

WEBINAR SUMMARY:

Artist Talk: Miyuki Okuyama in conversation with Jonathan Watkins

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Miyuki Okuyama's talk:

Let me introduce myself very quickly. My name is Miyuki Okuyama and I am from the Yamagata Prefecture in Tohoku, the northeast area of Japan. For the past 15 years, I've been living and working in the Netherlands, and for many years, I worked on art photography. But since 2011, which was a big year of change, I also began taking documentary photos.

At my exhibition, 'Japan Outside Japan' at Daiwa, I am presenting two of my documentary photo works. First, I would like to introduce "Michinoku Homeworld: walking towards the northeast". This word, Michinoku, literally means the end of the road, and was the old name for Tohoku, meaning northeast. You can see on this map, in the red area of Japan, that's Tohoku or Michinoku. For this project, I walked 400 kilometers from Tokyo to my home in Michinoku. My intention was to create a poetic and personal documentary.

It was not really simply walking home. I followed a historical Kaidō, which means route or road. In 1601, five major routes were officialized. I walked one of them called Oshu Kaidō. It's heading from Tokyo to the northeast, to the top of Honshu, like the Aomori area. After that, I switched to a minor route called Ushu Kaidō to approach my home. In this illustration, you can see the Kurihashi area next to the river Tone.

One of the two major inspirations for these traveling photos was ancient chronicles and poetry. The name Michinoku appeared in some old documents and poetry. As you can see, the old one was Nihon Shoki or the Chronicle of Japan, published in the 7th century. This name of the area, Michinoku, appeared in the 9th century, 10th century and 12th century in several Japanese literatures. Saigyō, a poet, even traveled twice to the Michinoku area. And of course, Matsuo Bashō, a haiku poet of the 17th century, traveled together with his pupil Sora. They walked from Edo or old Tokyo to the

Northeast. He left a travel poetry book titled 'The Narrow Road to the Deep North' or Okuno Hosomichi in Japanese.

You may also know this name: Isabella Bird. She came to Japan alone and almost as soon as the country became open. That was 1878. Isabella Bird, and her interpreter guide Tsurukichi Ito, traveled to the Tohoku and Hokkaido areas. I find it very courageous and inspiring that she came to Japan and travelled alone. There is more literature inspired by Michinoku, like Towako Yamada and Masaoka Shiki.

Another inspiration for this project was the Tohoku earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident that happened in 2011. It happened on March 11th, and more than 20,000 people lost their lives very sadly. When I found out on the news, I felt so awful and guilty. As a person from that region, I couldn't do anything, just a small donation back then. This sad event triggered me to challenge myself to make a documentary photo project for the first time.

For the very first one, I traveled from a Russian train from here, Arnhem, in the Netherlands, and to Moscow on the Siberian express train to Vladivostok, and then took a ferry to go home. I wanted to capture the physical and psychological distance from here to my home. But it was a failure, unfortunately. And the other attempt you can now see at the Daiwa exhibition.

This is a walking travel project. I walked about 400 kilometers from Tokyo to my home. I made landscape images and portraits of the people I met on my way. I was not confident that I would be able to walk the 400 kilometres. I didn't tell anybody about my plan, apart from my partner. After walking for several days, I finally felt I could do it.

Besides walking home from Tokyo, I headed to another destination, the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant area. It is located in the southeast part of Michinoku. It's still in Fukushima, but it was providing power to the Tokyo area. And after the disaster in 2011, all the residents of the area had to evacuate. Now, they are allowed to come back, but most of them don't. Only some older people came back to their home, like this picture of Mrs Oyama in Namie Town. Because Fukushima received a relatively large budget from the Japanese government, the roads are newly paved. But there were hardly any cars passing.

This photo was shot on the beach in Namie Town, about 10 kilometers from the nuclear plant. To protect the area from tsunamis, a 400-kilometer seawall along the Pacific Ocean has been built, blocking the view. It used to be a popular beach, but now, no one goes there. I was there and waited until the hour of dusk. It's a symbolic hour to photograph, I thought. If you look at this photo closely,

you can see right in the middle, the Fukushima nuclear power plant, and a beautiful evening scape. It's a cynical and a bit painful contrast, I think.

So what future awaits Michinoku? Some problems it's facing include a declining birth rate - there are only 1.2 babies per couple on average. On top of this is depopulation. Five of the six prefectures of Tohoku Northeast are having the worst population decline and becoming a serious aging society. For example, on my street, there are 12 houses, and six of the houses are now already empty. So I hope you can imagine the near future of this Michinoku from this image of the sea.

