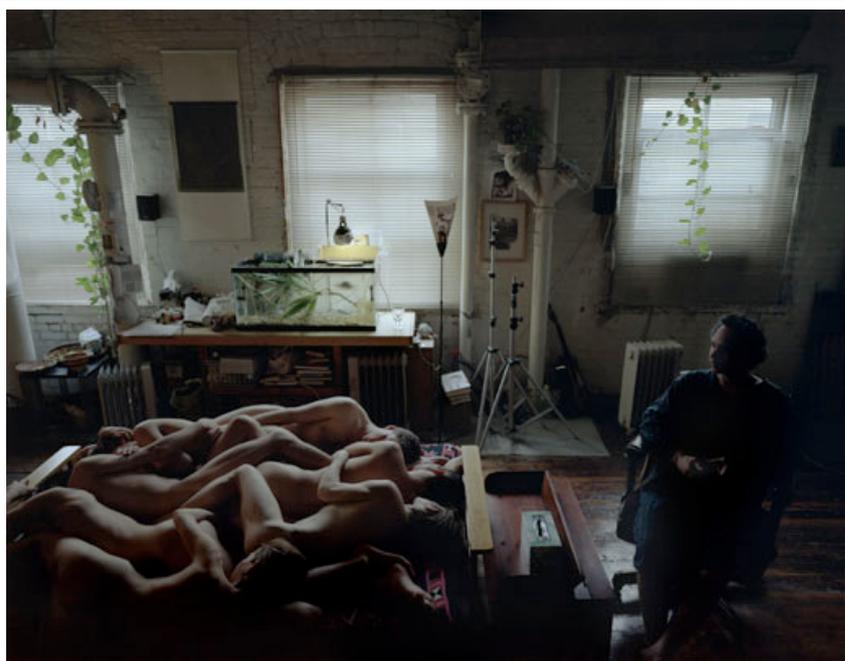


Naked Alienation - An Interview with Riichi Yamaguchi

Riichi Yamaguchi's first solo exhibition, "A Sense of De-tach-ment" is currently showing at Tokyo Gallery. Based on the themes of alienation and corporeality, his photographs present the world in a strange light. I talked to the artist about his inspirations and working method.

IN [INTERVIEWS](#) BY [LENA OISHI](#) 2007-03-18

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'040403'

Photo courtesy of Tokyo Gallery



Riichi Yamaguchi "A sense of de-tach-ment"

at **Tokyo Gallery + BTAP**
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Tell us about this exhibition.

Speaking loosely, the theme is about ourselves and others. Communications technology has developed a great deal and yet there is a sense of dilution in our society, that people are getting further and further away from each other; I have deliberately made a paradoxical use of 'nakedness' as a way of giving expression to that aspect of our society. I think that people were originally social animals and so it's natural for us to want to be connected to others. While technology has been developed to cater to that desire, it has in fact been the cause of this distancing between people.



For example, with my work that has been nominated for the [10th Okamoto Taro Contemporary Art Award](#), I consciously chose to make it out of individual, separate tiles as a metaphor for the divisions in our modern, rationalized society: it somehow conveys the sense of calculatedness on the surface which suppresses the emotions and humanness in the background. In among the naked figures, seemingly all tangled up together, by having one lay his or her hand on the next person, I wanted to convey that desire for connection.

You have been living in New York for a long time, having moved there in 1991. Has your experience of being abroad affected your work?

Yes, it has. America is a very individualistic country and unlike in Japan, there isn't much 'indirect' self-expression; there is a very clear distinction between 'oneself' and 'others'. On top of that, I didn't speak any English so there was a period when I felt a really strong sense of distance from people, and it's that sentiment that's being reflected in my work. But I create work based on the same theme regardless of whether I'm in Japan or America. They are both major cities, so I guess I always feel this sense of alienation. For example, you can't often see the faces of the naked people in my work, and I do that to convey the anonymity of life in the big cities.

