

An interview with Riichi Yamaguchi for the exhibition catalog

An interviewer : Naoko Maeshiba

**Q1) Interest in corporeality**

**Naoko Maeshiba : Could you tell me how and when you became interested in corporeality? Why did you choose the nude as your subject? In your work, “A Sense of Detachment”, you started working with vertical bodies standing without any physical contact and progressed to horizontal bodies piled together in a more contained space. What made you choose to photograph the nude in these particular positions?**

Riichi Yamaguchi : What became the major trigger for this change was my interest in and curiosity about human connection. After graduating from art school, I was shooting objects made of plants, food, and the like in my studio at home. I was making work while also working a daytime job, but hadn't produced any tangible results when it hit me that I was about to turn thirty.

Although I lived in such a big city as New York, outside of my daytime job, I spent most of my time alone creating works in my own enclosed world. Gradually I became aware that nothing new would come if I continue this way of living. That's when I began to feel an urge growing inside me to start a project that somehow involved people.

One morning, I was on my way to work with this idea percolating in my head. As I watched people waiting for a train on the subway platform, the image of 070101 faintly and gradually emerged in my mind. I wondered what it would be like if these people were naked? That's when I decided to focus on human bodies as the main subjects in my photography.

I tried anything and everything to find models and managed to shoot 070101. But, after that, I wasn't sure what I really wanted to do. So I followed sporadic impulses as they came to me, creating works based on inspiration from novels and such. As I continued, vaguely but with increasing frequency, I became conscious that the themes of solitude and human connection were strong in my work. At that time, I was concerned about the consequences of the rapid advancement of technology since the 90s (the internet and e-mail), the alienation and loss of connection in human relationships. However, as I am writing this, I gradually began to notice that there was also another hidden thought flowing deep inside myself.

I started the nude series in order to be more engaged with other people, Nevertheless, I had found myself becoming more and more isolated as I became increasingly absorbed in work. Now I see that, for me,

creating work meant descending into the deepest part of my inner world, facing myself thoroughly. By forcing myself into this ultimate state of seclusion, I was able to feel a connection with people much more strongly. Such intense feelings constructed an invisible barrier between myself and others, which might have found an expression in the nude works.



## **Q2) Perspectives on nude bodies**

**NM : The anonymity of the naked bodies in your work sparked my curiosity. The enclosed and exposed bodies, although seemingly powerless, mercilessly sheds a bright light on the environment around them. The power they possess appears to be casting a fundamental question about the human existence. Perspectives on the nude seem to differ depending on the disciplines such as dance, theatre, and photography. Could you share your thoughts about this?**

RY : Because the expression of nude photography is often rooted in sexual impulses, its interpretation is typically dictated by the taboos and the social construct of a given period, establishing the dynamic flow of the history of the nude photography. We find that a nude photograph was taken immediately after the invention of the technique called the daguerreotype, one of the earliest photographic processes, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It seems that nude photos at that time were shot for private purposes and kept as a secret possession. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, nude photography imitated classical painting. Later in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the rise of modernism, photography began seeking its own form of expression. This new movement gave birth to a new type of nude only possible within the frame of photography at that time. Man Ray was one of the central figures in this era. After the 1960s, photography established prominent ties to political ideologies such as nudism and developed various avenues of self-expressions, treating themes such as love, peace, gender awareness, and HIV/AIDS. From the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present, many photographers seem to be turning toward more realistic and intimate photographs regularly making use of friends and family as models.

In today's society where nude images abound, perhaps fewer photographers focus on the nude body as a theme of their work. In "A Sense of Detachment", without emphasizing the sexual element of the nude (especially in the work of color photographs), I used the contrast between a clothed person and a mass of

unclothed bodies to try to evoke a sense of the loss and isolation of life in a big city that I myself was feeling.

