

Afterimage.

Tomoko Yoneda was born in the city of Akashi, Japan, in 1965. She initially went to the United States to study journalism but a change of heart led her to study photography at the University of Illinois in Chicago, graduating in 1989. It was there that she was introduced to the New Bauhaus school of photography, founded by László Moholy-Nagy in 1937, and to the European émigrés involved in the design and architecture represented by the buildings of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. This would make a lasting impression on Yoneda's imagination.

After completing her studies in Chicago, Yoneda decided to leave for London to study photography at the Royal College of Art, graduating with an MA in photography in 1991. Her move to London, where she still lives, coincided with the breakup of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall. The end of the Cold War brought the artist new directions to pursue.

The geographical range of Tomoko Yoneda's work encompasses Europe, South America, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and China. For each of her projects she undertakes detailed research before deciding on the exact location to be photographed. This approach seems closer to that of an anthropologist who digs deeply in search of vestiges of past events that might tell us something about the human condition. In her depictions of beautiful landscapes and interiors of empty buildings, Yoneda is evoking the spirit of previous events. Her principal themes are memory and the way history — both personal and political — defines the present.

The political philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote that in the modern age we live between the past and the uncertain future and that we must learn to think differently without resorting to more traditional types of thought. Arendt's texts have been an important influence on Tomoko Yoneda. Like the philosopher, she asks the viewer to look more deeply as she creates new photographic images that have the capacity to suggest a different future.

Paul Wombell

A Decade After

On 17 January 1995 the Great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake struck Kobe and the southern region of the Hyogo Prefecture where Tomoko Yoneda was born. the artist was in London at the time and had difficulties contacting her family and friends as she watched the destruction of her native city via the media. Three months later she was able to return to Japan and to her home in order to see the start of the post-earthquake reconstruction. Yoneda took black and white photographs then returned nine years later to photograph the recently rebuilt city in colour to mark the forthcoming 10th anniversary of the earthquake.

1995 / 2004

Gelatin silver prints / Chromogenic prints.

Courtesy of the artist.

Scene

The geographical range of this series extends from Europe to Asia, the Middle East and South America. These landscapes and cityscapes, some of them beautiful, others showing dark skies over industrial zones, might initially appear to be inconsequential places. Yoneda, however, creates a tension between what is portrayed and what has happened in these locations. She has chosen sites associated with human catastrophe: from World Wars I and II to the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Korean War, and the conflicts in Bosnia and the Lebanon.

2000–Ongoing.

Chromogenic prints.

Courtesy of the artist

Between Visible & Invisible

Yoneda invites the viewer to look through the spectacles of leading figures from the twentieth century. Through the lenses of these glasses we see passages from books, letters, and photographs that have had a profound influence on human history. The photographs locate the viewer in the position of these historical figures, inviting us to imagine what they might have been thinking while they were reading the documents.

1998-Ongoing.
Gelatin silver prints.
Courtesy of the artist.

After the Thaw

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of the Soviet Union both Hungary and Estonia regained their independence from Russia. Yoneda portrays the physical legacy of the Cold War period in those countries and in particular their so-called “Russification”. Two contrasting styles of architecture coexisted in Tallin, the Estonian capital, typified respectively by the Russian Culture Centre from the Stalinist era and the Linnahall, built for the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Paldiski was a Soviet naval base and children now play in its abandoned barracks. The county of Võru in southern Estonia was the centre of resistance against the Soviet occupation. It was there that the group known as the Forest Brothers, of which Alfred Käärman was a prominent member, fought a guerrilla war against the Red Army. Initially named Sztálinváros [Stalin City], the industrial city of Dunaújváros was built in the 1950s by the Hungarian government, then a satellite state of the Soviet Union. Some of its buildings are influenced by the Bauhaus and the city has been described as a “socialist industrial landscape”.

2004

Chromogenic prints.

Courtesy of the artist.

Topographical Analogy

The United Kingdom was just moving out of economic recession when Yoneda took these photographs of interiors of abandoned buildings in London's East End. This was a time before the "regeneration" that permanently changed this part of the city. Dark stains on the wallpaper made by heat from central heating systems evoke the spirits of former inhabitants and their daily lives before the property boom changed living conditions dramatically. These photographs are the only memory of those lost souls.

1996 and 1998
Gelatin silver prints.
Courtesy of ShugoArts, Tokyo.

