

Shōmei Tōmatsu: Skin of the Nation

Cameras and film were invented in Europe and America, and for a century Japanese photographers learned their styles from the West. It was only after World War II—when their country was absorbing Western fashions and ideas more hungrily than ever—that they began to develop their own unique ways of seeing. The best Japanese photographers of the 1950s and 1960s combined an intensely emotional realism with aspects of Surrealism and classical Japanese art, developing one of the most distinct photographic cultures in the world.

Shōmei Tōmatsu was born in 1930 in Nagoya, the center of Japan's automobile and aircraft industries. He was a schoolboy in the decade when his country embraced right-wing nationalism, conquered much of East Asia, and then suffered catastrophic destruction during World War II. Too young to be drafted, he watched up close as Nagoya was incinerated by bombs; he came of age in the cosmopolitan air of postwar Japan, where the foreign and new mixed incessantly with the native and old.

Tōmatsu has worked as a photographer for more than fifty years. This retrospective follows the majority of his principal themes, but his oeuvre covers an even greater range. His pictures insist fiercely upon freedom—the freedom to leap from one subject to another without concern for conventional categories; to turn from the deeply serious to pure whimsy and back again; to desecrate and celebrate the symbols of Japan. He often says that his immediate contemporaries believed in nothing—that they saw Japan's old beliefs crumble, yet had known such violence that they had little confidence in the future. Tōmatsu's photographs are emphatic in their conviction that one's personal experience of wounds, earth, detritus, sunlight, and skin contains more truth than grand ideas, and that one ought to trust one's own eyes before the voice of any authority.

Tōmatsu's era saw Japan rebuild itself headlong, as individual men and women took charge more than at any time in memory. Responsive, mobile, flexible, and inexpensive, photography was an ideal medium for exploring the questions that troubled the nation, and Tōmatsu did this with what his fellow photographer Daidō Moriyama has called "awesome tenacity." Even Tōmatsu's most playful work has great moral force. He has been one of the most eloquent artists of Japan's last half century, and one of the most eloquent anywhere to study what happens when the West collides with the world beyond it.

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Après-Guerre

In 1945 the most powerful weapons ever built were unleashed on Japan's cities and civilians. A new word was coined to describe what remained—*yakinohara*, or “burnt plains.” Tōmatsu names this scene of devastation as his starting point, though he was only fifteen when the war ended, spent the first year of peace scrambling for food, and did not obtain his first camera until 1950. The feeling of the early postwar—which the Japanese, borrowing from the French *après-guerre*, called *apure-geru*—was strong in his work through the 1950s, even in photographs that touch the war only by allusion. The subjects of his series *Barge Children's School*, for example, were born well after the conflict ended, but the greed with which they devour their rice suggests the wandering orphans of the war years. Tōmatsu's famous photograph of a rubber boot floating in silvery mud was made after the great typhoon of 1959, but it sharply recalls wreckage in the surf of the many Pacific islands where vicious battles had been fought.

Tōmatsu's photographs of the 1950s are characterized by a loving examination of the everyday. It is important that the fierce beauty in *Prostitute, Nagoya* (1958) is a “pan-pan” girl (a low-end prostitute who catered to American soldiers), but the long plumes of smoke that spew from her nose are just as important. It is important that the old man who has curled up to sleep on a railway seat is a hard-traveling member of the new parliament, but no more so than his brigadier's moustache and hairless, schoolboy's thighs.

For Japan, the war's end was both a disaster and a liberation, and the *après-guerre's* emotions included not only despair and exhaustion but optimism and joy. Writers and artists often spoke of the brightness that was inextricable from the pain, and such complexity would mark all of Tōmatsu's work, even as Japan changed and his concerns moved beyond the landscape of the immediate postwar. None of his best photographs simply describes the thing in front of the camera. Each is an intricate picture-poem, in which dissonant, even contradictory attitudes contend perpetually with one another.