I'm now going to talk about my other project I am presenting in this exhibition. It is called "Dear Japanese: Children of War". Years ago, I was only producing art photos, like I said. Around 2009, I found a book by Yoko House, a Japanese woman living in the Netherlands, who is now a good friend of mine. Her book, *Watashi wa Dare no Ko*, or *Whose Child I Am*, was shocking to me. To find out about these Japanese children born during wartime, now living in the Netherlands. When I met these special people, my eyes were caught by their clearly Japanese faces. It was like meeting Japanese *obasan* and *ojisan*, aunt or uncle. Here you can see a picture of John, the son of Man Sato. You can tell that he is a partially Japanese man.

I need to explain some history. Dutch East Indies, or now Indonesia, was the place where their story began. It was a rich colony of the Netherlands for 300 years. Um, VOC, or Dutch East Indian Company, was there too. It was a land with rich resources, like gas, metal, sugar, coffee and tea. I also need to explain the word, Indo, or Indo people. Their origin was the Dutch East Indies. They speak Dutch, they are Christians, and they have mixed roots. But when the war was over, they had to make tea, and it was a difficult decision whether to stay in New Indonesia, or to move to the Netherlands.

On December 8th, 1941, the Japanese army attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, but also at the exact same moment, Japan attacked British Malaysia. Most Dutch men, and Indo men, had to serve in the Royal Dutch Army. The Japanese army attacked the Dutch East Indies in January 1942, and it quickly became under Japanese occupation.

Dutch women and their children were forced in camps till the end of the war. What about those Indo women? They were born into rather rich Indo families, but now, during the war, they couldn't fit in the camp, because there was not enough space. So the Japanese army issued some kind of ID card for them, and they could stay in their own homes. But these women had to work to support themselves. They worked at restaurants or cafes, often serving Japanese occupiers. And that was the beginning of the story of Japanese war children.

So, who are those Japanese children born of war? Their mothers were Indo, supporting themselves. Their biological fathers were Japanese army civilian employees or Japanese military men. While the women were working, they often served Japanese men, and this meant many of these women had relationships with these men. Some were wanted, but often unwanted ones. These women had to stay in relationships with the Japanese men for financial support. So these children were all born between 1943 and 1946.

August 15th, 1945 was the day of Japanese capitulation. Japanese fathers had to leave and go back home. Mothers and children were left behind. Almost immediately, the Indonesian national revolution started. Even after the war ended, difficult times continued. Because of Indonesian independence, those Dutch citizens had to make a decision to go back to their unknown homeland, Netherlands, or to stay in New Indonesia. These pictures I borrowed from John. John's mother secretly kept the photo of her biological father in Norway on the right. During the interview with John, I asked him to softly peel off these pictures from his album. Like I expected, there was something written on the back of this picture. I hoped it was the full name of his biological father, but it was not. It says in his mother's handwriting, 'I will never love anybody else.' So she was seriously in love with this man called Inoue, one of the stories I was told.

Most of these Japanese children born in war grew up in difficulty. Most of them were not told the truth about their fathers. Well, some were told secretly that he or she had Japanese fathers, often not from their mothers, but from their cousins, aunts, or drunken stepfathers. They were told the truth when they were in their forties, fifties, or even sixties. They grew up with enormous hate towards Japan, with the shame of being the enemy's child.

Were they shocked when they heard about the secret? No, not really. Most of them at least felt that there was a secret, and they don't look like their younger brothers or sisters. Some mothers loved their Japanese children, but often not, sadly. There were even abandoned ones. Some grew up in children's homes, were adopted by a grandmother or an aunt. This photo you see is of Jack, and he is one of such cases. His mother didn't want him, so his aunt had to adopt him. Jack didn't even know his father's name. Many of their mothers married, or perhaps had to marry former POWs who went through a lot of suffering during the war. These ex-POWs had hatred and anger against Japan. Sadly, it may not be surprising that some of them, especially girls, were abused sexually by such fathers. I've heard really awful stories of Japanese female children being raped, but I'm hesitant to talk about it in detail today.

Now I'd like to talk a bit about the father's search. From 1994 to 2011, Mr. Kaoru Uchiyama, a veteran man who worked as a newspaper journalist after the war, together with Yoko House, the author, researched about war children to look for their fathers. They looked at 70 cases, and 23 fathers were

identified. When I say identified it doesn't mean that they could meet their fathers. There were some lucky cases, but often, Japanese fathers were already deceased or Japanese fathers didn't respond or didn't accept their half-brothers or half-sisters. In 2012, part of the Japanese war archive became open. Since then, a newly established organization, SOO, took over the research. Yoko and I were the members of this SOO. We worked on 40 cases and in 16 cases we were able to identify the biological fathers. Later this year, the very last client of ours will meet his half-brother in Japan, one of the rare lucky situations. pieces of good news.

