THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
SATURDAY/SUNDAY, JUNE 6 - 7, 2009

yr

Hiroh Kikai: Persona
Yancey Richardson Gallery • 535 W. 22nd St.
Through July 2

Hiroh Kikai (b. 1945) is also a street photographer, but quite different from Helen Levitt. Whereas Levitt captured the interplay between people on the street, Mr. Kikai concentrates on individuals. Instead of Levitt's 35mm Leica, he uses a 120mm square-format Hasselblad. For 30 years he has regularly visited the Asakusa district of Tokyo, a somewhat down-at-the-heels tourist area, and asked people he selects to pose against the blank wall of the Sensoji Temple, a neutral backdrop that isolates them and emphasizes their particularity.

Over the years, he has shot more than 600 portraits this way; 14 are on display at Richardson.

The poetic titles Mr. Kikai gives his photographs suggest the flavor of the images: "A man who said he's just had a drunken quarrel, 1987"; "A clerk who was letting her hair grow long, 1987"; "A nurse on an internal medicine ward, who'd recently moved here from the provinces, 1999"; "A young man who walked here from far away, 1999"; "An older man with a penetrating gaze, 2001." The last wears a suit and tie, fedora hat and surgical mask, and leans on a cane. He is as distinct a personality as "A maintenance man for industrial dishwashers, 2002," who wears a shiny bicycle helmet and shoulder bag, and peers at the camera through hip sunglasses.

The gallery also has up 11 well-known portraits by August Sander, whom Mr. Kikai acknowledges as an inspiration.

535 WEST 22ND STREET
NEW YORK CITY 10011
646 230 9610 FAX 646 230 6131
INFO@YANCEYRICHARDSON.COM

THE NEW YORKER
SUMMER FICTION ISSUE
JUNE 8 & 15, 2009

y|r

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

HIROH KIKAI
Fourteen black-and-white photographs taken in one Tokyo neighborhood between 1974 and 2003 provide a core sample of a portrait project that Kikai continues to pursue after some thirty years on the street. His subjects, most of whom stand before a featureless temple wall, are wonderfully random: a young girl in traditional dress, a boy in a crude homemade wrestler's mask, a maintenance man in a biker's helmet, a bunny in a cape. The gallery has hung a group of August Sander portraits in its project space to draw the obvious parallel (Diane Arbus is another influence), but Kikai's work is quirkier, less formal, and wittily captioned. Don't miss "A man who said he'd just had a drunken quarrel." Through July 2. (Richardson, 535 W. 22nd St. 646-230-9610.)

535 WEST 22ND STREET
NEW YORK CITY 10011
646 230 9610 FAX 646 230 6131
INFO@YANCEYRICHARDSON.COM
WWW.YANCEYRICHARDSON.COM

ART

Hiroh Kikai

A chronicler of free spirits captures life-story snaps

Known for his street portraits of free-thinking outsiders, Japanese photographer Hiroh Kikai has been composing pictures of eccentric people, Tokyo cityscapes, and street scenes in India and Turkey for nearly 30 years.

Diane Arbus is his strongest influence. Although his first interest was philosophy, Kikai switched to photography after discovering Arbus' dynamic portraiture. He even used the same film format as her for his work.

He provides rare views of Asakusa. The Tokyo neighborhood, which lies outside the old city walls, was once filled with pleasure quarters, popular theaters, and other diversions, and the locals still project an old-school independent streak.

Each image tells a tiny tale. Kikai photographs local characters in natural light, posed against the plain walls of the Sensoji Temple, and captions each image with a spare, miniature biography.

Check out Hiroh Kikai's gallery page, read a recent interview, view a slideshow of his work, and buy his *Asakusa Portraits* book.

– Paul Laster

How did you like this article? LIKED IT DISLIKED IT

URBANISM

Detroit reborn »

Is the city poised to become the next artists' haven?

