

Private View:

ひろしま/**hiroshima**

Group exhibition by Ishiuchi Miyako, Fujioka Aya and Sasaoka Keiko

Gallery tour presented by Jonathan Watkins

Tuesday 9 September 2025

Jonathan Watkins: Miyako was born in 1947, so two years after the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. For one reason or another we didn't do a solo exhibition, we decided on a group show. Rather than us making up our minds on whose work should be combined with hers, we asked her to choose some other artists that she'd like to be shown alongside her work. She chose Aya Fujioka and Keiko Sasaoka.

Let's talk then about the fact that she wanted to be in the company of two women photographers. She feels very strongly about her ideas here as a woman and as a photographer. Why did she choose the work of the artists next door? You haven't seen that yet, so what I'm going to propose is that I'll give you a bit of commentary as to what you're seeing here, and then next door, I'll give you a bit of time to wander around, and then you can tell me what it is that you're seeing and how you're responding to it. I say that above all because she is an artist. Like so many artists, when you say, what is the meaning of your work, they say "There's no meaning. It's what you derive as meaning from my work." You know there's no answer. It's not like when you confront the work as some sort of exam and if you've got the right interpretation, you get top marks. It's very open to interpretation. That's her point, and that's what I encourage you all to do.

This work was brought to London from Japan as well, and she's very famous for it. It's work that she made in 2007, having been invited to Hiroshima to respond to what it was that she saw there.

Let's go to the next room and have a look at the combination of work by the two younger artists who, incidentally, are born and raised in Hiroshima, and I'll tell you about how they came about.

Here is Aya Fujioka's work. This is the Peace Memorial Park. There is a remnant building that sits in the middle of Hiroshima, and is left as it was after the explosion as a kind of reminder. Rather than removing it or rebuilding, you've got a building that symbolises destruction but also survival. You can see from these photographs and others I can show you next door. Has anyone been to it? It's true to say it feels haunted a little bit. But on the other hand, it feels like everyday life just kind of goes on. The point that she's making is that there are kids playing this game against this backdrop. These are school children possibly on their way to the museum. Every year, millions of people visit because it's become a kind of pilgrimage destination. This is a very, very small tip of the iceberg of images that this artist has made that depict everyday life in Hiroshima. I really enjoy being there, actually. It's quite a laid-back kind of place, a little bit hippie, perhaps, with lots of street food. I mean, life just goes on, and it's quite enjoyable.

The other artist, Keiko Sasaoka, whose work is behind me - she published a book called 'Park City', because she was interested, having grown up in Hiroshima, to reflect on the extraordinary nature of her city. It has history like Nagasaki, but almost unlike any other city in the world. What she does is combine archival images, and here you see the dome of that building there. It's like a kind of collage of archival images and photographs that she's taken moving around in Hiroshima today. It's something very straightforward, snapshots of daily life. Sometimes, she takes photographs in the same place. So it could be an old postcard. A tram going across a bridge.

Miyako Ishiuchi was the only artist of the three who came here and installed the work. It's actually quite interesting watching her do it. She said she wanted to install it, and from a curatorial point of view, I thought well, let the artist have that opportunity to do it the way they want. It says a lot. She started by putting that photograph quite high on the wall there. Then, almost in kind of an unfolding jigsaw puzzle, she started to move around the room. If that's up there, then maybe that sort of sits well next to it. We've got some smaller ones. We've got some in the corner like that, like a punctuation mark, here on this wall between these two images. Then the watch and the slippers are touching for one reason or another. It's these sorts of details that are particularly poignant.

In a conversation with the artist, a couple of things came up. One is that she felt very strongly that women respond to the subject of Hiroshima very differently than men. She also said female photographers have a different take on the subject. It would be interesting to know, especially because you're predominantly female, if you feel that there could be some truth in that.

The other thing that sort of cropped up as controversial, and again in the light of what's going on in the world right now it would be interesting to know what you think. These are very elegant

photographs. What happened in Hiroshima was horrific, so how can you make work that is so aesthetically pleasing, so beautiful, about something that is so awful? Are you being irresponsible? How can it be an acceptable way of responding to something like an atomic bomb on an innocent population, killing thousands and thousands. So how can you justify that?

