EVENT SUMMARY:

# Artist Talk:

# Sayuri Ichida in conversation with Fiona Rogers

*Tuesday 4 March 2025*

**Sayuri Ichida's Talk:**

Hello, everyone. Thank you for joining me this evening. I'm excited to share a bit about myself and discuss my work and practice with Fiona later on. I attended Rika Noguchi's artist talk in this very room, the previous artist who exhibited here before me. As I listened to her, I was both amazed and excited to realize that I would be the next artist to show my work in this space. It brought back memories of when I was a 19-year-old photography student nearly 20 years ago, visiting her exhibition in Tokyo. She was already a renowned photographer back then, and it's such an honor to be on the same stage today. A special thank you to Jason, Nanaka, and Nana for this invaluable opportunity, and to Fiona for being here with me tonight.

The title of my exhibition is 'Transient', and I'll explain its meaning at the end. This is my first solo exhibition in the UK. I see some familiar faces here, but for those of you who don't know me, my name is Sayuri Ichida, and I'm currently based in Margate. I was born in Kokura, Fukuoka Prefecture, which was once Japan's largest industrial area. I grew up in a small coastal town in Niigata, an ordinary countryside surrounded by rice fields. My dad has always been a facility worker and my mom was a housewife. My sister and I were raised in a typical working-class family. When I was preparing for this presentation, I tried to recall my first encounter with photography and remember that my parents gave me a stereoscope similar to this one when I was about three to five years old. I still have vivid memories of beautiful sunny landscapes and cityscapes from western countries seen through the positive slides.

I started taking pictures when I was 15. At that time, I loved collecting postcards with beautiful landscape photos and I soon began borrowing my dad's camera. This is the very first photo book I bought for myself at 16 using money I earned from my part-time job at KFC. Shortly after starting high school, I joined a photography club. However, I was very unhappy with my early attempts and

results. To improve my skills, I decided to study photography at Tokyo Visual Arts. All of my teachers were men, most of whom were influenced by Japan's legendary street photographers. They encouraged us to go out and photograph homeless people, believing it would be a challenging subject for young photography students. These are the photographs I took during that time. At first, I was intimidated to approach them, but surprisingly they opened up quickly and I really enjoyed listening to their life stories, even though I felt like the subject didn't quite fit my style.

In my second year, I got really into fashion photography and wanted to learn more about lighting. After graduating, I started working as a studio assistant at Ino Studio in Tokyo. I was especially drawn to the Western fashion world. I decided to leave Japan to chase my dream of becoming a fashion photographer. First, I moved to the UK to study English. Then, later, I moved to New York where I got a job as a photo researcher at a fashion photographer's studio. However, while working there, I realized that I wasn't really a good fit for the industry. As an introvert, I struggled with the role of leading a crew, and I just didn't enjoy it. I stopped taking pictures for two years after that. I felt like I had lost my sense of direction. But gradually, I found my way back and started shooting again, this time with a film camera and completely different subjects.

This is one of my earliest works, titled 'Deja Vu.' I photographed the houses in upstate New York that matched my idea of American homes. They reminded me of my childhood dollhouse. This work was selected for the Japan Photography Award 2016, which was my first recognition.

In this series, I collaborated with a professional Japanese ballet dancer in New York, and the title was taken from her first name. Initially, she asked me to photograph her for her portfolio, but I wasn't interested in creating traditional dance photos, especially after leaving fashion photography. Instead, I approached her as a sculpture object. Together, we aimed to depict the struggles we both faced as female Asian immigrants, with her body forming peculiar poses. Through this series, I developed an interest in exploring body shapes.

I created this series, ‘Absentee’, during the COVID lockdown. It was such a difficult and isolating time. The constant stream of negative news and the rising death toll brought back feelings of emptiness that I had buried deep inside after losing my mother to lung cancer. She was only 47. It felt like a powerful reminder of how fragile we are, that we are all temporary beings. At that time, it felt like my inner self was absent, disconnected from the confusing reality. That feeling led me to title this series, ‘Absentee’. I aimed to document my emotional state during that challenging period and stay creative amidst such uncertainty. The lockdown also led me to experiment with self-portraiture. I'd never considered using my own body as a subject before, but at that time, I was the only one available to photograph. I also felt uncomfortable photographing models in the nude.

