

## Sympathy with small things: the luminous fragility of Rinko Kawauchi

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A translucent bubble floats in the air next to a picture of a baby's head cradled tenderly in an adult's arms. Nearby, among an arrangement of similarly intimate images, an infant's tiny hand is gently enfolded in an elderly grandparent's grasp. On a single wall in the National Portrait Gallery, amid the contrasting styles and subject matter of the 2018 Taylor Wessing portrait prize, Rinko Kawauchi's vivid images of four generations of her family create a quietly intense space in which to pause and ponder the beauty and fragility of the everyday.



She is the fourth photographer to be commissioned for the In Focus section, which highlights new work by established artists in a mini exhibition. (Pieter Hugo, Cristina de Middel and Todd Hido preceded her.) "I need many elements to come together in a series to create a mood," she says, "not just portraits, but landscapes and tiny details and also the mood, the sky, the air. It's about creating mystery, but also expressing my own feelings about time passing, the fragility of life. They are metaphorical images, really, [about] how fragile our world is."

Recently, that sense of life's frailty has become more acute for Kawauchi following the birth of her daughter, whose first few years have been captured in characteristically hypnotic images. Since Kawauchi's arrival on the art scene in 2001 with the simultaneous publication of three photobooks, *Utatane* ("Catnap"), *Hanabi* ("Fireworks") and *Hanako* (a Japanese girl's name), her family have featured in her work alongside often breathtakingly beautiful photographs of the natural world – insects, rainbows, clouds, butterflies and, of late, sacred rituals and ancient sites in her native Japan. She is an artist of the quotidian sublime, creating a world in which the tiniest details – a slice of watermelon on a plate, a bird's egg cracking open – are imbued with meaning as part of the greater whole, the great interconnectedness.

The images on show at the NPG are a continuation of an ongoing project that began with her 2005 book, *Cui Cui*, which comprised photographs of extended family taken over the previous 15 years. In that time, she witnessed the death of her grandfather and the birth of her nephew. It is not, though, she insists, a work of "personal disclosure" – rather a visual contemplation of the cycle of life in all its sadness and wonder.



She is, she tells me in her faltering but often poetic English, "in sympathy with small things in the bigness of nature". Her approach is patient, deeply attentive, akin to a kind of heightened meditation. "It's about finding a certain space of mind, if that makes sense. When I am shooting, I am following my intuition without thinking. Thinking too much is boring, not good. It stops the surprising from coming through."

When a picture happens, I just say 'thank you' and move on. It is only afterwards that I become an editor and impose the meaning on the work."

In person, the diminutive Kawauchi is quietly spoken and self-contained; one senses that her work is an extension of her self. It is difficult to imagine her operating in the combative world of commercial advertising photography, which she did for several years after graduating from college in the early 1990s. She cites the American master of the everyday William Eggleston as a formative influence, alongside the younger Japanese photographer Takashi Homma. Her early images, which often seemed like deftly composed snapshots, were bathed in natural light and washed with bright colour tones that added to their almost dreamlike quality.



In 2004, Martin Parr gave her two gallery spaces when he guest-curated Les Rencontres d'Arles, and in 2006 she had a solo show at the Photographer's Gallery in London. Back then, I noted that her work "might initially appear to approach the deadpan detachment that characterises so much contemporary art-photography, but on closer inspection there is always some glimmer of hope and humanity, some sense of wonder at work in the rendering of the intimate and fragile." That remains the case, but, of late, her vision has widened and deepened. In 2013, her series Ametsuchi announced a departure of sorts. Using a large format camera mounted on a tripod, she shot from a distance, creating panoramas of the stark, elemental, volcanic terrain around Japan's Mount Aso, a sacred site for Shinto pilgrims who gather there to perform often spectacular fire rituals.

Last year, Halo continued her exploration of these bigger themes. In rural Japan and China, she photographed other religious fire rituals and the vast constellations above. On England's south-east

coast, she captured the wondrous natural spectacle that is the murmuration of starlings. The private and the everyday had suddenly given way to the celestial elemental, the tranquil to the spectacular. And yet, they remained Rinko Kawauchi photographs: striking, luminous, poetic.



"Halo is really about the relationship between nature and the manmade," she says, "There is something about time passing in all the work and, with Halo, it is about a practice that is unchanging for hundreds of years while the world changes around it."

Her work is changing in other ways, too. When she began making work, Kawauchi gravitated towards the photobook as the perfect medium for her closely observed images of the world around her. Now, she is intrigued with the possibilities of the moving image. To this end, in 2015 she created an installation in a gallery in Shinjuku of video works mounted on 30 monitors, her images, both intimate and elemental, unfolding to an ambient soundtrack of natural noises – wind, insects – and "music created on real instruments".

I ask her, in conclusion, if being a mother has changed her approach to her work. She thinks for a long moment. "I would say yes, but not in the expected way. In my personal life, it has been amazing of course; as a photographer, I am not so sure. When I feel happy, I see no reason to make work, but sometimes there is this hunger to make work. So, it is complicated. I need this hungry spirit and the calm. I need the balance to find the story inside me."