Before

Japan fought its failed war with the West not only for territory, but also for ideals that it argued were uniquely, classically Japanese. Though it swaddled them in fiction and propaganda, militarist Japan saw itself as defending the ancient and pure against the assaults of the modern. In the 1950s, the nation threw those values overboard so enthusiastically that any artist who examined what Japan was becoming would have to ask whether they had ever had much substance. Tōmatsu created several photographic series in the 1950s that searched the present for vestiges of the remote past. *Pottery Town* and *Floods and the Japanese* became his first small books. *Chindonya* (which followed a troupe of street musicians), *Osorezan* (on Fear Mountain in northern Japan, where pilgrims traveled to consult blind shamanesses), and *Home* (on the old Kyushu residence of his first wife's family) are among his best-loved photographic essays. The traditional symbols of old Japan—its cherry blossoms, splendid warriors, beautiful courtesans, mountains, shores, and pines—were strikingly absent from the work. Instead he offered a world of cold, darkness, and decay, empty of glorious myth, evoking a past to which no one could want to return. By the decade's end, Tōmatsu's photographic style had become very particular, even idiosyncratic. He was isolating his subjects very distinctly from the things that surrounded them, and cutting each moment sharply out of the stream of time. In his photographic essays he was combining pictures with unprecedented freedom and refusing the journalistic conventions according to which such essays were usually framed. He would call a series on an old house *Home*, but instead of the house's architecture he would show only its odd, ruinous details: a repulsive flytrap, a dead

mouse on the vestibule floor. He had learned that a picture could be an independent piece of visual poetry, as distinct, physical, and compact as haiku, free of any obligations except the logic the photographer was following inside his own mind and heart.

The Americans

By the war's end in August 1945, few Japanese had ever seen an American in the flesh, and Tōmatsu has written that, as a child, he expected them to have hooked noses and hats pointed like rotten teeth. Fearing rape, neighborhood girls cropped their hair and blackened their faces with ink, but the Americans had already done their worst from the sky. Their generosity astonished the Japanese, just as the openness with which the Japanese received them astonished the Americans. The early postwar period began a relationship characterized by a complicated mixture of hate and love. Its dissonances, though far milder now than then, can still be felt today. The Occupation ended in 1952, when Tōmatsu was just beginning to photograph, but America-in-Japan would become his central, most powerful theme. In the late 1950s he began a fifteen-year "pilgrimage" to Japan's main U.S. military installations, coming eventually to Okinawa—almost half of which was withheld for American use, and which the Japanese still needed special clearance to visit. Tōmatsu was rarely admitted onto the bases themselves; instead he painstakingly investigated the squalid towns around them, where Americans haggled for cheap souvenirs and chased bar girls. His Okinawa photographs are also full of soldiers bound for Vietnam and the huge aircraft that, heavy with bombs, flew every day to Southeast Asia. He titled his work on the Americans *Chewing Gum and Chocolate* after the sweets soldiers dispensed to the children of the *après-guerre*. Where the Americans of the bases appear in Japanese literature and film of the period, the feeling of humiliation can be intense, and it is present in Tōmatsu's work, too. There can be no more brutal evocation of the marriage of conqueror and conquered than his picture of a laughing Marine putting his combat boot down in the photographer's face. Nonetheless, Tōmatsu was always guided by the camera's faithfulness to specific facts. The American soldiers, sailors, and military children in his best work are not monstrous or overpowering but human and flawed—they are individuals whose frailty and loneliness he found fascinating and beautiful. As he would often say, love and hate are no more distant than two sides of a sheet of paper.

