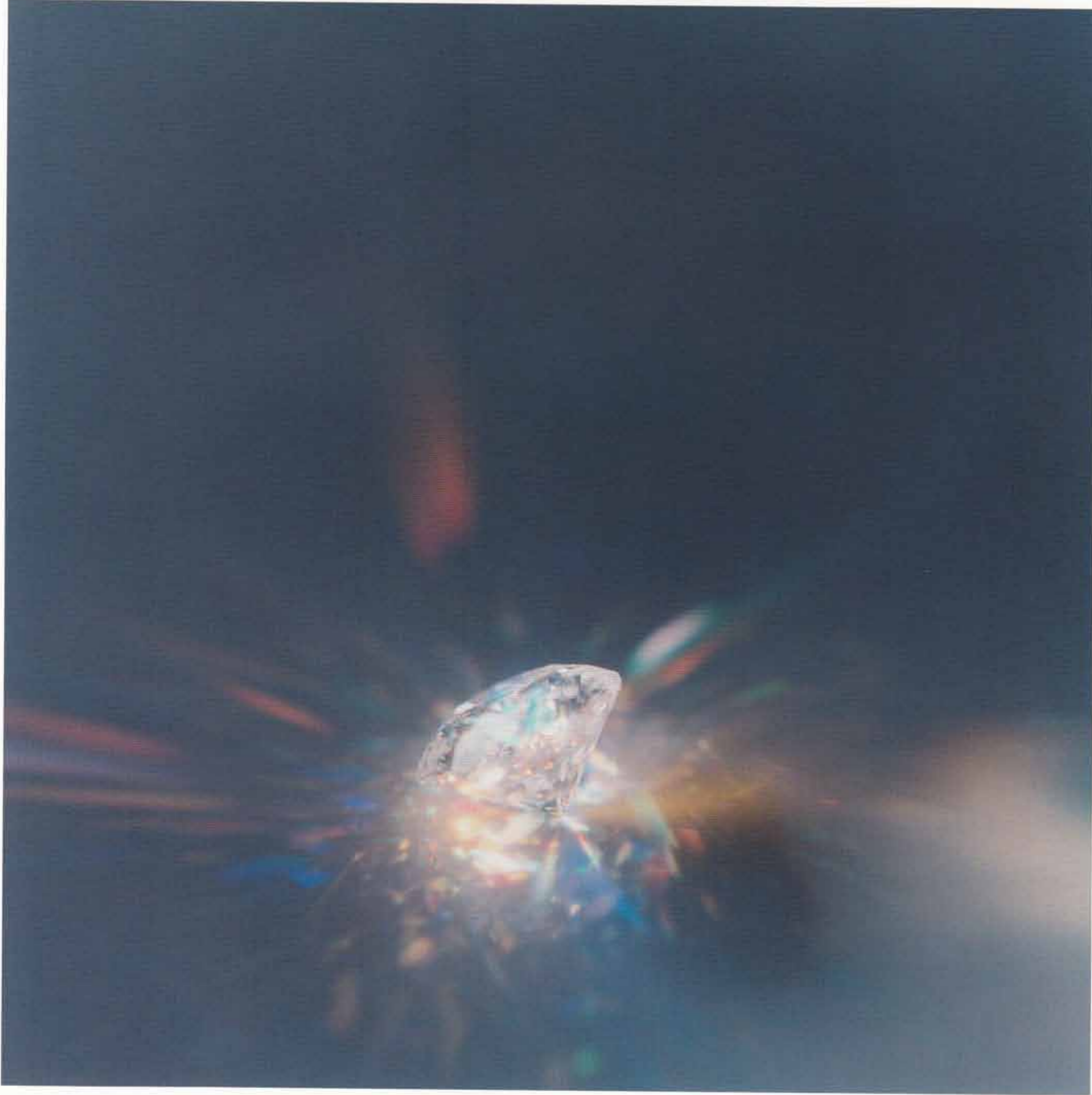
It's a mixed kind of thing, sometimes I really know what something is going to be like and sometimes it's really about letting go. It's a repetition, that goes on and off, of the conscious and the subconscious in which I seek what I cannot see. It's the balance of doubting and being confident, of coming in and out.