Kimusa

Originally built as a military hospital by the Japanese during the occupation of Korea, Kimusa is a modernist building which later became the headquarters of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA). The KCIA would become notorious for its suppression of any form of opposition to the military government of South Korea in the early 1960s. With their restricted views onto the outside world, Yoneda's photographs produce a feeling of confinement and claustrophobia. Here is a world hidden from view, a visual labyrinth with seemingly no way out. Today the building houses the National Museum of Contemporary Art.

2009

Chromogenic prints.

Courtesy of ShugoArts, Tokyo.

Beyond Memory and Uncertainty

When she was child Yoneda's parents would tell her about their experiences during the war and how they saw American Boeing B-29 bombers flying overhead. Employed extensively over Japan, the B-29 *Superfortress* was an American bomber intensively used in Japan and was the plane that dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Yoneda re-imagined this childhood memory when she travelled to a military aircraft base in England to photograph an American B-52 *Stratofortress* returning from a bombing raid on Baghdad during the Iraq War. By doing so, she suggests that the story her parents told her about the American bombers will be retold to Iraqi children sometime in the future.

2003

Chromogenic prints.

Courtesy of the artist.

Crystals

The black and white photographs that Yoneda took in Finland depict the ice crystals that form at low temperatures. The crystals are ephemeral and disappear with a slight rise in the temperature. These images combine the aesthetic of Bauhaus photography, which can border on abstraction, with the Japanese sensibility for looking at the physical world, which in a fleeting moment can reveal something profound about the nature of existence.

2013-ongoing.

Gelatin silver prints.

Courtesy of the artist.

DMZ

The Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), a neutral strip between North and South Korea, is one of the most militarised borders in the world. Created in 1953, it runs from east to west across the Korean Peninsula and at one point coincides with the 38th parallel, which was the original border between the North, controlled by the Soviet Union, and the south, controlled by the United States. The area of the Zone has remained largely unaltered since its creation and has become a unique ecosystem for flora and fauna. Yoneda's photographs of barbed wire and concrete walls also include the Korean flowers and plants which grow inside and over the fence that marks the human boundary between two opposing political visions, both seeking ascendancy on the Korean Peninsula.

2015

Chromogenic prints.

Courtesy of ShugoArts, Tokyo.

Japanese House

With the defeat of Japan in 1945, Taiwan came under the control of the Republic of China headed by Chiang Kai-shek and a new political class occupied the buildings from the Japanese era. Yoneda's photographs depict the former homes of political figures who were close to the president. Her images show domestic interiors in different styles which feature references to Japan, China and the West. With their shoji screens, tokonoma alcoves with typical wooden shelving, wallpaper and "Chinese" red paint, these houses reflect the change of era and the shift of political power. In the manner of historical documents, these private homes record their inhabitants' conflicts and internal tensions.

2010

Chromogenic prints.

Courtesy of the artist and courtesy of ShugoArts, Tokyo.

The Island of Sakhalin

Located off the Russian coastline, the island of Sakhalin's sovereignty was disputed by Russia and Japan since the 17th century. In 1855 the two countries agreed to inhabit it jointly without a fixed border, with Russia occupying the north and Japan the south. In 1905, after the Russo-Japanese War, the island was divided in two along the 50th parallel but with the defeat of Japan at the end of World War II it became Soviet territory. Anton Chekhov visited Sakhalin in the late nineteenth century when it housed a Russian penal colony and wrote about his experiences on the island. Yoneda was inspired by Chekhov's writings to photograph the vestiges of earlier occupations on Sakhalin.

2012

Chromogenic prints.

Courtesy of the artist and courtesy of ShugoArts, Tokyo.

The Parallel Lives of Others

ENCOUNTERING WITH SORGE SPY RING.

Richard Sorge was a Soviet spy during the Second World War. In 1933 he was instructed by the Soviet Union to organise an intelligence network in Japan. Working undercover as a journalist and a supposed supporter of the Nazi regime, he made connections inside the German embassy in Tokyo. Sorge gathered information on foreign policy and on Germany and Japan's future war plans. The most important information that he obtained was that Japan would not attack the Soviet Union.

Using a Kodak Brownie Hawkeye camera, Yoneda photographed the locations where the secret spy network met and exchanged messages. The photographs give the impression of being taken clandestinely. Sorge was arrested and accused of espionage. He confessed under torture and was hanged on 7 November 1944.

2008

Gelatin silver prints.

Courtesy of the artist.

