

Traces of Akira Yoshimura (1959 - 2012)

Since the mid-1980s, at a very young age, Akira Yoshimura was in the spotlight as a notable photographer in the world of contemporary photography of Japan. After that, he presented the experimental work until the early 2000s while changing the style largely in the 1990s. In 2012 he passed away at 53 years old. This photo book is the first collection of his photographs. It contains his works through the 1990s until the year 2000. It is the first time these photographs are collected in one book.

In the early 1980s, while studying at Nihon University College of Art (Department of Photography) in Japan, he participated in Salzburg College International Photo Workshop, where Yoshimura got in touch with the international trends of photographic expression of western contemporaries. After graduating from the college, he went to postgraduate course of Tokyo College of Photography. When he was at school, he made solo and group exhibitions in which he presented sensitive street snapshots showing people's lives in urban public spaces. The works began to draw attention of critics, editors and photographers in the mid-1980s. He was selected as one of the important Japanese contemporary photographers for an important exhibition titled 'Paris, New York, Tokyo' at Tsukuba Museum of Photography, the first museum of photography in Japan opened for a limited period in 1985. Additionally, in the first contemporary photography exhibition of the Kawasaki City Museum which was opened in 1988, titled 'Aspects of Contemporary photography TREND'89' he was selected as one of the artists for the exhibition, together with 11 artists including Kiyoshi Suzuki, Toshio Shibata, Hiroshi Sugimoto and Lewis Baltz. He came to be known as one of the promising contemporary photographers of Japan. Masterpieces of the period in this time are 'Homeless Run' (1991) and 'Run through the street' (1993).

The collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 had a great impact on the world and also on Yoshimura. It became a major turning point for him. With the collapse, therewith a symbol of the Cold War and the East-West confrontation, he turned away from his past works, and changed to a new direction. It was a theme related to Japanese history. After the Meiji era, driven by own interests, Japan pushed forward its modernization and expanded and invaded countries seeking prosperity in a large scale war. The Yoshimura's new theme involved the traces of Japan's invasive ambitions in, for example, Seoul (South Korea), Tsushima and Sasebo in Kyushu and other places in Japan and abroad. He took pictures of, for example, the 38-degree line that divided the Korean Peninsula, the Seodaemun prison built by Japan for the Korean government, a giant

telegraph tower built in Nagasaki for the Japanese Navy for distant communication, the Balloon Bomb, a secret weapon invented to attack the United States at the end of World War II and so on. The masterpieces of this period are 'The River' (1995), 'Dark Calls' (1996) and 'New Story' (2000).

Not only did he take pictures of traces of the past wars as you see in the telegraph tower, the balloon bomb and the 38-degree line, but in 1999 he took photographs of the critical accident that occurred in the nuclear fuel fabrication facility in Tokaimura in Ibaraki Prefecture. Experiencing the tragic nuclear accident that resulted in the death of several employees due to radiation exposure, Yoshimura felt the similar negative power of Japan's blind belief in Western technology which was found also during the Second World War. The belief still did remain. He rushed to the site without fear of radiation exposure, making pictures there. 'New Story' became the most important work since the change of his direction in artworks, because it has opened a new perspective towards the darkness of the history of Japanese modernism. It is a view not only from the past, but from one of the modern events such as the nuclear accident.

In 21st century a new dimension is added to the work of Yoshimura, which was focused on negative traces of modernism in Japan. He seriously began to ask himself about the meaning of his family history with his camera. Alongside the modernization of Japan, he went to Korea and asked questions about the history of families about relatives who worked as a police officer or a doctor. The following was said by Yoshimura in an interview:

'Why am I particularly interested in the history of the war? It's because of my family history. I had relatives of a doctor and a soldier in Korea. They were westernized people. I think there was something like a distortion in my family history that has been condensed. Until my father's generation, my family and relatives were in the overseas territories. The modernization of Japan and the history of the war are part of the history of my family. Both are related to problems of myself and of today's modern society.'

'Genogram' was exhibited in 2001. There was a photograph of what used to be a gatepost of his grandfather's house who worked as a doctor in Korea under Japanese rule. In 'Genogram,' you can see more clearly his intuition to illuminate the distortion of the modern Japanese in relationship to his personal history.