Before COVID, I had the opportunity to participate in a photobook-making masterclass at Yumigoto Studio in Tokyo, which inspired me to turn this series into a book. To build the sequence, I created a diptych portfolio. which is shown here, and I tried to find the right image pairs. The images are printed on thin Japanese kozo paper, and I love the paper's sheerness as it brings an intimate and almost poetic quality to the prints. I looked for connections between the two images, sometimes discovering visual resemblances or nearly identical pairs. Artificial objects represent anxiety and fear, while the soft curves of organic forms evoke calmness.

In 2021, I self-published Absentee in a limited edition of 50, designed by my partner, book artist, Tomasz Laczny. This coincided with my MA degree show at the University of Westminster where I met Fiona. The cover was screen printed by me, and the book was printed using a risograph with silver ink by Pagemasters, one of only two risograph printers in the UK who can print with silver ink. We also bound all the copies by hand. We chose black paper with silver ink because at the beginning of the project, many of the images were taken at night, as I could only go out after dark and wanted to reflect the solitude of those nighttime moments in the book.

This self-published edition led to an opportunity to collaborate with Ibasho Gallery and GM Editions, who co-published Absentee in 2022 as a limited edition of 500. We slightly increased the size, and the book opens from right to left like traditional Japanese books. Tomasz and I were inspired by the renowned photo book, ‘Chizu’, the map by Kikuji Kawada and incorporated gatefalls. However, instead of the single horizontal image seen in Chizu, we placed four images in each spread. We also created a special edition with a slipcase designed with a cut that aligns with the line in the cover image. Our idea was to approach the book in a sculptural way.

In my exhibitions, I try to create rhythm by displaying framed works with no space in between, using two different sizes to mimic musical notes. I chose walnut frames to echo the look of ‘shoji’, traditional Japanese sliding doors. I don't use glass because I want the audience to experience the texture of casual paper fibers as closely as possible.

The other series I'm exhibiting here is titled ‘Ctrl Shift + J’, named after the keyboard shortcut I used to switch between English and Japanese. For me, this simple action reflects my cultural background and the experience of navigating between two languages and identities. For this series, I worked with a wide range of subjects, including archival photos from my family album, landscapes from my travels, architectural elements, self-portraits, and more.

As a child, I experienced several relocations due to family circumstances. Later, I moved to Tokyo and then abroad, and I've now been an immigrant for many years. I've always carried a sense of being an

outsider. When I was transferred to an elementary school in Niigata from Fukuoka, my strong Kyushu dialect made me the subject of teasing. Here, I navigate life in my second language, and when I return to Japan, I'm often treated as an expat. This feeling of being an outsider follows me everywhere, even in my home country. Over time, I've come to accept it as a part of my identity and journey.

In this series, I try to express this sensation by using geometric lines and forms in each image, enhancing the feeling of not fitting in. I've always been drawn to the beauty of geometry, and I believe this fascination stems from my childhood memories of industrial architecture in Fukuoka. The works are hand-printed photopolymer photogravures, a non-toxic alternative to traditional photogravure. I love the pencil drawing-like quality of this technique, which evokes a sense of timelessness and felt fitting for this project, as it brings together images from different times and contexts. The double mount board echoes the geometric lines in the image through a cut, creating subtle shadows that add a three-dimensional quality to the piece. For this particular installation, I extended the lines across the wall, further emphasizing the theme.

Before moving on to the last slides, I'd like to say a little about the exhibition title. The curator Nanaka-san and I came up with the word ‘transient’ as both series explore the theme of temporality. We also decided to use a phonetic letter to mimic the playfulness of the title ‘Ctrl Shift+ J’. Before I finish, I'd like to share a bit about what I'm currently working on. One of my latest works is a collaboration with my sister. Growing up, we had very different personalities, which made it hard for us to connect. I tried to be a big sister the wrong way, being too strict, which made her distant from me. However, after losing our mother, we went through challenging times together and slowly grew closer. We spent our childhood in a small town in Niigata, where my father worked at the nuclear power plant. As kids, we played on the beach and watched the power station glow at night. But since the Fukushima accident, that same beach now evokes a blend of nostalgia and anxiety. By photographing her in our hometown, we are revisiting our sisterhood and trying to strengthen the bond we once failed to have.