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/oct/26/rinko-kawauchi-taylor-wessing-photographic-portrait-prize-national-portrait-gallery>

Monday, April 11, 2011 | By Yumi Goto

## Rinko Kawauchi's Illuminance



*Untitled, from the series Illuminance*

Rinko Kawauchi

Contemporary Japanese photographer Rinko Kawauchi creates an imaginary space where the fantastical is possible— evoking ideas of dreams, memory and temporality. The images in her book, *Illuminance*, span 15 years of work, both commissioned and personal projects, and have the ability to make the mundane extraordinary, leaving poetry in the viewer's mind. This is even more apparent after the recent natural disaster in her homeland.

In her photos we see an iridescent diamond; a radiant blue sky; an elderly woman making *onigiri*; an infant suckling on a mother's breast. At first glance, her



photographs seem simple. But her talent lies in the way she is able to evoke the primal in all of us: a depth of raw human emotion. “It’s not enough that [the photograph] is beautiful,” says Kawauchi. “If it doesn’t move my heart, it won’t move anyone else’s heart.”



*Untitled*, from the series *Illuminance*

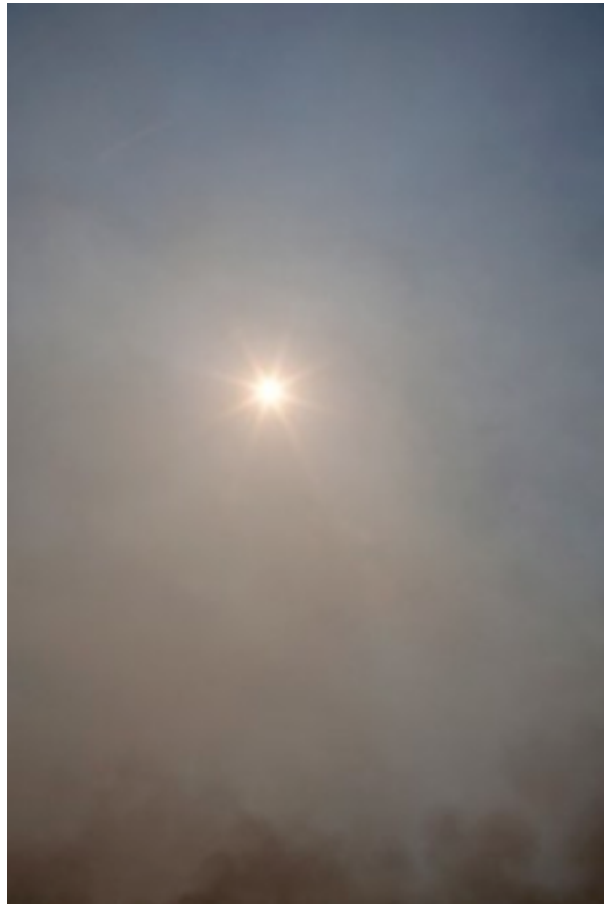
Rinko Kawauchi

A distinctive trait of her work lies both in the sequence and the juxtaposition of her images. This editing, she says, “differentiates between a photograph and an artwork. Seeing two images next to each other opens up the imagination and gives birth to something else. Flipping through the pages of the book, it can arouse feelings of excitement, sadness, or happiness—things that are hard [for me] to do with words.”

During the tumultuous aftermath of the earthquake and the tsunami, when the country was still rattled by aftershocks, Kawauchi stepped outside with her Rolleiflex and took a photograph of something she sees everyday. But on that day, the sun seemed to symbolize something more. “The world is connected by what we cannot see,” says Kawauchi, “in times of despair if we hold on to the things we believe are beautiful in life, that energy will change and affect the world in a positive way.”

Even in her darkest moments Kawauchi is still able to evoke what is important to her and to others feeling the same pain: Hope.

Her work will be on view at Hermès, which opens on May 20, 2011 in New York City (691 Madison Avenue, 4th floor). You can purchase a limited edition of her print via the Aperture Foundation. Proceeds from the print will go to support disaster relief efforts in Japan.



*Untitled, 2011*

Rinko Kawauchi

Print available through Aperture Foundation



## 10 questions to Rinko Kawauchi about photography

11 Aug 2006



Rinko Kawauchi, one of Japan's most popular female photographers today, created a sensation across the contemporary photography world in 2001 when she simultaneously released three critically acclaimed photography books: *Utatane*, *Hanabi* and *Hanako* and won the 27<sup>th</sup> Kimura Ihei Photography Award. Rinko's publications have continued to amaze the photography world with three more books: *Aila*, *the eyes the ears*, and *Cui cui*. She won not only the hearts of the young generation in Japan, but Rinko Kawauchi is said to be the next upcoming photographer - even in London. Being a great fan of Rinko's work, I jumped on the opportunity to talk to her during her exhibition at the Photographers' Gallery in London.