There is one photo with many naked people standing, which is actually the first photo I took as part of this series. The idea came to me when I was on the train on my way into work, and I suddenly started to wonder what it would be like if everyone around me were naked. While they're not as bad as in Japan, trains during morning rush hour in New York are pretty crowded, and everybody stands there looking like they're in a bad mood. I thought it would be interesting to express this kind of unnatural closeness with nakedness.



'110101'
Photo courtesy of Tokyo Gallery



'090105'
Photo courtesy of Tokyo Gallery

How do you go about making your works? It must be really difficult to get so many models to pose together for you.

It's really difficult (laughs). The shoot always takes around 3 hours, and we work on two or three variations, but I do a lot of painstaking planning beforehand. The film for the large format camera that I use is expensive so I can't just take photos here and there without thinking; there are a lot of models involved as well, so I take the photos after I have made sketches and thought out the composition. My work portrays intimately entangled human bodies and sometimes it's difficult to create this effect by myself, so I get help from some sculptor friends who have a lot of experience with three-dimensional expression. Perhaps it doesn't show when you look at the photos, but there are in fact two or three layers of people piled up on top of each other and the people at the bottom are being squashed, complaining that it hurts! I have all sorts of demands when I'm photographing: I want to ask people to move to move their arm here or there, but it's quite hard to ask these kinds of things in that kind of a situation, don't you think? Also, my works are not about 'gender', so I aim to conceal people's private parts as much as possible. Those kind of practical issues are quite a hassle, and there are times when I wonder to myself why I put myself through so much trouble (laughs).



'040320'
Photo courtesy of Tokyo Gallery

Who are the people who model for you?

The models are all volunteers. I put up flyers calling for volunteers around New York and then I interview them. Bearing the intertwined look of the works in mind, I ask for applicants to be of slim build, but sometimes these large-built, 80kg people turn up, so I get them to go at the bottom so as to bulk up the layers. By the way, for some reason, a lot of Latino people apply. In this exhibition, there are some photos that I shot in a Japanese house in Kanagawa Prefecture, but I had little success with getting Japanese models here and in the end the majority of them were foreigners. I put up the call for volunteers on a Japanese website, but as there was the word 'naked' in it, people would get the wrong idea and take the post down.

Do you normally shoot in a studio?

It depends on whether the photo is colour or black and white. In general, my black and white photos are abstract, and I shoot these at a studio (which is often my own house). With my colour photos, I try to incorporate scenes from daily life in order to create a contrast between the ordinary and extraordinary. I often shoot these at friends' houses. I also try to shoot in natural light, which is why my work on the whole is probably a little dark.



'050603'
Photo courtesy of Tokyo Gallery

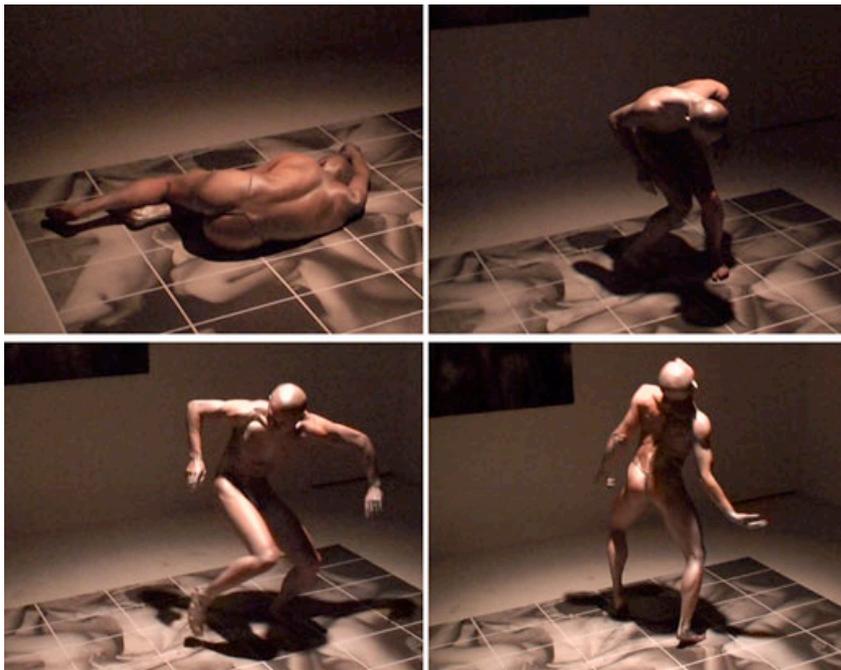
Some of the photos feature objects made of white paper. What are they?