A-Bomb

In 1960 the Japan Council Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs asked Tōmatsu to photograph Nagasaki's *hibakusha*, the survivors of the city's destruction. Tōmatsu had never been to the city before or thought much about the horror of August 9, 1945. The victims were usually ashamed of their illnesses and scars and lived in seclusion, and when he was first taken to meet them, he was so anxious that he found it hard to manage his camera. He nonetheless took home from the project what became his most famous work. Among his subjects was Tsuyo Kataoka, who, as a young girl, had been beautiful. Her face was turned to jelly by the exploding "Fat Man," and in Tōmatsu's superb photograph she looks out as if through the eyeholes of a mask. Tōmatsu approached the *hibakusha* with patient circumspection, as if intruding in a place where he ought not to be. He paid meticulous attention to their wounds, but he never attempted a grand declamation of protest or sympathy. Instead, the authority of his Nagasaki photographs comes out of their intimacy. What happened was so enormous and so plain, he seems to say, that any help he offered would be no better than an insult. The work he collected in the book *11:02 Nagasaki* (1966) is at once the most shocking and the simplest of his career. The volume also includes pictures of relics in the collection of the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum—bottles, watches, eyeglasses, and roof

tiles mutilated by the blast. The most powerful shows a beer bottle so grotesquely melted that it makes us imagine a monstrous fetus or a broiled child. 11:02 Nagasaki ends with photographs of American sailors on shore leave and of the nuclear-armed aircraft carrier Enterprise, yet where we might expect fury, these pictures have the same quiet character as the rest of the book—not bitter but deeply tragic. They suggest that the bomb has made itself at home in the world, and that we should never be so innocent as to think we have seen the last of what it could do.

Americanization

When the Americans arrived in Japan, a flood of Western ideas, products, and fashions followed in their train, and the novelist Jirō Osaragi wrote that everyone who rushed into uniform in 1940 rushed into aloha shirts in 1945. Tōmatsu himself became a quintessential cosmopolitan. After the war, cafés were often painted with surrealist murals, and well before he knew anything about art, he would drink coffee in Nagoya while staring at a grotesque copy of a painting by Salvador Dalí. He would later read Jean-Paul Sartre, Jack Kerouac, and Allen Ginsberg; study the films of Jean-Luc Godard; use music by Sonny Rollins for a film of U.S. Air Force jets in flight; and convert the famous victory proclamation of Muhammad Ali into the title of one of his finest essays, “I Am a King.” Japan had in fact been devouring the Western for more than a century, believing it inextricable from the modern, which was both celebrated and reviled. Things modern and Western were seen at once as the violation of a glorious past and as the means of liberation from a no less oppressive, confining past. Where the Japanese in Tōmatsu’s pictures wear Western clothes or behave in Western ways, they do so against the background of these ideas, and Tōmatsu’s ambivalent feeling about the West is the true subject of his work on Americanization. His five bar matrons in beehive coifs are comically repellent, but the freedom of his young man dreaming away among the playing cards on a beach blanket is delicious. There is nevertheless no Coke or Pepsi sign in Tōmatsu’s photographs that does not carry the taint of the war’s loss. Defeat shows even more powerfully in his pictures of certain women, though not because he presents any whom the Americans have abused. Instead, the women of his bar towns, energetically swallowing the American, have made themselves ugly. We see this sharply when we compare them to other women elsewhere in his work. The young, ineffably beautiful actress Eiko Ōshima, for example, retains all the exquisite ambiguity of the archetypal Japanese feminine. The women of the bar towns, by contrast, appear to have thrown themselves away.

I Am a King

If Japan’s grief over its defeat ran submerged for years, it was greatly assuaged during the 1960s, when the nation prospered spectacularly and began resembling the Japan of today. In that “era of high growth,” the nation’s intentions seemed good and its actions humane; the war’s catastrophe receded and the future seemed near and bright. Tokyo burgeoned, and if disillusionment appeared at the decade’s end, it never took root as in America. More than anything else, the Tokyo Olympiad of 1964 stood for the new Japan. The games were understood as the antidefeat; they were a source of a pride not unlike that which the Americans took in the moon landing five years later.

Tōmatsu worked prolifically through the 1960s, publishing series of photographs almost monthly. He would later collect those that best expressed the decade’s exultation in the book *I Am a King* (1972), whose title evokes the parallel triumphs of the photographer-everyman and the Japanese nation. His range expanded dramatically, and through pure force

of feeling he embraced subjects as disparate as plankton under the microscope and the city of Tokyo from three thousand feet up. He placed pictures in mysterious combinations, achieving an unfettered poetry rare in photography.

