



‘For a New World to Come,’ Experiments in Japanese Art and Photography

By **KEN JOHNSON** OCT. 29, 2015

There’s a French phrase that has no elegant equivalent in English: “reculer pour mieux sauter,” or, to step back to better leap forward. Figuratively, it nicely captures the experience of withdrawing from a challenge to gather oneself for a bigger effort. It’s an idea viewers might usefully bear in mind in approaching “For a New World to Come: Experiments in Japanese Art and Photography, 1968-1979,” a dry but exceptionally interesting and informative exhibition divided between Japan Society Gallery and the Grey Art Gallery at New York University.

Organized by Yasufumi Nakamori, a curator at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, where the show debuted in March, the exhibition presents about 250 photographs, photography books, paintings, sculptures and videos produced by 29 Japanese artists from 1968 to around 1979. In their works, you see memes and trends — including the assimilation of photography into contemporary art — that would continue to resonate in ensuing decades around the world even up to today.

But contrary to the exciting, optimistic-sounding exhibition title, a curiously disaffected and even depressive mood runs throughout the show. Almost everything is in black and white, and most of the works are driven by abstract, hermetic conceptual purposes. It’s not the sort of photography that joyfully embraces the world in vividly sensuous depictions of people and places.

With its technocratic-sounding title, Koji Enokura’s “P.W. No. 50 Symptom — Floor,

Water” (1974), an image of a dark puddle of water on a dark linoleum floor, is emblematic. In one of the excellent catalog’s essays, the photography historian Robin Kelsey comments, “In a distinctly institutional space, reminiscent of schools, government ministries and hospitals, Enokura’s pool of water becomes a haunting sign of social distress and historical failure.” Many other works in the show have a similarly downbeat feeling. That might not sound like a lot of fun, and it’s not. But from a historical perspective, it’s fascinating and illuminating.

So what’s going on here?

As it was in the United States, Europe and other places around the world, the year 1968 was a high-water mark for youthful rebels against social, political and artistic establishments in Japan. The spirit of that moment is reflected in a rousing film, displayed as a video on a flatscreen at the start of both presentations. Made in 1968 by Toshio Matsumoto, “For the Damaged Right Eye” is a manic, 12-minute montage of people dancing and rioting, psychedelic graphics, pop music and tinny broadcasters’ voices. It channels the euphoria and anxieties of the ’60s with great verve. But it’s a misleading introduction to the exhibition.

In the decade that followed, the establishment’s walls held fast, and the 1970s brought ideological disillusionment for activists and utopian dreamers. That sense of failure infected photography. While the medium once aspired to bear witness to truth and history and to engage people around the world in a common enterprise, the artists here seem weighed down by a feeling that photography could not deliver on its promises.

One response was a retreat into personal subjectivity. Takuma Nakahira’s grainy, blurry, nocturnal cityscapes of the late ’60s have a hazy, surrealistic feeling, as if you were seeing into the mind of an uneasily dreaming sleeper. Nobuyoshi Araki’s deliberately anti-sensational “Sentimental Journey” (1971), records moments during his honeymoon in diaristic, snapshotlike pictures. Several pictures from Shigeo Gocho’s book “Self and Others” (1977) portray children with a poignant immediacy. In his image of identically dressed twin girls in a park, there’s a sense of wonder at the sheer existence of other people.

More prevalent in the exhibition is photography that focuses on photography itself, as if it were a patient suffering from a possibly terminal illness and compelled to poke and prod itself from every conceivable angle.

Time and space stripped bare became a theme for some. A 1970 sequence by Tatsuo Kawaguchi shows four long boards placed in parallel on a beach in the first picture. Subsequent images document the tide rising and eventually engulfing the boards. While it

appears ascetically cerebral, you may read in the series a plangent metaphor about how time eventually washes everything into oblivion.

Numerous other works deal with photographic illusions. Masafumi Maita's "Situation 1" (1973) consists of a photograph of the ocean enlarged to 81 by 77 inches and a white fluorescent tube attached horizontally just below the horizon line. The actual artificial light appears as to be reflected by the illusionary ripples of the water in the photograph. What's real? What's illusory? What is true? What is fiction? Are representations of the world in our minds any more trustworthy than photographic representations? Epistemological anxiety hovers like a dark cloud over the exhibition.

Treatment of photographic prints as objects to be photographed recurs elsewhere. A 1969 series by Daido Moriyama called "Accident" depicts different views of the aftermath of an automobile crash. Mr. Moriyama copied the imagery from a public service poster designed to encourage safe driving. Like Andy Warhol's "Death and Disaster" paintings based on horrific newspaper photographs, Mr. Moriyama's series projects an acidic skepticism about photography and its too-often vampiric relationship to the world.

The show ends on the threshold of a decade, the '80s, in which avant-garde photographers worldwide would shake off the depressive sense of their medium's inadequacies — if not its self-reflexive narcissism — to spectacularly leap forward and compete with painting and sculpture as a major art form in the global art marketplace. A sequel explaining how and why that happened would be good to see.

"For a New World to Come: Experiments in Japanese Art and Photography, 1968-1979" runs through Dec. 5 at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, Manhattan, 212-998-6780, nyu.edu/greyart, and through Jan. 10 at Japan Society, Manhattan, 212-832-1155, japansociety.org.

A version of this review appears in print on October 30, 2015, on page C33 of the New York edition with the headline: Picturing Social Upheavals in a Personal Way.