### **Q3) 'Individual' and Society**

**NM : My work often deals with the theme of societal rules and regulations that deprive people of their individuality. I sensed a similar theme resonating in your work. What especially struck me was the contrast between the nude bodies and the clothed ones that co-exist in the same environment. For instance, in 050603 a woman in kimono, (a symbol of formality, social rules), and status, is juxtaposed against a mass of the completely defenseless unclothed bodies arranged like a human boat with no destination. This silent collision of 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' is breathtaking. The lack of a direct reaction on the part of the clothed person to the mass of the nude bodies made me think of a sense of alienation from the environment and the self. Were you thinking of the nature of the clothing as a tool used to formulate and defines both the body and human nature?**

**RY :** Clothes can achieve effects such as hiding bodies and layering various images upon them. Wearing a uniform, the image of a particular organization or a group masks your individuality. For instance, if you wear a piece of clothing from Uniqlo (Japanese apparel brand), you might end up subsuming your identity to larger trends, maybe, or popular notions of attractiveness. Therefore, for me, the ultimate individuality is to be found in the naked body itself. However, the strange thing is that when nude bodies multiply, the bodies themselves become emphasized and the individuality starts disappearing. I hadn't given much thought to the way that the clothes that formulate and define the body and human nature as you mentioned. In my case, I wanted to make the connection with others and the sense of isolation stand out simultaneously within one image by placing a clothed person in the mass of anonymous naked bodies.

### **Q4 Collaboration with a Butoh dancer**

**NM : You collaborated with Konno Yasuchika, a butoh dancer in Tokyo three years ago. Could you talk about the relationship between your work and Butoh in terms of the influence you received from this art form? This is the first time for me to collaborate with a photographer. I'm curious about your experience of working with a dancer. Can you talk about the components of the experience particularly rewarding or challenging?**

**RY :** When I met Yasuchika Konno, a butoh dancer in 2004, I had been back in Japan, creating new works for a while. At first, I asked him to participate in my creative process as a nude model. As I photographed him dancing and listened to his stories, I gradually began to develop an interest in butoh. I started wondering why such a grotesque dance form was born in Japan and why it was first accepted abroad after

being rejected in Japan.

Furthermore, its perspectives on the contrasting concepts (beauty and grotesquery, life and death, and holy and worldly) and its methodology which physicalizes the emotions through language and imagination improvisationally – both of those made a considerable impact on me because I was having difficulty escaping from fixed ideas about photography. So in a sense, the collaboration with Mr. Konno was a natural consequence of our meeting. Our performance took place in a gallery space close-to-naked on top of a life-size work of nude photograph. We were able to create an enigmatic environment where the actual gallery space, the fictive realm of the photograph, and the live dance performance melded together.

It is often said that the production of photography is collaboration with subjects. In my case, since I started shooting butoh dancers, I came to think of photography and butoh as mediums that share similar characteristics. Both use physical actions that can instantaneously express the artists' inner worlds. If a dancer's movements vividly illuminate his spiritual world, then a photographer's images reveal his psychological intuition. In other words, these two physical actions instantaneously bring that which is inside to the outside.

With this idea in mind, I have taken a series of photos of butoh dance under the theme, 'Improvised Wanderings.' This series is an attempt to discover accidental beauty in the ambiguous territory where the boundary between dance and photography blurs. Since this is an experimental exploration, I'm not sure how it'll develop in the future. But I have a feeling that the more improvisational and ambiguous both the dancer and the photographer are, the more visible the unknown world that's beyond meaning or ideas will become.

When I was reading your blog, this series of experimentation came to my mind. Especially, in the interview about your work, "Paraffin", you made a brave statement regarding something about which I had had a notion for some time but hadn't quite been able to articulate yet:

"I have real suspicions about "understanding". When I think back to the most memorable performances I've seen, I think I don't understand them. And so I have a feeling that when you think you understand, you've already labeled it and defined it, and you feel like you've "got" it and you put it aside and leave it. We want people to keep questioning and searching. This kind of process is very important."

When I encounter art that resonates with me and moves me, I first experience a wonder and a curiosity welling inside me even if I might not understand its content. Then I get a sense that what I saw somehow

'doesn't fit' with my expectation. This is because such work is beyond the existing framework of art. This work, which attracts me for an unknown reason, holds an incredibly powerful idea which tears down the barrier of the fixed ideas that had contained me.

Can you share your thoughts about how you are pursuing new values in your dance or theatre?