The lightness of *I Am a King* was equal to the sense of liberation ubiquitous in 1960s Japan. Surrealism flourished in Tōmatsu's work, and he delighted in ingenious experiments, some of which recalled the old Surrealists' game of exquisite corpse. For *Gulliver's Travels* he would photograph a cinema screen as a movie ran, then rewind and reexpose his film in a radically different setting—in one picture, *My Fair Lady* plays among sharks in an aquarium. *I Am a King* is full of the joyful impurity of a moment when the nation was reformulating itself at high speed, when the hallucinatory strangeness of the new was everywhere, but there are also moments when it bursts into fury. For Japan World Exposition, Osaka (1970), Tōmatsu montaged a blurry view of the Expo with a sharp image of red paint blots, splattered as if the rising sun of the Japanese flag has been flung at the buildings of the fair, or flung by them at us.

Underground City

In the late 1960s Tōmatsu lived at the edge of Shinjuku—Tokyo's second downtown, the center of its sex trade, and one of the great urban spectacles of the world. At that time it was also the home of the bohemian avant-garde and the site of massive, violent protests against the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, which granted America its bases in Japan and helped underwrite the Vietnam War. One of Tōmatsu's most powerful books, *Oh! Shinjuku* (1969), collected the work he did there. As he wrote on its cover:

Shinjuku is a young people's town
Shinjuku is a getting-off-on-the-way-home town
Shinjuku is an underground city
Shinjuku is a happening-stage
Shinjuku is a floaters' town
Shinjuku is a sex-town
Shinjuku is the womb of civilization
Shinjuku is a giant supermarket
Shinjuku is Tokyo in miniature
Shinjuku is the Mecca of instant culture .
. . . Shinjuku is a formless amoeba
Shinjuku fills us with expectation
Shinjuku is the student's home village . . .
Shinjuku is where you can drink and dance for 200 yen
Shinjuku is everybody's plaza . . .
Shinjuku is frivolity and infamy
Shinjuku is a modern jungle
Shinjuku smells of crime . . .
Shinjuku is the specter of desire gone wild which can swallow everything
There are countless words one can use for
Shinjuku
If we try to catch them they will wriggle out of the net like eels . . .

People who passed through Shinjuku at that time recall extremity, violence, degradation, rage, and joy of such intensity that, once the moment was over, what remained seemed an emptiness. Indeed, Tōmatsu's Shinjuku photographs—little concerned with Japan's complex modern history and greatly rooted in the now—are among his least retrospective. In spirit they are like his Butoh dancer, who, sprouting a monstrous, tarantula eyelash, has lost herself in pleasure. Even so, there is in the work's darkness and harsh, flaring gestures a vestige of the temper of certain ancient arts. The shriek of the flutes to which Noh actors gravely step is in it, as is the ferocity with which brush attacked paper in the calligraphy of the priest-painter Hakuin.

The South

In 1969, when Tōmatsu was admitted into Okinawa for the first time, he expected to confront the most rampantly Americanized part of Japan. Indeed, his early visits produced many strong photographs of the Americans, their huge military bases, and their fearsome warplanes. He

was surprised, however, to find that outside the tawdry border towns that surrounded the bases, the Americans had left Okinawa largely untouched. In impoverished isolation, its outlying areas preserved ways of living long gone from mainland Japan. Like many of his countrymen, Tōmatsu considered the premodern to be the authentically Japanese. Traveling frequently to the south in the 1970s, he would say that when he went there he was going to Japan, but that when he returned to Tokyo he was going to America.

This discovery brought on the most dramatic change of his career. Tōmatsu had always been a skeptic: He had disdained the Japan of his childhood, loathed the occupying Americans, and even (in the love of the Americans his photographs also express) distrusted his own loathing. Now, however, in places that Japan's contest with America had passed by, he began to reject rejectionism. The sunlight, sea, and empty afternoons freed him, and he imagined that they might hold a clue to what Japan had once been—or what it ought to be.

