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VISUAL ART

A Tokyo exhibition of Australian and Japanese photographers explores how the image affects history, memory and our notions of self. By *Melissa Bianca Amore*.

Reversible Destiny: Australian and Japanese Contemporary Photography



Detail from *hiroshima #13*, a 2007 work by Ishiuchi Miyako.
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Can a photograph reverse history by shifting perception, reconfiguring memory and modifying time? In *Reversible*

Destiny: Australian and Japanese Contemporary Photography at the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum (TOP), eight artists from Australia and Japan address this question and explore a collectively reimagined future.

Co-curated by Natalie King and Yuri Yamada, the show articulates notions of cultural memory, parody, sovereignty, destruction and regeneration, questioning our equivocal and speculative relationship to the contemporary world. Maree Clarke, Rosemary Laing, Polixeni Papapetrou, Katayama Mari and Ishiuchi Miyako, among others, evoke shared but culturally disparate impressions of place – personal, public and psychic – and poetically examine the phenomenology of time.

Reversible Destiny provocatively echoes a 1990s collaboration with the same title between Japanese and American conceptual architects Shūsaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins that used interactive spaces to reframe human cognition, disrupt habitual perception and reverse time. “The double bind or paradox of *reversible destiny* alludes to cycles of the past and future; life and death; remembering and forgetting,” says curator King. “Photographers have the uncanny ability to collapse time and imagine past futures and present possibilities.”

Australian artist Rosemary Laing’s *effort and rush #1* (2015) and *effort and rush #9* (2015) – opaque landscapes of the Madagascar forest and the aftermath of the 2013 bushfires in Shoalhaven, New South Wales – powerfully anchor the exhibition’s sense of static impermanence. In these works, a simple gesture of blurring the landscape entangles the act of observation into

a visual binary. Laing's photographic blur challenges the mechanism of visual perception, registering a twofold experience that exists between acute vision and spectral apparition, motion and stillness. In these wounded environments, Laing makes something less visible to reveal its visibility.

“I can't explore the past, but the things in front of me are an extension of the past.”

Where Laing characterises the landscape as an extension of the psyche, Maree Clarke's lenticular print light boxes *On the Banks of the Murrumbidgee River 2 & 3* (2011) cast the artist's thumbprint on each image as a gesture of cultural redemption, a permanent marking that suggests being both physically and spiritually ingrained in Country. Clarke is a Yorta Yorta, Mutti Mutti, Boon Wurrung and Wemba Wemba woman known for reclaiming south-east Australian Aboriginal art practices and cultural knowledge from colonisation. These works recall the artist's childhood during the early 1960s, sleeping in a suitcase on the Murrumbidgee River. Engendering a sense of absence and dispossession, these photographs serve as a memorial where notions of time and ancestral memories are implicated in place itself.

Acclaimed Japanese artist Ishiuchi Miyako, who represented Japan at the 51st Venice Biennale, examines another type of monument in a contemplative suite of works that include *hiroshima #9F* (2007), *hiroshima #13* (2007) and *hiroshima #88* (2010). Photographs of personal remnants housed at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum – garments, watches and other objects

worn by victims of the 1945 atomic bomb – convey a deep, harrowing sorrow.

“I want to see the things you can’t see,” says Miyako. “I can’t explore the past, but the things in front of me are an extension of the past.” Photographs have the capacity to disclose the passage of time by bringing the viewer close to the subjects being captured. In these works, traces of the dead – scars, bloodstains and torn clothes – are transmitted through light – the carrier of information – into a photograph, and reveal a presence perhaps not immediately visible in the objects themselves. The poetic act of translation is central to Miyako’s practice; in many ways her images echo Walter Benjamin’s observation: “Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye ...”

The photograph can reveal a unique visibility that is often concealed from human observation. Susan Sontag says in *On Photography*: “A photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask.” For the most part, it is this trace that reveals photography’s relationship with time. In *Rhetoric of the Image*, Roland Barthes writes: “The type of consciousness the photograph involves is indeed truly unprecedented, since it establishes not a consciousness of the *being-there* of the thing (which any copy would provoke) but an awareness of its *having-been there*.”

In Australian artist Polixeni Papapetrou’s *The Visitor* (2012), from the series “Between Worlds”, the

camera opens to a liminal juncture between unconscious and conscious realities, mythology and history. In this deeply melancholy work, Papapetrou's daughter Olympia – or an anonymous hybrid impostor disguised as part animal, part human – visits a mysterious land.

Papapetrou's whimsical gesture examines the early childhood stages of fashioning human identity in which masquerade is employed to orient oneself in the world. The distinction between self and the performance of self is masked.

This play on performance is further dramatised in Japanese artist Katayama Mari's self-portrait *Shell* (2016).

Katayama was born with tibial hemimelia – a rare bone condition that inhibits the growth of her legs, which led to an amputation at the age of nine – and here she radically and intimately employs the camera as an extension of her body. “If we want to ‘capture’ time, things or thoughts that have no physical form,” says Katayama, “then we have no choice but to memorise them.” Embellished with crystals, seashells, mannequins and her prosthetic legs, this work is part of a series of tableaux, intimately staged settings that challenge perceptions of imperfection and body image.

Katayama's embodied gestures articulate our fundamentally ambiguous relationship to each other, and challenge the power of the photograph to dissolve delineations of otherness and identity.

Reversible Destiny is a poignant and intelligent exhibition that raises direct questions about modes of representation and how photography affects the experience of memory,

self and time. The central question, however, remains: can a photograph reverse destiny?

In the words of Brazilian philosopher Vilém Flusser:
“Images are mediations between the world and human beings ... the world is not immediately accessible to them and therefore images are needed to make it comprehensible. However, as soon as this happens, images come between the world and human beings. They are supposed to be maps, but they turn into screens: instead of representing the world, they obscure it until human beings’ lives finally become a function of the images they create.”

Reversible Destiny: Australian and Japanese
Contemporary Photography *is online at the Tokyo
Photographic Art Museum, Japan, until October 31.*

*Maree Clarke’s show Ancestral Memories is at The Ian
Potter Centre: NGV Australia until February 22, 2022.*

<https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/culture/visual-art/2021/10/09/reversible-destiny-australian-and-japanese-contemporary-photography#mtr>