**NM : For me, the most memorable performances always have the simplest beauty that defies any reasoning or analysis. The performance frees me from regular space and time. It is almost as though the performer extended into the future and into the past. This kind of break from reality comes with amazing sensation and vitality. I would like to create that in my work.**

**Though the performance might involve a particular context and form, the aspects of the performance might appear indirect or vague, devoid of clear meaning or definition. It is an attempt to go as far away as possible from what is explicable or understandable.**

**Somehow, it seems this kind of approach makes room for the body's true expression instead of using the body as a tool to express some fixed ideas. What we know as reality seems fairly limited. I think the ongoing exploration of the intuitive and primal body, extremely precise yet vague, through sensation and language, might allow us to achieve a resonance between the performer, the audience, and the environment, breaking the boundary of a predetermined reality. This is the most important for me. I do not consider myself to be a butoh dancer, but simply a dancer; however, I can say that the way I perceive the body has been profoundly influenced by butoh.**

**In the past years, I have tried to place myself in various environments, involved in diverse collaborations, experimenting with the process and the form of the performance. "Paraffin", was an ensemble piece performed from 2009 to 2010. It was originally inspired by an old Japanese book cover made of paraffin paper and eventually turned into a dance theatre piece consisting of eight scenes, performed by nine dancers. Multiple layers of the images and stories without any definite plot created a new and vital relationship between the performer and the audience.**

#### **Q5 Attractive 'ambiguity': difference between America and Japan**

**NM : In an interview by Tokyo Art Beat, you mentioned the differences and the similarities between the United States and Japan in terms of individualism. I agree with you that in the places which have been westernized and industrialized, its people, especially city dwellers, share a similar**

**experience of alienation. But I feel that these two seemingly similar cultures of America and Japan are still fundamentally different. One difference for me is a greater tolerance for the 'ambiguous' and the 'undefinable' in Japanese culture. Have you experienced this difference in responses to your own work?**

R.Y. : I might not be directly answering your question, but recently, I haven't actually been paying too much attention to the difference in creating for different audiences since I've been back in Japan for a while. What hasn't changed for me is my stance towards work. For me, work is a reflection of my fundamental ideas towards beauty. Originally, the Chinese character for 'beauty'、**「美」**、consists of the top part、**「羊」**、meaning 'lamb' and the bottom part、**「大」**、meaning 'big', together meaning, 'the sacrificial lamb is big.' So 'beauty' actually indicates something splendid or something superb. Therefore, when I say 'beauty' I'm not using it to mean the beauty as in "the flower is beautiful". Instead, it is the sheer transcendental quality that grabs people, reflecting the spiritual world of the artist regardless of any reason. Since beauty is being created naturally through the process of melding various concepts coming from different cultures or eras, it is a challenging task to define it with simple words.

In my case, I don't consider photography to be a means of expressing a statement. Rather, through my own approach, I'm trying to let the photographs reflect what I feel and the stimuli I received in daily life. That's why my work seems vague not only in its appearance but also in its content. What I think is that, even with its ambiguity, if there is power in the image itself and a story behind the work, it will generate a new perspective toward everyday life. I think I can only reach that place with my work through further life experiences and trial and error.

#### **Q6: Plan for the future**

**N.M. : Do you intend to shoot nude bodies in the future? What kind of theme do you think you might pursue next?**

R.Y. : In my case, I'll probably continue as a Sunday photographer. Recently, I'm finding that my daytime job gives me the mental support I need. Rather than doing photography full-time to make a living, I'm starting to think that this balance between the daytime job and photography might work better for me. Perhaps this is because I'm beginning to see photography as a lifetime work. This way, I can take a long span of time to accumulate various life experiences and let my ideas ferment without haste so that I can gradually allow my work to reflect my life.

Photographer, Diane Arbus, once said that a camera is a kind of license to relate to various people. After I

changed the subject of my photography from inanimate things to people, I have come in contact with various eccentric people such as an illegal immigrant from Cuba, an adult video actor, a drag queen, and a pole dancer. I'm not sure if all of their stories are true, but I do believe that people who are comfortable being nude in front of the camera might be leading comparatively unique lives. I am deeply amazed at how strangely people's lives are connected. In the future, I'd like to continue creating work, not necessarily tied to the nude photography, and broaden my scope to encompass the lives of the people I encounter and their stories.