Tōmatsu moved to Naha in 1972, going on to Miyako and other remote islands soon after. In their jungles, sorceresses spoke a secret language to the dead, and there was little that recalled Americanization, the atomic bombings, or the supereconomy of mainland Japan. Yet, if he was seeking manifestations of the nation's ancient spirit, the facts were sadly complex—what he saw of it was disappearing before him as the islands' inhabitants defected to the north. Rather than hard findings, Tōmatsu's photographs from the south present metaphors for a quality that he might wish for but that was never to be grasped. They contain the thrill an explorer feels when he makes a great discovery, but they are no less full of the elegist's regret.

The Post-Postwar

Since 1980 Tōmatsu has continued to concern himself with Japanese identity, though in a more abstract manner than in his work from the southern islands. His obsession with Japan's Americanization has faded almost to invisibility; in 1999 he wrote that he had “embarked on a nameless sea of chaos that is neither America nor Japan.” Japan, however—what it was and why—has continued to be his preeminent theme.

In one of his principal later series, *Cherry Blossoms*, Tōmatsu addressed Japan's most potent classical symbol, whose image had once been embossed on the brass buttons of his school uniform. During the war, romantic, doomed young suicide fliers pronounced their desire to fall as exquisitely as the cherry petals did each April—and, indeed, the film director Nagisa Ōshima has written that Tōmatsu's photographs express “a singular enthusiasm for . . . the scent of death.” Nonetheless, in *Cherry Blossoms* he reveled in the pure magnificence of the cherry, and where he measured it against old myth, Tōmatsu aimed to cut the blossoms loose from the past, to present their beauty alone and unencumbered. To do this was to suggest that the war was finally over.

For more than a century, many Japanese and Americans have asked whether Japan lost more to Americanization than it could afford, and some have declared that it lost more than it gained. Tōmatsu, though much troubled by this himself, has come in his later work to a point where it is difficult to state the question. In *Coming of Age, Nagasaki* (1997), a smiling girl greets him in a fire-truck-red kimono, before a chartreuse dumpster and an azure sky. The ancient elegances of Japan are long gone, and she seems a bit nervous—perhaps about whether he will judge her harshly or well—but the past is another country. Their encounter hovers poignantly in the January sun, and all that we might remember of old times pales in comparison to the blaring ugliness and splendor of today.

The Skin of the Nation

Perhaps for clarity's sake, Tōmatsu's books have generally been organized around common subjects—the Nagasaki bombing, for example, Shinjuku, or the Americans in Okinawa. Recombined, however, his photographs transcend the categories in which they were first presented, and they collaborate closely even when their points of origin are far apart. The stones on the river's bottom at Osorezan hold an obscure key to the thick scars on the back of one Hiroshima victim, which in turn unlock *Ruinous Garden*, Tokyo (1964), a composition of dry leaves and pods.

The camera shows the world abundantly while explaining little, and Tōmatsu found a perfect point of intersection between the ambiguities of photography and those of postwar Japan. His was a time when much was new yet much still old, when much was splendidly accomplished yet much set delicately aside to be considered later, after it had become less painful. Tōmatsu's pictures are most luminous with meaning not when they explain a tragic or radiant piece of the familiar world, but rather when they assert the beauty of the modern condition of having more questions than answers. Yet they also harbor—as a byproduct—a ghost of the elegance, tact, and magical power that were among the high ideals of classical Japanese art.

All Tōmatsu's best photographs refer in some way to his era's great events, but they are less a history than a series of inquiries whose conclusions can only be partial, and they are the more valuable for being so. What, after the catastrophe of his youth, was left of Tōmatsu's country, and what of that, if one rejected all he did, had any value? What could Japan's essence be when the nation was rapidly becoming something new, and what might stand for it when all the old flags had been shredded? Tōmatsu's work lingers between Western and Asian, ugliness and beauty, regret and exhilaration, horror and acceptance, distilling the taste of the uncertainty with which an honest man necessarily regards his times. We can never hope to see beneath the skin of things, the pictures say, yet they also promise that if we read the skin correctly, we will learn much of what we need to know.