This photo series, 'Dear Japanese Children of War' was not a photo project I wanted to do. It was a photo project I felt I had to do. Yoko wrote a book, but I felt this story had to be recorded visually. When I asked these Japanese war children for portraits, some said, no, sorry. I started with only five or six of them agreeing to be interviewed and photographed. But luckily, over time, more and more of them accepted me, and eventually, I was able to photograph 40 of them, including those from the second and third generation.

I asked them to pose for me in their personal space, like their home or garden, if not, in their neighborhood. In this picture, you see Marcel, or Masao in Japanese, standing in front of a canal, a pretty typical Dutch landscape in his neighborhood. Typical Dutch houses are also visible in the background. I asked Japanese children to face my camera, so they are facing eye-to-eye contact with me and also with the viewers. The aim is so viewers can think, imagine, and feel who these people are.

This is one of the examples from my exhibition. I've left some empty spots. Maybe you can guess what the meaning behind that is. Academic research about these Japanese children, about Japanese war children was never completed. So, we don't know how many of these people exist. But I'm sure there are more of them, perhaps still hiding, or even not knowing that they are Japanese. Just last year, there was a lady who came to me and introduced herself as a Japanese born of war.

I will quickly introduce my photo book, Dear Japanese. The portraits of these Japanese war children are hidden in the pages of this book. So, this is an actual page from my book and you have to open it, and you'll find these hidden Japanese children. That was my book design. You can see the actual book in the exhibition space. Thank you very much for listening. Thank you Daiwa for this opportunity.

Q&A with Miyuki Okyuyama and Jonathan Watkins:

Jonathan Watkins: I wanted to ask you about your work overall, about both projects. What is it that links them? You talked about motivation. I wondered what was your fundamental motivation for the kind of work that you're making? I mean, what is it that drives you?

Miyuki Okuyama: Just to record, to keep a visual recording. For the future, I hope. Because these Japanese children, for example, they're already approaching their 80's. Because, you know, they were born at the end of the war, '45, '46. So, before they became very old, I really had to capture their faces. So, the next generation can see what happened. So, that was my motivation to photograph.

Of course, traveling to northeast Japan was just to see my home. It was something I had never done, as I always travel by Shinkansen, the super express train between Tokyo and my home. But this time, I had to really take my time. It took 25 days of walking. So, I could really see the small details, and capture it. I also met many people, and could ask them about their memories of the earthquake. So yeah, that was my motivation.

Jonathan Watkins: I mean, you're going back home, you're going to where you come from. So, the walk is almost like a pilgrimage, I think. I mean, it's a very symbolic thing to do. And of course, the subjects in 'Dear Japanese', and particularly for people of that age, you're wanting to take them back to where they come from in terms of family; there is this sort of impulse to arrive or return to an origin somehow.

Miyuki Okuyama: Yeah, but I think it was also for the viewer to compare their appearance and their background. You know, they look Japanese, but they have a Dutch identity and nationality. But they are, biologically 50% Japanese, and they do look a lot like Asians. So, I wanted to capture them. But I didn't have enough space at the time, so I couldn't show much of the landscape. But if you compare where they live and who they are, maybe this difference makes you question it and wonder why they are the way they are.

Jonathan Watkins: Yeah, I mean, the nice thing about your installation of 'Dear Japanese' is the inclusion of the cherry blossom in the Netherlands. I mean it's almost like a key to open the meaning of your exhibition.

Miyuki Okuyama: It's cherry blossom season now in Japan. You see news every day about where it's blooming and how much it's blooming, you know. It's very Japanese so it may have been surprising for the viewer to see the picture of the cherry blossom.

Jonathan Watkins: It's rather nice to see the cherry blossom trees in Regent's Park from the Daiwa Foundation.

Now speaking about the transplantation from Japan or, you know, people of Japanese origin to the Netherlands, what is your story? How is it that you are, well, you're speaking to us from Arnhem in the

Netherlands and I also heard that you studied in Alabama and then for a number of years now living in the Netherlands. I mean, what is it that's brought to you there?

Miyuki Okuyama: Maybe that's just destiny, I guess. Firstly, I wanted to study the deep south literature, so that's why I chose to go to Alabama- also the tuition was relatively cheap compared to the state of New York. But my English is just not good enough to study literature, so I started art, but since then, art became photography, art photography became also documentary photography. I originally came to the Netherlands as an artist in residence and then I met my partner, so I'm still living there, so it's just all like destiny, it's not that I chose to live in the Netherlands, but it became like this. It's just how my life turned out I suppose.