Audience member: I guess in wartime women weren't fighting, and there was no sense of normalcy except these women in the homes that were keeping everything alive. The city was alive. Then their lives were completely destroyed.

Jonathan Watkins: Another interesting thing she said was that men take black and white photographs. She responded to the colour that she saw. Could something be as simple as that as a subject matter?

Audience member: For a long time, colour was associated with commerce and advertising. Serious photographers until relatively recently wouldn't touch colour, would they? It didn't look serious. Serious art photographers or documentary photographers would primarily shoot in black and white, because advertising, commerce, fashion photography was using colour, so they wanted to make a distinction. So it's interesting. She's made various serious images, but uses colour very richly.

Audience member: Also, of course, in 1945 all the pictures that we do have of the aftermath are in black and white. When I think of either World War, I always think of it in black and white. I remember actually, as a young woman, there was a programme called 'Holocaust', not a documentary, a series. It was in colour. I always thought it must have been in black and white because every single picture I'd ever seen of what happened was in black and white. I think that's the same with Hiroshima. I think of it in black and white. Here it is in colour.

Jonathan Watkins: There's been that interesting project by Peter Jackson, where he went back to the archival films from the First World War and coloured them, using some extraordinary AI, I think.

Audience member: These are in colour, but there's a kind of black tint isn't there? There's some kind of filter, I think.

Jonathan Watkins: She didn't grow up in Hiroshima, and so when she arrived she was surprised because in her head, her idea of Hiroshima was all black and white because of all the documentary photographs and films that she'd seen, and was therefore surprised by the colour that she saw. Then she

really brought it out. So she makes the point as a female; this is something that she draws out of her subject, rather than the male photographers of her generation.

I mean how do you feel about the beauty? She's unashamedly making this work good-looking. What do you think about that? I mean it would be a bit like if you go to Gaza now and you take the clothes of somebody who is suffering, and then you make some kind of pretty picture, and say this is my response to Gaza. How could you think that you were representing it properly and responsibly?

Audience member: I think that gives them new life, and it respects them because somebody wore these clothes and cared about these clothes and objects, and representing them like this shows that you respect what was most respected. Even though the people who were born and took care of these things aren't around anymore, it's nice to know that their things are being taken care of.

Jonathan Watkins: So it's almost a kind of gesture of respect.

Audience member: Their memory is still living on these walls, so it's nice to still remember the people that were alive at that time and to remember their culture, what they wore, and how their lives were.

Jonathan Watkins: Above you, there's this image of the watch, and of course, it kind of stopped at the moment of the explosion. The idea of photography as a kind of freezing something in time, I mean, it's epitomized by that image. She said "I can't photograph history. I can't capture it."

Audience member: I also wanted to say that this shows that it was individuals who lost their lives, because you always hear these big numbers, and obviously that's horrible, but it gives people the opportunity to not look at it as just a large amount of people, but individual people who had a life and stuff they cared for and enjoyed.

Jonathan Watkins: Yeah, that's really important. I mean that's definitely something that she says. Look at those slippers, and you see somebody's name is written on the inside of it.

She talks about wanting to maintain a distance from the work, she's not arriving with a kind of melodramatic tendency or a kind of expressionism. She wants to be almost scientific, and archival in her approach. Does it work? Does it make the work more touching, perhaps in a way that you're describing? There is an absence of these people. I mean they've gone. Even if they survived, they've all gone. So does it work?

Audience member: I think it's capturing a very delicate subject matter with the clothing, but I also think she's set up how the pictures are around the room and I think it looks very industrial. I think it's quite reflective of next door, where you have the pictures of Hiroshima afterwards, with these very big industrial buildings that were built very quickly afterwards. I think it's not disrespecting the people that obviously wore these clothes and it's a very delicate subject matter, but it's also showing that time moved on very quickly. It's only been 80 years and people have moved on. Hiroshima's still there. These things still live on; the people will be remembered. However, I think it's quite quick.

Jonathan Watkins: I mean they're already starting to talk about the reconstruction of Gaza and the bombing is still going on. I mean another 45 people died overnight, and they're already starting to talk about rebuilding it, in spite of the fact that the violence continues.