This intuition was shown in bolder manner during the exhibition titled 'u-se- mo-no(2004)'. The main work was an old photograph taken from his family album. In this photograph, there is a young beautiful woman standing like a statue on top of a white table which is placed in the garden with blooming flowers. The Woman is the youngest sister of Yoshimura's grandmother, or his great-aunt. She studied at the famous

mission school, which was founded in Fukuoka Prefecture in Kyushu by American missionaries in 1885. It was an old photograph that was taken when she was chosen as the annual queen of the May Queen Festival and it was taken on the founding anniversary of the school in 1932 (Showa 7). In this year, the founding of Manchukuo was declared under the Japanese military governance. At that time, she was married to a wealthy family. However, it is said that she died by throwing herself out of a window in her later life. In the history of the relatives of Yoshimura, her existence was a mystery for him. In the exhibition room, there is old photographs his great-aunt taken from the family album, together with photographs of a firefight between a Japanese patrol boat and a North Korean agents' boat on Japanese coastal waters in 2001. He took the pictures of traces of bullet holes in the patrol boat that was attacked. The 38-degree line is still separating North and South Korea. The firefight increased the tension in the area of 38-degree line. The photograph of his great aunt represented the adaptation to the trends of westernization when she was young. They were related to the photographs of the social incident of modernization due to the political issues surrounding the Korean Peninsula, which could be historically traced back to the Japanese governance of Korea. At first glance, they seemed to have no immediated relationship, but he showed both in the same space.

Yoshimura tried to evoke the image of a new story about the modernization of Japan in the mind of the viewer. It was a really experimental work. The concept was the Yoshimura's attitude. The photograph represented the darkness of Japan's modernism that led to wars of aggression, along with the family history of their own. And without fear of failure, Yoshimura challenged the possibility of photographic expression, and continued to attempt experimental work. Those experimental works, which departs from the way of general photographic expression, were provocative and embarrassing. He had never been nominated to big prestigious photo awards in Japan like Kimura Ihei Photo Award, but his works are formidable for contemporary photographers, who contributed together with him to the art of photography and in their eyes he rocked the foundation of photographic expression with his innovation. Therefore he has been highly evaluated by some critics. Experimental photographs by Yoshimura were shown in an exhibition titled 'Dream Diary' in 2006 and there he stopped the experiment. His work was unfinished. In 2010, after his last participation in a group exhibition, he moved away from Tokyo, which had been the center of many of his photographic activities, and went back to his home in Moji, Kitakyushu in Fukuoka Prefecture. On June 2nd in 2012, the day before his birthday, he passed away at the age of 53.

It should be noted that this photo book is based on the work and materials that Yoshimura left behind, for example: 'The River,' 'Dark Calls,' 'New Story,' 'Genogram' from his representative works in his later years. It also take up 'Recent Works' (corresponding to the 'u-se-mo-no'

in contents) that has been collected by Yoshimura himself, and '1994-2001,' it was selected by Yoshimura and followed the traces of aggression of war by Japan.

Text: Masafumi Fukagawa / Curator

Akira Yoshimura

Photographer. Born on June 3rd 1959 in Moji City (Today: Kitakyushu Moji-ku), Fukuoka Prefecture. His real name is Akira Yoshimura 吉村晃, in 1991 he changed his name to 朗. He graduated from Moji High School in Fukuoka Prefecture in March 1978. He entered Nihon University College of Art (Department of Photography) in April the same year. He graduated in March 1982. In April of the same year he entered postgraduate course of Tokyo College of Photography and graduated in March 1984. Since the mid-1980s, he was in the spotlight as a snap photographer of the city. He also received attention by presenting various works that followed historic events. His major photo exhibitions were 'The River' (Ginza Nikon Salon, 1995), 'New Story' (Matrix of Contemporary Photography 1999 IV Risaku Suzuki / Akira Yoshimura, Kawasaki City Museum, 2000), 'u-se-mo-no' (IKAZUCHI, 2004) and his photo book "SPIN MOLE UNIT No.9" (Mole, 1999). He passed away on June 2nd 2012.