The Michigan-based Kresge Foundation just dropped $450,000 in grant money to bring artists to Detroit. Is the Motor City prepped to eclipse Brooklyn as the epicenter of the creatively broke? (The cost of housing screams, "Yes!") We take a look at the evidence.
Read more »

How did you like this article? LIKED IT DISLIKED IT

VIRAL

Share the Web

Eight recent obits that aren't for Michael Jackson »
Blog: Summer of Science — particle-physics road trip! »
Gallery: Mermaids frolic in the Coney Island drizzle »

Shoutbox

You could win a Weber grill! What's the craziest thing you've barbecued? Tweet @Flavorpill and the best answer wins!

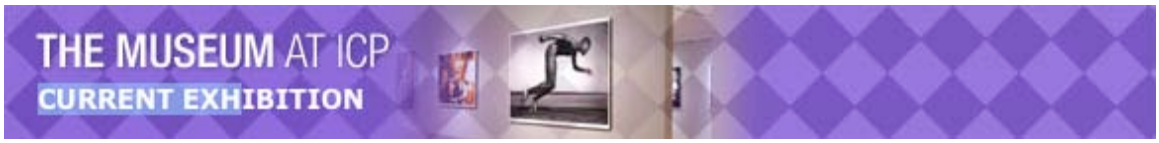
Oh, and Happy Canada Day!

Looking for events?

If you want events, head over to Flavorpill. For an up-to-the-minute culture fix, check out Flavorwire.

646 230 9610 FAX 646 230 6131
INFO@YANCEYRICHARDSON.COM
WWW.YANCEYRICHARDSON.COM

YANCEY RICHARDSON GALLERY



Heavy Light: Recent Photography and Video from Japan

MAY 16 – SEPTEMBER 7, 2008

HIROH KIKAI b. Yamagata, Japan, 1945

In 1973 Hiroh Kikai, who had recently graduated from Hosei Univeristy with a degree in philosophy, began to make impromptu portraits of the people he encountered in the busy Asakusa district in northeast Tokyo. He has continued the project until the present. Working with a handheld Hasselblad camera and black-and-white film, he photographs his subjects in even, natural light as they stand in a pose of their own choosing before the plain vermilion walls of the celebrated Sensoji temple.

Kikai says that he rarely spends more than 10 minutes with any of his subjects. But in that time he manages to carry out an intense study of their attire, physiognomy, body language, and expression. With surprising frequency, he is able to capture in a few exposures an image that does more than suggest the outlines of his sitter's personality. With a radical economy of photographic means, Kikai seems to isolate and lay bare his subject's essential character. He says that his aim is to create portraits that set in motion what he calls a "two-way conversation between the viewer and the picture."

535 WEST 22ND STREET
NEW YORK CITY 10011
646 230 9610 FAX 646 230 6131
INFO@YANCEYRICHARDSON.COM
WWW.YANCEYRICHARDSON.COM

The New York Times

June 13, 2008
ART REVIEW | 'HEAVY LIGHT'

Japanese Culture, in Vivid Color

By ROBERTA SMITH

It was probably too much to expect the International Center of Photography to have two excellent group shows of contemporary art in a row. Not many New York museums, especially small ones, manage that regularly. Thus "Heavy Light: Recent Photography and Video From Japan," coming after the dense, thought-provoking "From the Archive," is just average, or a little less, by the center's own standards.

Organized by Christopher Phillips, a curator at the center, and Noriko Fuku, an independent curator from Japan, "Heavy Light" feels a bit phoned in. But with 13 artists, most of them in their 30s and 40s, it is the first large museum survey of Japanese photography in this country in decades. It contains some names that are new and worth knowing and others that are familiar and worth remembering. And when all else fails, it provides, at times inadvertently, some valuable glimpses of Japanese life and culture today, including a tendency to prolong adolescence.

One of its revelations is how much the artistic tradition of extreme artifice, visible in everything from gold-leaf folding screens and lacquer ware to bonsai gardening and ikebana, continues to course through Japanese art, clashing or mingling with reality.