Initially, when I moved, I knew nothing about this whole history between Japan and the Netherlands and one day, I took a small job as a translator in Amsterdam, and one of my colleagues - a Japanese colleague - came to me with this book and it was really, really surprising to read. Since then, for over 10 years, I've been working with them. I'm helping them to look for their mothers in Japan. If something is found, I will try to communicate with their Japanese family. So, yeah, you never know what will happen in your life; I must say.

Jonathan Watkins: I was going to ask you a question, but you've kind of already answered it, about how you locate your subjects for 'Dear Japanese', because you're working with Yoko and the SOO Foundation, and then you have this research on which you can base the portraiture that you made. But in the case of your journey to your hometown, how did you meet the people that were the subjects of your photographs there? Was it just spontaneous? You just happened across these people and said, 'Tell me your story, can I take a photograph of you?'

Miyuki Okuyama: I just met them on the road. Sometimes, you know, in the Japanese countryside, *inaka*, you often see older people taking care of their plants or vegetables. So I would just go up to them and say, 'Hey, hello, what are you up to? What are you doing?' Then I would tell them what I'm doing, that I'm walking from Tokyo to Yamagata and they would be very shocked. After a little bit more conversation I would ask if I could make a portrait of them. 80% of them said yes. Actually, I do have a lot of portraits, but yeah, just because of the space, I'm not showing everything. But yeah, so that was my first attempt to just photograph some people I met on the street. It was a bit of a challenge for me because I'm quite shy. But I had to say hi and ask questions and take pictures.

Jonathan Watkins: And did you feel safe? You know, a woman by herself walking?

Miyuki Okuyama: Yes, it was safe and I never felt like I was in danger. Maybe in a very crowded train in Tokyo, but walking, no, it's not dangerous. I would even recommend anyone wanting to go to

Japan, to take a short walking trip - it's good for finding small details along the road. Not like a very famous tourist spot, but going somewhere unknown and walk, take some time.

Jonathan Watkins: Speaking of that, I mean, you're living now at a distance from where it is that you come from. It's almost that you perhaps have a clearer view because you are able to draw back. You made a couple of observations in your writing about the walking project, about the way Japan was changing. You said you were walking away from the Olympic Games, and you were very happy to do that, as if you were escaping from the mad crowd in Tokyo. You also talked about the changes that you noticed in the landscape, and that you were not so happy about what it is that you saw.

Miyuki Okuyama: It was the time of the Olympic Games. I was actually against this Olympic Games. Prime Minister Abe made Japan appealing for the Olympic games, and he was successful. But at the time he used Fukushima and the nuclear earthquake to get this opportunity to host the Olympic Games. But I didn't believe his words. I was hoping that they would leave it quiet and focus on the recovery. But yeah, in Japan, they hosted the Olympic Games. Tokyo was just way too busy. Just too many people coming for less than a month, I think. I thought it was completely unnecessary for Japan, I don't know what kind of merits it brought.

In terms of the landscape changing, once you leave Tokyo to the smaller cities and smaller towns and villages, there are so many empty houses, amazingly many. Like I said, my village is half-empty now. We have no hope for the future that the younger generation will come back. Yeah, it's hard for me to think of a positive future.

Jonathan Watkins: What about you? Do you ever think of going back to Japan? Living there again?

Miyuki Okuyama: Ah, maybe. Maybe when I'm 70 I will return to Japan and live in a small village. I've already talked to my younger sister about this, that when we become very old, we will live together. But yeah, perhaps. Well, like I said, my future, it's some time away.

Jonathan Watkins: My final question is what are you working on now? Can you tell us what your current project is or what you're looking for in the future?

Miyuki Okuyama: My new projects? Yeah, I have two ideas. One is art photography and the other is documentary photography.

For one, I'm going to Japan soon. So I can really start. It's about different stories I heard from my grandmother. When I was small, our family was four generations: me, my sister, my parents, my grandparents, and my great-grandparents. My great-grandmother was often my babysitter; my grandma

also was. When trying to make me sleep, instead of singing like a sweet lullaby, they told me spooky ghost stories. That's my next project. I don't know what kind of images I can capture. But yeah, I have to do research because I'm not sure if you grew up in the countryside, but is it normal to hear spooky ghost stories in order to sleep?

The other documentary photos will be capturing walking animals. I don't know where, perhaps in Africa or the Middle East. That's my documentary plan.