Lastly, I was honored to receive the Jerwood Photoworks Award 5 last year. Currently, I am creating a new body of work for a touring exhibition next year. For this project, I decided to explore Japan's depopulation issue. While this issue has only recently gained attention outside of Japan, it's been a pressing reality for me, having grown up in a small town. Two out of three elementary schools in my hometown have already closed, and my junior high school is also scheduled to shut down in the coming years. Nearly 450 schools close in Japan every year. I plan to visit several closed school buildings in Niigata to create photo collages, and I intend to print the images on chalkboards, which are strongly associated with schools. The UK is expected to begin experiencing a natural population decline this

year. My goal is to raise awareness of this issue among UK audiences, encouraging them to consider the possibility of a future similar to Japan's. Thank you all for your time and attention.

## Q&A with Fiona Rogers:

**Fiona Rogers:** Hello, everyone. I can see some friendly faces in the audience, which is very nice. Thanks, everyone, for being here. Thank you, Sayuri. That was a potted overview of your practice. It's such beautiful work. I mean, this is why you filled this room so quickly. I wanted to start by referencing when we met, 2021, and that we met during your Westminster degree show. I remember coming, and I was with Emma Bowkett, who recently featured your work in BFT. I remember thinking that it was so Japanese and so unlike anything I'd seen before, this abstraction, this flipping of the images. It felt very familiar to me at the same time. I just wondered if you could talk a little bit about Japanese history of photography and how much you're conscious of that, and how much you play with that, or perhaps it's something that you try to reject. I mean, we talked about this idea of diasporic identity. So I just wondered if you could tell us a bit about how you feel your work intersects with Japanese photography history.

**Sayuri Ichida:** First of all, I feel very privileged to be from a country with such a long history of photography and with a great number of great photographers, but at the same time as a young photography artist, I was struggling with this Japanese label because this label is so prominent in this field. At the beginning of my career, I tried to suppress the Japanese-ness in my work because I was living abroad and I wanted to blend more into Western culture. But at some point, I realised that it naturally comes out no matter what. I decided to adopt it and I started even experimenting with my cultural background, for example, by using Japanese paper.

**Fiona Rogers:** Yeah, I think that's very evident. You guys working together on the book design, this very process-driven approach you have to your work. Clearly you like to get your hands into things and I guess you like to make things, like hand stitching. There's obviously a lot of Japanese references in the way you make your work. You touched on some of the techniques that you use in your photography, but I wonder if you could elaborate a little bit on darkroom techniques or what you like to print with, how you're photographing within the studio.

**Sayuri Ichida:** I think that having tactility in my prints is very important and an essential part of my work. I think it partially comes from my background of being a commercial photographer or having worked in the commercial photography industry for many years. I was looking at digital photography on the screen every day, and so I wanted to go in the opposite direction, and I love the hands-on process. I love the tactility my work has. I think tactility affects how the audience experiences the work.

I've looked at so many photographic works, mainly to get ideas or inspiration for my own projects, and I realised that sometimes I don't get very excited when I look at photography with digital prints. It feels too flat and too two-dimensional to me. So I try to add tactility, a feeling to my work for that reason.

**Fiona Rogers:** I also wonder if there's some kind of PTSD in your fashion career that you're working through, because fashion photographers spend forever looking on a screen at the tiniest little detail of this thing that's going to be a massive billboard. There's something about returning to the scale of bookmaking and of printing that is almost like a rejection, that maybe you had to work when you were doing commercial work. But I wanted to talk about Absentee a little bit more, because it's where we met, and I think probably a lot of people will have discovered your work through that book. You were talking about the legacy of Japanese street photography and about your tutors who were encouraging you to go out into the street and meet vulnerable people. I guess it was very much of its time. It doesn't suit you, and I suspect it doesn't suit a lot of working contemporary artists, particularly female artists now. I think the ethics around that have thankfully moved on somewhat. I also wonder if using your own body in some way was also a rejection of the lack of control. I guess you may have felt being pushed into photographing people that maybe you didn't feel very comfortable with. We do see a lot of particularly female artists using self-portraiture as a way to control their own image making but to also not to exploit other people within that process. Do you think that there is something in that? Did you feel it was easier, more comfortable for you to photograph yourself?

**Sayuri Ichida:** It was a bit challenging because I didn't have prior experience of doing a self-portrait. If COVID didn't happen, I wouldn't have done it. So it was a fun process. It was almost like discovering my inner self. I had a feeling deep inside me that as a woman, and I'm reaching 40, and I had this idea that maybe I should preserve my current body in a picture as a female photographer. I had this idea somewhere in my mind, but COVID opened this door and allowed me to explore this area. All the pictures in the Absentee series were shot on a film camera. Self-portraiture was difficult to do on a film camera because I had to focus and pose at the same time. I had to use a digital camera. I put my digital camera on a tripod and photographed myself. I held my phone and I remotely controlled my camera and I hit the shutter button on my mobile app, and I printed those images on A3 photographic papers, and I re-photographed the image on a film camera. That was the process.