On the down side the show has commitment and space problems. The catalog lacks a case-making essay, resorting instead to interviews with the artists (most of them conducted by Ms. Fuku), as if the curators couldn't get involved enough to argue for their selections.

Apparently because of a lack of wall space, Masayuki Yoshinaga's extraordinary photographs of the Goth-Lolita subculture — young women and the occasional young man in hybrid get-ups, like goth black pinafores — is visible only one image at a time, on a large digital screen. This reduces their impact and their contribution to the visual energy of the show. (If you want to see Mr. Yoshinaga's images hanging on a wall, a nomadic gallery run by Mako Wakasa is showing his work, through Saturday, in a small ground-floor space at 139 Norfolk Street, near Rivington Street, on the Lower East Side.)

“Heavy Light” divides between those photographers who include people in their images and those who don’t. The don’ts, while fewer, have a much higher rate of success.

One of them, Naoya Hatakeyama, quietly gives the show its center of gravity, with large color images that push fairly rugged documentary subjects toward artifice. A photograph of a lime quarry blast shows rock fragments hurtling outward in a nearly perfect orb, and images of Tokyo buildings taken from water level in a concrete-walled river qualify as accidental Cubism. A wall covered with 96 views of Tokyo taken from the tops of high-rises over 16 years shows a world carpeted with mostly gray buildings. Changing light seems to be the subject of the images, which sometimes are taken from the same location. But then you realize that the images have been taken years apart and that they also record the city’s changing architecture.

In colorful but deserted images of an entertainment district near Osaka, Naoki Kajitani shows the Japanese love of artifice in society’s tawdrier sectors in neon signs advertising drink or exotic dancers; a display of pornographic magazines or a shot of a lone but red kiosk plastered with posters.

Risaku Suzuki’s images rarely stress the human presence, although you feel it everywhere, as the images take you along roads and through deserted squares, as if on a kind of journey. The images are from Mr. Suzuki’s continuing “Kumano” series and chronicle an end-of-winter Shinto pilgrimage to a revered mountain near his hometown. Their offhandedness creates the sense of motion, but it also weakens the individual images, which tend not to hold your attention.

As a master of ikebana, Yukio Nakagawa, who was born in 1918, has a long experience with the tension between natural and artificial, and backed into photography while using it to document his work. His arrangements are Surreal temporary sculpture: a long, curved iris leaf filled with rose petals lies like a curved knife blade dipped in blood. A glazed ceramic stiletto (by the ceramic artist Miwa Ryosaku) houses a “fingered citron,” a fruit that looks more like a squid than a lemon. The combination conjures a particularly grotesque version of the Cinderella story.

The whiff of a fairy tale gone wrong becomes overwhelming in the large, gloomy, often violent set-up photographs by Miwa Yanagi. They owe quite a bit to Cindy Sherman and Anna Gaskell, but they are the most convincing work that Ms. Yanagi, something of a veteran on the art fair circuit, has yet produced. Strangely she is the only artist in the show to be favored in the catalog with both an interview and an essay, and by no less than the art historian Linda Nochlin.

The bonsai shoe drops with Makoto Aida, who specializes in making and photographing sculpture that fuses bonsai gardening with young girls. Described as a maverick, Mr. Aida's catalog interview is a long, amusing and often touching autobiographical ramble that begins, “I am from a yakuza family.” As seen here, his work is not nearly so effective, but might be better if he would stay out of the pictures.

Tsuyoshi Ozawa makes weapons out of vegetables and poses people (mostly women) armed with them in front of buildings, including one of the most photographed of Hiroshima’s bombed-out buildings. Enough said. Midori Komatsubara makes elaborately staged movie-still images based on the popular yaoi (“boys’ love”), a subgenre of Japanese comics, which brim with sexual frisson and technique, but not much else. Kenji Yanobe’s video installation, “Blue Cinema in the Woods,” puts a more satiric spin on childish things, mixing a visit to the zoo with 1950s “duck and cover” instructional films and shots of mushroom clouds. The work also involves Mr. Yanobe’s father, who is an amateur ventriloquist, and a Geiger counter.