Written by Mayalina





**1. Miss Kawauchi, your photos bring me into a world of quiet contemplation, your camera captures the most intricate details of every day life, transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary and revealing a lyrical rhythm to our daily lives and surroundings. Before I go into your motifs and motivation, may I start by asking you what cameras you use?**

My favorite camera is the Rolleiflex. The reason why I like the Rolleiflex so much is because every aspect of it, the soft quality of the lens, the feeling of it in my hand, the clicking of the shutter, feels just right. But I also use normal compact cameras as well because some things can only be taken with a compact camera. I love that moment when I feel something and press the shutter.

**2. Do you insist upon a certain kind of form of printing? For example, you often print your photos in a square format, is there a reason why?**

The reason why I print in a square format is because the Rolleiflex camera that I use is a 6 x 6 camera. I dislike trimming photos because I when I take pictures I am taking them through a 6 x 6 lens and therefore from a 6 x 6 point of view. But I also really like the square format, as it is a world that is neither vertical nor horizontal. Not being pulled by either feels like a world to me.



### **3. What do you like about photography?**

I was comfortable with it the moment I held my first camera. Also, there is a kind of positive chemistry between me and taking photos ...I think I really like the idea of cutting out a moment in time...it is almost like fulfilling a hunting instinct for me. By fulfilling this need I get a feeling of satisfaction. For example, I think its similar to going shopping, the feeling of going to get something is a really comfortable task and coming home and printing the images is very similar to cooking for me. This string of tasks is very important to my daily life.

### **4. You do commercial photography as well as your personal artwork. Can you tell us a little about the relationship between your work in an artistic and commercial context and about how you negotiate and deal with both?**

At first I had been doing lots of commercial work, but my manager Mr. Takei encouraged me to spend more time on my artistic work. But it's difficult to choose one or the other because if someone where to ask me whether I would be better without commissioned work, that is not always the case. On the other hand, doing too much commercial work is no good either.



From the book Aila

But for example, the work I am displaying at the Photographers Gallery now is what I worked on whilst I worked on commissions and when I look back on myself, I am really glad that I was able to take so much work side by side with my commercial work. If I were given lots of time to concentrate just on my artistic works, I don't know if I could do it. So for me it is best when I balance out the job of being a commercial photographer and an artistic photographer.

**5. I realized, that you take photos with your mobile phone, too for your online Rinko Diary you write! I find it extremely interesting to see a professional photographer taking photos on a mobile phone and presenting them to the public. Can you tell me a bit more about those photos and why you started the diary?**

I thought taking photos with my mobile phone every day would be quite interesting. It's a mobile phone camera and I am writing a diary, so I tried not to make it too artistic.

Why I started it is because I really wanted to do something daily. Even more, I wanted it to be presented to others because doing something privately doesn't ever last long, and going round in circles brings you back to the same place. I also thought that presenting it on the Internet would make it feel live.

I also think it a really positive activity form me as it is in a sense therapeutic and helps me maintain my mental health.





**8. Your books are collections of images often put together based on visual association and I find that these visual associations create space for engagement, curiosity, contemplation and imagination. How do you decide upon the composition of your books? How do you make your books flow so beautifully?**

When I put together a book, I actually I have a conversation with myself. To be more specific, I begin by printing simply everything that I have recently taken and which interest me for whatever reason. And then I spread everything on my floor at home and start by taking an image in my hand. I then choose the next image, as if I were playing an image association game. I have moments where I say to myself, “I don’t know why but only this image can be next to this one”, or “this is a bit too well-coupled”. It’s almost like having some kind of discovery. In fact, photography is a succession of discoveries. When you take the photo you have a discovery. Then when you print you have another discovery. It is as if I am pressing the shutter a second time, because I notice things, I wasn’t aware before.



### **9. How did you cultivate your photographic/artistic sensibility?**

People often say that I have a child's eye. For example, I stare at ants gathering around sugar, or when I seek shelter from the rain, I gaze upon snails. These are things which you often do when you are a child aren't they? I have a very similar sensibility to that.

I prefer listening to the small voices in our world, those which whisper. I have a feeling I am always being saved by these whispers, my eyes naturally focus on small things. Even when I walk around Shibuya, I find myself running towards a little batch of flowers. I find comfort in them. I think this is a very normal sensitivity, on the contrary to what people may think, I think its sound. But of course the world we live in is not only made up of grass growing by the road, it is composed by lots and lots of other elements and so I do also take pictures of many other things. Just taking flowers is not interesting. I experience the world with a feeling of equilibrium and I think it shows in my works.

### **10. Finally, can you tell us about your next project? I heard you are working on an exhibition in Brazil?**

I am holding an exhibition at a museum in San Paulo next year and I visited Brazil in February to take photos for the exhibition. The owner of a Contemporary Art Museum in Brazil suggested that I took pictures of Japanese immigrants in a study of the history of Japanese immigration. I am thinking of going back again in the summer and making a book out of the idea.

I really look forward to that!





**I think many aspiring photographers will be surprised to hear that Rinko majored in Graphic Design at University. Her career as a photographer was inspired by the photography classes she decided to take once a week. Her determination to pursue what she felt was right! To create an immense archive of work is both amazing and encouraging. Besides being a very young incredible photographer, she is a wonderful person to meet.**

**Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us.**