What about the fact that it's photography? She's a photographer, and it's a very graphical representation. The medium is the message. What about the fact that this is photography? It's not somebody sitting down and drawing it.

Audience member: For me at least, it builds a connection. It makes it easier to put myself in their shoes as opposed to it being a painting.

Jonathan Watkins: There's a visual record of a photographer, Miyako Ishiuchi, actually confronting something real and then wanting to communicate that to you. It was real at the time. I mean the idea of fixing time, the snapshot, it's kind of a perfect medium for conveying the difference that a split second can make, not only to an individual life but to the history of an entire country.

It's interesting that in the conversation we had about the revolution in Japan, she kind of claimed that Japan did not actually have a revolution. But you could argue that this was a revolutionary moment. I mean, until that time, Japan had an emperor, and it was pretty muscular. It had this imperial dynamic and it was moving quite successfully through China, through Burma, through Singapore. It wasn't until the bomb exploded that everything changed, and America won the war. So yes, I mean, there is this moment that changed everything, and it can be captured in a photograph.

Okay, what about next door? We've got the choices of these younger women photographers and the way they represent Hiroshima now, but with memories of what happened. How do you respond to that and maybe this combination of their work? They're a younger generation. They were born and brought up in Hiroshima. She wasn't. She sort of comes in almost like a natural historian, like a

scientist who makes his documentation. This is in the museum, but what you see outside on the streets, how does that help the proposition of the show?

It relates very much to what you were saying, that these were individuals and they were living everyday life. They were wearing fashionable clothes. In fact, the artist says, "I look at these clothes, and I can see myself wearing them and actually quite enjoying them." There's a kind of fashionability in these garments. If you've been to Japan and you've seen kids in school, quite often there you see them wearing these kinds of sailor uniforms. I mean, this is this beautiful sort of translucent material in the way the light shows through.

In a split second everything changes, the clocks stop, and the young woman is walking down the steps to the river. She's probably not thinking about what happened in Hiroshima eight years ago. The kids that are playing, it's almost as if they're kind of oblivious to the history that is embodied in that building. What do you think about that? I mean, why put these things together?

Audience member: I think it's interesting, but it's like how do you live with that history? That sense of the ordinary in relation to the extraordinary is spreading through a lot of this and the sort of micro-macro levels of individual human lives, but at the same time, the broad notion of humanity. I think they're really interesting in how they operate on so many different levels.

I just wanted to highlight and look at the decisions that have been made. Things don't just happen; she didn't just happen to make these images. The exhibition didn't just happen, the curation didn't just happen. It's all the result of very deliberate decisions that have been made, so I think it's interesting that's come out. You can see the effect on this decision to crop the images, the decision to choose quite delicate fabrics, as you said. All of these decisions then have an impact on us as viewers and the way in which we then interpret the works. and what we take out of them. It's all about the viewing experience, but that viewing experience often comes out of a whole set of factors, partly all those decisions have been made by the artist, by the gallery, by the curator, but also decisions that you've made. So they're all very much connected here.

Jonathan Watkins: I mean when I was your age, I set out history, and I just imagined that I was going to be an art historian because you're modelling your future life on the people that you see teaching you, and it just self-perpetuating, but later on it kind of occurred to me that there was a job for a gallery curator. I mean it's exactly that point. Things don't kind of just spring up like mushrooms on walls. Somebody is making a decision, that this is what they want to show. They want to show this in

juxtaposition with that, and they think that that could somehow skew the meaning and communicate something to an audience in a non-verbal way. That's the kind of job that I chose to do.

Going back to this point: what's the point of making this juxtaposition, not only of the works in this room but the two rooms, and the younger artists, in Aya and Keiko's work. These are people who are just getting about their everyday lives. They've done the things that they did the night before, they've had breakfast, they've had lunch, you know, they're going to meet a friend, and then all of a sudden, their lives changed or stopped. They're getting about their everyday life in Hiroshima now, just like these people were. It has a very strong existentialist dramatic impact. You start thinking, oh my god, you know that could happen to me.