As the theme for this series is mental instability, I used objects such as boats made of white paper as a metaphor for drifting between reality and unreality, especially in the colour photos. I've tried to express a boundary of sorts in a realm where the ordinariness of a normal house, and the unreality of a pile of human beings, overlap.

Your work makes me think of the photographer [Spencer Tunick](#), who also takes photos featuring many naked bodies.

That's right. However, he shoots outdoors, and the whole thing is like an event. Actually, some of the models that are in my photos have also been in his work too. It's amazing how he can deal with so many people at a shoot. The difference between my work and his is that he intentionally tries to make people's bodies seem 'beautiful' by showing it from another perspective or form. In contrast, I am more interested in the coexistence of extremes, such as the ordinary and extraordinary, beautiful and grotesque, organic and inorganic. I want people to see my work and hesitate for a second. That said, my photos don't feature any unpleasant or grotesque images, and I try

to pick models that are 'neutral' in terms of build and skin colour. So my photos are neutral, and yet somehow strange at the same time.



The butoh performance held on the opening night.
Photos courtesy of Tokyo Gallery

The Butoh dancer Yasuchika Konno performed at the opening party for this exhibition. How did this come about?

I had seen Mr. Konno's performance before, and was struck by how dynamic it was. It made me want to collaborate with him in some way. It turns out that Tokyo Gallery has been incorporating some sort of event at their gallery openings since the end of last year, so I thought that it would be a great opportunity to work with him. The performance featured him as a figure from one of my photos, expressing the bodily journey from death to life, and once again to death. Initially I wanted Mr. Konno to dance nude, but in the end we decided that it would be a little too 'raw', so he painted his body silver to symbolize his emergence from the silver printed photographs. Unfortunately I was unable to see the actual performance on the day as there were so many people... Mr. Konno also helps me out with the composition of my photographs too.

What are your future plans?

Lately, I've been taking photographs of models painted white, which in some respect is directly influenced by Butoh. I plan to pursue this theme of 'alienation' further, but gradually incorporate experimental aspects to my work.

Riichi Yamaguchi, thank you very much!

(Translation: Lena Oishi, Ashley Rawlings)



Lena Oishi. Born in Japan in 1982, grew up in England and Australia. With a BA in Media and Communications and MA in Cinema Studies, she now lives in Tokyo as a freelance translator and occasional editor. Works include VICE Magazine, Japanese editorial supervision of "Metronome No. 11 - *What Is To Be Done? Tokyo*" (Seikosha, 2007), and translation for film and art festival catalogs. She can also interpret simultaneously if you give her enough candy. Lena likes making her eyeballs bleed after watching way too many films while eating ice cream in the dark. » [See other writings](#)

perke
2007-03-18

Great interview. I wonder why the artist cares so much about an "80kg person" showing in the picture? My first impression of the photos was that the models looked like pieces of dog turd clumped together. I know, the nearly perfect bodies is just an aesthetic choice. But, in that case, it does not the standard pleasing effect.

And, yeah, Tokyo morning commute is so much more human than the NY. I guess people are just happy to be out of the house, in the clean train.

Lena
2007-03-19

A note: 'Neutral' is the key word here; the artist did mention that he intentionally avoids 'perfect' -looking people, and instead goes for 'normal' bodies (whatever that is). And the 80 kg person is more of a logistic problem than anything else - you just can't put an 80kg person on top of a petit girl, they'll crush her. Plus, in terms of skin colour, apparently he didn't choose dark-skinned people because they'll just end up looking like shadows, which I guess disrupts the effect he's after.

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