**Fiona Rogers:** The types of paper you're printing on and the color differences for you are also really important because the work fluctuates from being this very deep silver, as they are in the book, to almost like a greeny gold. When you showed the installation shot, I was reminded of how different the images look in color, depending on how you're experiencing them. Sometimes they look quite black and white on a backlit screen, but then when you have the book they're very silver. Are you very

experimental with it? Will you go through lots of different paper before you land on something that you like?

**Sayuri Ichida:** I made the portfolio first and I was determined to use that kozo paper, because it felt perfect for this series. I wanted the book to have a different feeling. I want the reader to have a different experience in the book. During my presentation, I briefly mentioned that there were a lot of night shots at the beginning of the project. I wanted to add this night feeling into the book. For that reason, we decided to go for black and silver. But I really like how it turned out, and how different the exhibition presentation and the book were. So that the audience can enjoy two different versions.

**Fiona Rogers:** A lot of the photographs in the book are you, but you wouldn't necessarily know, like your face is sometimes covered or you've clearly tried to abstract your own body. Is that you responding to this feeling of melancholia, linked to the loss of your mother? Was there a particular reason why you wanted to be hidden?

**Sayuri Ichida:** Anonymity plays an important role in my work because I think it's important to leave a space between me and the audience. As a viewer myself, I'm not a big fan of photographic works that show the model's face very clearly, because I don't know this person, I don't know the personality of this person. So I feel a bit awkward. For that reason, I try not to show my face, not only in this series but in other series, in most of the images I don't show the models' face for that reason.

**Fiona Rogers:** So it's almost so that the viewer or the audience can almost interpret their own experience with the work. That's very interesting. With the newer work, the work that you're showing here and the work that you're now doing with your sister, there's also a kind of tactility. Ctrl Shift + J has this intervention aspect to it, with the cuts. Can you tell us a bit more about the process of making those, is that something that you do or perhaps you guys do it together: How does the piece become this unique thing?

**Sayuri Ichida:** First of all, with this series, I used archival photos almost for the first time. All the images came from different times, for example, I used my grandpa's passport picture and some images are my self-portraits and building pictures I photographed during my trip. I want them to blend into one work, so for that reason I went for a photo etching technique because this printing technique gives a feeling of timelessness to the image. The reason why I decided to play with the mount board with the card was that I wanted to add a feeling of three dimensional-ness, and I also wanted to add the playfulness of geometric lines and forms in the image.

**Fiona Rogers:** It's very graphic in a lot of ways, from a design perspective. I mean, clearly you have an eye for the design as much as you have an eye for composition and shapes photographically. Is that something that you think you'll continue with?

**Sayuri Ichida:** We are actually working on a book for this project, Ctrl Shift + J, and we want to try to adapt the same effect into the book. Like I mentioned during my presentation, I have this big fascination towards geometric lines and forms. It comes from my old childhood memory of seeing factory buildings and I often get inspiration from artworks from the constructivism era. So I think that reflects into this.

**Fiona Rogers:** In a way, Absentee was about your mother, even if she didn't feature in the photographs. Now this project with your sister, I mean, how has it been? I mean, you're going from working with your own body to working with archival images, and now you're working with a family member. Is it difficult to direct it or control it in any way, how are you approaching that?

**Sayuri Ichida:** First of all, we are doing this to make time to spend time together. We had a difficult sisterhood when we were children, so we both knew that we needed this time together. My sister is a musician, and we wanted to do some creative collaboration, so it naturally started because she needed some pictures for her music work and then it continued and it became a project. Through this project I'm discovering a new sister in her, because we've spent so much time separately. I think how I treat her is a similar approach to Mayu. I'm not a documentary photographer or portrait photographer. So, it's more like I treat her in a sculptural way.

**Fiona Rogers:** Where does your sister live, still in Japan?

**Sayuri Ichida:** Yeah, in Niigata, my hometown.

**Fiona Rogers:** So it's a good opportunity for you to go back and visit. This idea of collaboration I imagine heals those traumas and in some ways repairs those lost years. I think there've been many fantastic photography projects that come out of families finally coming together and collaborating. I look forward to seeing it.