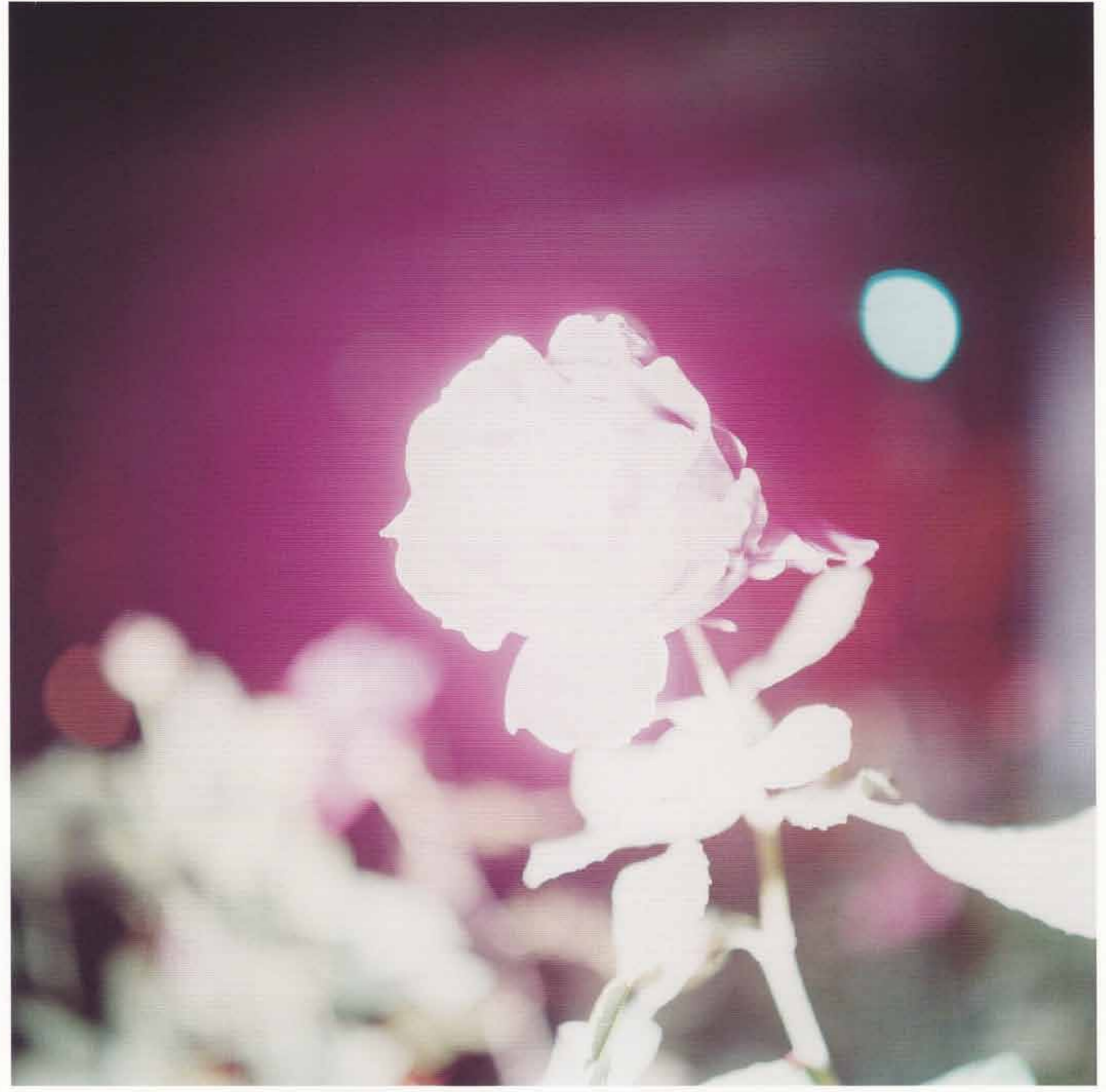
*Would you ever consider doing a book containing only abstract work?*

It's not something I am really thinking about at the moment, I am more interested in the possibilities of mixing figurative and abstract images together and finding ways to combine them. Maybe later on in the future it could be interesting.

*(At this point Rinko reaches to her library where she picks up a copy of her book, Ametsuchi)*

The way I was making this book, combining abstract and non abstract images together I think it helps expand the work, which is something I really









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turn off the phone, don't look at a screen,  
go to a library, touch something...”

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like. For example this picture is not an accident, (image in page 213, abstract black and lines image), I did it intentionally by use of a laser pointer and long exposure, it takes ten minutes to take one picture, I did this in a planetarium.

*You used the technique of folding the paper in such a way that the sides are closed. In Ametsuchi the closed side is at the top of the page and the bottom side is open allowing the inside to show that in some of the inside pages the images are printed in inverted colours.*

Yes, the theme of this book is the juxtaposition of positive and negative, literally. The negative is always behind, and that's why I didn't open the end of the page, so it's hidden and only showing a little bit.

*Have you ever done one book, knowing exactly beforehand how you wanted it to be like?*

No, the result of a book is a step by step process.

*You don't give titles to your photos, you only title the body of work embodied in a book. Can you explain how you choose the titles of your books?*

I like words that can have multiple meanings. One thing I keep in my mind when choosing a book title is that it's a bit poetic and that it can have a universal meaning. I don't want people to think of something too specific represented by a concrete word. In this case the title, *Ametsuchi*, has three different meanings: heaven and earth, top and bottom and is also the title of one of the oldest Japanese chants (a pangram in which each character of the Japanese syllabary is used). It took a long time to come up with the title, and it was in fact my manager, who helped me come up with it.

*You had an online dairy for a while.*

Yes, I stopped it.

*Are you on Instagram?*

Yes and no, I have an account but never been active.

*Are you going to start?*

No idea. [laughs]

*What's your relationship to social media and the digital world?*

For people born in this era, it's something that is already there, I can't even imagine how it must be like to grow up when it's not possible to live without these things. I feel lucky to have known analog before these ages, now everything is way too different to even compare.

*Do you think there's always going to be enough people that love paper?*

Young people still buy LPs and magazines and books. Maybe in the same way people can still preserve the goodness of printing, as long as it's done right there should be enough interest from young people.

*Why do you think there's a revival of analog photography?*

Physical existence give us a relief and certainty. A human being in not just a mind and having psychical things can be comforting. And clearly, there's a different temperature to a picture that is printed than to look at it on a screen.

*Anybody with a phone can be a photographer nowadays. The technology and shared information is very advanced and accessible to almost everybody.*

Because of social media and the fact that there simply is too much information all the time I think it is something that could make people hurt and even get sick cause of it. It's a bit like the sickness of the human being of today. Take a break, turn off the computer, turn off the phone, don't look at a screen, go to a library, touch something... Maybe these things can heal a little bit. Experiences are the important thing, like these photos in *Ametsuchi*, I could have easily googled about the fires (a traditional controlled burn farming method called yakihata) but it was not about learning about them but about going there and experiencing them myself. The experience is the most important part of the process of taking the picture. That's how I work, that's why I am a photographer.

SSAW

Translation SAORI OHARA

