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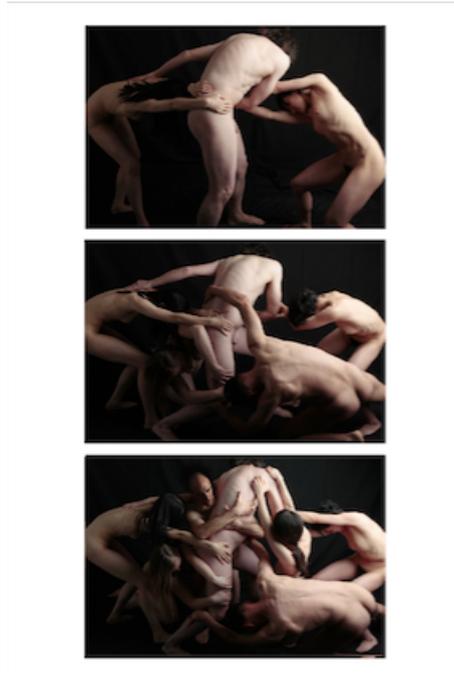
Fotografia : Hello Riichi, thank you for this interview. What are your main interests as a photographer?

Yamaguchi : I have been photographing dancers and performers since I discovered an interest in nude photography while attending art school in New York City. Thereafter, I became more and more interested in the relationship between the human body and psyche.

Fotografia : What is Transcending Our Limitations about in particular, and what inspired the project?

Yamaguchi : The idea for this project emerged from the process in my previous project, which I am not pursuing at the moment. Inspired by Diane Arbus I had been working on a portrait series of people who had experienced existential angst in the past. I met refugees, a suicide survivor, a person from a broken family, a gay man, a person who had trouble fitting into society, and a person who went through a very painful divorce. They told me their personal stories, their difficult experiences and feelings of confusion. In speaking to them, I felt that some of them had gained an understanding of their past that would help them to overcome their circumstances and to move on to the next stage of their life. And I was impressed by how people's inherent energy inwardly heals them and liberates them. My original goal for the previous project was to present their portraits along with the texts of their stories. However, because their problems are so personal, and some of them are still struggling, I began to wonder if I should pursue this project.

In Transcending Our Limitations, instead of revealing the models' pasts, I wanted to create a series of photographs that focus purely on the energy that allows us to overcome our difficulties. This energy, however elusive it is to define, is something we all have; in the East it is called qi[ki], in the West, libido or will.



Fotografia : Can you explain why you chose the entanglement of nude human bodies to visualize your initial ideas?

Yamaguchi : To me, photographing the human body naked, without any cultural signs, seems to be the most logical way to highlight this energy. The energy that I had in my mind is something kinetic and animalistic -- something you may find in performances of Butoh, a highly expressive Japanese dance form that began in the 60s, and the paintings of Francis Bacon.

The entanglement of human bodies was created mainly using a dance technique called Contact Improvisation. Using this technique, a group of models moves extremely slowly while maintaining their balance, creating countless unexpected shapes. I feel that these shapes created by constrained and distorted human bodies makes the energy I am talking about almost tangible.

The difficulty the models experienced trying to maintain their balance while moving very slowly can be seen as a metaphor for something we all experience in our lives : the art of living lies in constantly readjusting to our surroundings.

Fotografia : To create the Transcending Our Limitations pictures you worked with a group of dancers performing to a technique called contact improvisation. How did you instruct the dancers, and in what does this technique consist exactly?

Yamaguchi : Contact Improvisation, developed around the 70s, is a partner dance form based on the physical principles of touch, momentum, shared weight, and most quintessentially - establishing a shared point of contact. In the actual shoots, a choreographer(his name is KEKE), and I use this technique as a starting point for exploration through movement improvisation. For example, in one shoot models began in a standing position with their bodies touching. We asked them to bend their knees slightly and lower your bodies, and then to reach out and touch the shoulders of the person in front of them while maintaining their balance. We asked them to move very slowly. The instruction process is very organic, because we need to pay full attention to the physical and mental flexibility of each model. Because the models are required to remain in contact at all times, it is very hard for them to maintain their balance. This physical tension interests me and reveals the models' energy.



Lastly, let me add that the models were not only dancers. Rather, I always tried to include a wide range of people (body types, races, ages) in order to make my work more universal, because I feel that if the viewers see models whose body types are diverse, they will relate to my work more than if they were looking at beautiful photographs of dancers. That being said, in reality, it is not an easy task to find ordinary people who will pose naked, especially in Japan.

Fotografia : Transcending Our Limitations is made of short sequences of two to three pictures. Why did you choose this format rather than single photographs?

Yamaguchi : I attempted to apply the Japanese aesthetic of Ma (literally: negative space, gap, discontinuous place). This aesthetic has been widely seen in Japanese arts such as painting, flower arrangement, the tea ceremony, etc. For example, this use of negative space is a very important element of some traditional Japanese paintings. Japanese see this negative space (Ma), figuratively speaking, as the place the viewer enters and fills up with their own aesthetic emotion. Ma is generally applied in terms of physical space, but in my project, I applied this aesthetic to the temporal gaps between the shots that evoke movement. In this way, the viewer can become an active participant in my work.



Fotografia : Did you have any specific references or sources of inspiration in mind while working on Transcending Our Limitations?

Yamaguchi : Contact Improvisation and Butoh were the two explicit sources of inspiration for these photographs.

Fotografia : What have been the main influences on your photography?

Yamaguchi : There is a well-known book called Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor E Frankl. This book totally changed my attitude toward life and photography. Frankl's words "Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual" are always in my mind when I begin a new project.



Fotografia : Who are some of your favorite contemporary photographers? (by contemporary, I mean photographers who are still active or have been in the last few years).

Yamaguchi : I admire Pieter Hugo for his simplicity and strength, Katy Grannan for her superb choice of models,

Rinko Kawauchi for her stylized visual eloquence, and both Sophie Calle and Hiroshi Sugimoto for their unexpected and profound ideas.

Fotografia : Choose your #threewordsforphotography (these can be anything: nouns, adjectives, verbs, etc. and you can mix and match. The word LIGHT is banned, though).

Yamaguchi : INTROSPECTION, DECISIVENESS, ACTION