Fragments of the Unimaginable

Realising that Nazi Germany was on the point of collapse, in January 1945 Adolf Hitler retreated into the Führerbunker, the air-raid shelter in the Reich Chancellery in Berlin. On the 30 April, as the Soviet Red Army advanced towards the centre of the city, Hitler and Eva Braun committed suicide: he with a pistol and she with cyanide. Their bodies were found on a sofa in Hitler's study and removed to the Chancellery garden where they were burned. Four days later the Red Army found the charred remains. They were moved to different places in Germany before being finally housed in the State Archive of the Russian Federation in Moscow.

2002

Chromogenic prints.

Courtesy of the artist.

The Sleep of Apples

Yoneda visited the battlefields of the Spanish Civil War, from Granada to the locations of the battles of El Jarama and Brunete outside Madrid. Taking part in the latter two was the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, the men of which crossed the Atlantic to fight and die in the Republicans cause. The fierce fighting around the Cerro del Mosquito (Mosquito Crest) in early July 1937 saw the death of both Jack Shirai, the only Japanese member of the Brigade, and Oliver Law, its Afro-American commander.

The other death that Yoneda alludes to in these photographs is the murder by Nationalist soldiers of the Spanish poet, playwright and theatre director Federico García Lorca one year earlier in Granada. The artist photographed various objects and the blue workers' overalls that Lorca wore when touring the country's provinces with his "La Barraca" theatrical company to perform plays from the Spanish classical repertoire. By combining popular and experimental forms of theatre and referring to Andalusian culture and legend, Lorca challenged the orthodoxy of theatrical performance and created the theatre of the impossible.

2019-2020

Chromogenic prints.

Courtesy of the artist.

Cúmulos

In this work Yoneda looks at two events that have marked the recent history of Japan; one a natural disaster and the other a man-made event but both involving nuclear power.

On the 11 March 2011 Japan was struck by the most powerful earthquake ever recorded at 9.0 M_w . The quake triggered a tsunami that swept along the north-east coast and flooded the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. This caused the reactors to melt down, releasing radiation into the atmosphere and the Pacific Ocean. Yoneda photographed the nearby village of Iitate, located north-west of the plant, which was evacuated due to concerns over the radiation leak and has become a ghost village.

Yoneda has also photographed the annual ceremonies that are central to Japanese culture, in particular those that commemorate the end of World War II. Every year on the 6 August the dropping of the atom bomb on Japan is remembered with Hiroshima Peace Day. The other significant event is the commemoration of the end of World War II, generally known outside Japan as "Victory over Japan Day". It takes place on 15 August at the Yasukuni Shinto Shrine which houses the spirits of the one million Japanese who died in combat in the war. In another ceremony, every New Year's Day the Emperor and other members of the imperial family appear on the balcony of the Chowaden Reception Hall in the grounds of the Imperial Palace, from where the Emperor gives his traditional greeting.

2011-2012

Chromogenic prints.

Courtesy of the artist.

Correspondence. Letter to a Friend.

Using her father's old Olympus-Pen camera, which exposes two vertical images in a 35 mm photogram, Yoneda set out to find traces of Albert Camus' life in Algeria and France. The camera becomes the bridge to the past through its photographs, which evoke the period when Camus was writing his novels *The Stranger* and *The Plague*. The two slightly different views created by the camera suggest a disconnected world, although the images are inseparable as they establish a dialogue with each other.

2017

Platinum palladium prints.

Courtesy of the artist.

Dialogue with Albert Camus

In a type of photo-biography, Yoneda identifies the different locations in Algeria and France where Albert Camus lived and wrote and the site where his father died in the battle of the Marne in World War I. She raises the question of Camus' legacy: do his writings have an influence on Algeria today?

2017

Chromogenic prints.

Courtesy of the artist.

Dialogue with...

The journey from Algeria to Marseille, which is the passage from Africa to Europe, has many meanings for immigrants: a journey from the past to the future, from the rural world to the city and from poverty to wealth. The reality is more complex and the journey is likely to be one of separation and isolation. In 1958 Albert Camus left Algeria for the last time and took a boat to Marseille. Yoneda relives that journey through references to the places where Camus wrote his novels, the places where he played and lived as a child and the blue sea and sky of Algeria that he loved so much.

2018

Single Channel video installation (HD, colour, sound).

06:07

Image: Tomoko Yoneda.

Music and sound design: Tomi Räisänen.