The most impressive artists who engage the human form are poles apart. Hiroh Kikai, born in 1945, is a kind of August Sander without a studio. Since 1973 he has roamed the Asakusa district of Tokyo, briefly interviewing and then taking black and white photographs of strangers who pose themselves against the blank walls of the Sensoji Temple. "A tattoo artist and his son," records a young man with peroxided hair, holding a child with a vertiginous Mohawk who resembles a young witch. A morose-looking man wearing a "love and peace" T-shirt and a skull-and-cross-bones cap provides his own caption: "I've always wanted to be different since I was a kid, and I've always been knocked around for it." These images are full of soul and respect. They remind you that artifice understated is style, which seems to come naturally to the Japanese.

Born in 1977, Tomoko Sawada is widely known for photo-booth and yearbook pictures of girls and young women in which, using computers and variations in hair, makeup and expression, she plays each and every character. Here Ms. Sawada is represented by two examples of her "School Days" series, which show groups of girls in their school uniforms lined up in neat rows. Subtle feats of acting that quietly satirize Japan's homogeneity and emphasis on conformity, these images are initially innocuous. As their single subject emerges from the crowd, they become quite demonic. They have a focus, reserve and ambition that is too often missing from this exhibition.

"Heavy Light: Recent Japanese Photography and Video" is at the International Center of Photography, 1133 Avenue of the Americas, at 43rd Street; (212) 857-0043, icp.org, through Sept. 7.

Conscientious

Conscientious - Jörg Colberg's weblog about fine-art photography (and more)
Posted on September 10, 2008 1:33 PM

Review: Asakusa Portraits by Hiroh Kikai

These are exciting times for contemporary photography, with vast amounts of new work to be seen, vast numbers of books published, vast numbers of young photographers emerging. Looking back over the past few years, one thing appears to be unchanged, though: Only every so often, one encounters photography that has the ability to stop one in its tracks, that makes everything else disappear for a moment. Those moments are to be cherished, especially since they're so rare, so unpredictable.

I do remember the last such moment very clearly. At the Heavy Light show, ICP's recent survey of contemporary Japanese photography, I discovered the photography of Hiroh Kikai, or actually more accurately his "Asakusa Portraits". I went to see the show twice (something which I almost never do), in part because of the work. The second time, I was with two photographer friends (each with lots of big shows and several books on their respective CVs), and they both reacted to "Asakusa Portraits" the way I did: They were completely mesmerized.

Needless to say, Asakusa Portraits has been *the* book I have been looking forward to, and it now is available.

It has become customary to include August Sander's name in any discussion of portraiture (just like any talk about photography in general often is "enhanced" by some Roland Barthes quote and the use of the words "sublime" and/or uncanny), but if any comparison of Hiroh Kikai's portraiture with somebody else's could be made it would be with Diane Arbus'. But even so, it is never very obvious to me why one would want to refer to someone from the photographic pantheon when discussing a photographer's work, and inferring Diane Arbus here would only stress what one could call superficial similarities.

Hiroh Kikai's portraiture is very direct and sometimes very humourous, with the humour being partly created by the colourful characters in the photographs, partly by the deadpan titles of the photographs ("A man who came a long way to eat eel, 1986", "A seller of footwear who

suffered from a bad leg when he was a child, 1985"). But it would be wrong to say that everything is just funny, in fact a lot of the portraits or their descriptions are not funny at all. So maybe here the Diane Arbus comparison would make sense: Just like Arbus' work, superficially all about "freaks", was really not about freaks, but about people, so is Hiroh Kikai's.

Asakusa Portraits is the book that I will be coming back to often over the next few weeks, to discover more and more layers; and it is certain to be on top of my list of the best photography books of 2008. Asakusa Portraits is an absolute must-buy, especially for anyone interested in portraiture.