

WEBINAR SUMMARY:

Artist Talk: Tomoko Yoneda in conversation with Melanie Pocock

Wednesday 9 April 2025

Introduction by Melanie Pocock:

Thank you to the Daiwa team, and thank you to Tomoko for this opportunity to delve back into your work after I had the privilege of getting to know it better through the exhibition I curated in Singapore called *Native Revisions*. This exhibition looked at history, at how photography can really open our eyes to what lies hidden within the landscapes that we take for granted and know. Tomoko's work resonated so strongly with this theme. Ever since then, we've had this great dialogue, so it's wonderful to be working together again for this show. I have about six official questions for Tomoko, but I'm hoping that we will veer off the designated path at points to reflect on things that occur to us during this discussion. But also to note for people attending, what we've attempted to do with the order of questions is to take you a bit through the exhibition if you haven't already had the chance to physically visit it at Daiwa.

As our starting point, if we go on to the first slide, this, in some ways, extraordinarily, is your first show in London in more than ten years. As we both know, London is actually a really important place for you. It's where you did your further studies at the RCA and settled in East London, and where you're based today. While the subject you're often addressing in your work is Japanese history, imperialism, East Asia more broadly, and the geopolitics of that region, London is where you are very rooted. In many ways, we can also understand your very different approach to Japanese history almost from an external perspective because of the fact that you are often physically outside Japan and have that distance.

Q&A with Tomoko Yoneda and Melanie Pocock:

Melanie Pocock: My first question to you is about what London has meant to you and your practice, and also to this very early work, which forms the starting point of the exhibition. Here are two prints from your series, *Heat*, one of which we are seeing on screen.

Tomoko Yoneda: Actually, I first studied photography in America. Then I came to London, as Melanie knows. When I came to London, I think it was the height of a recession. There was a lot of turmoil after the first Iraq War and quite a sombre atmosphere in London. When I graduated from the Royal College of Art, I was looking

for a place to live, and I wasn't sure what kind of work I wanted to produce. I think the essence of my work at the time came from America. I studied in Chicago, and I was inspired by the landscapes of the big cities, with the high-rise buildings and the big blue sky, all the straight and horizontal lines.

I then moved to a cheaper location so I could have a studio. At the time Shoreditch was a run-down place (this was in the mid-90s). Many places were vacant. When I went to the estate agent with my friend to look for a place, I saw all the empty places. Some were council estates, which were going to be torn down. Obviously, people used to live there and had families. I wanted to see the traces of the people who had lived there. We exist anonymously. We don't make a mark in history, but as individuals, our stories are important.

So when you see some of the spaces, it may seem like there's nothing there. But you can see the heat marks left on the wall because of the sunshine coming through the window. This *Heat* series tells a story of the past, and traces of history, but we don't know who lived there.

Melanie Pocock: Hearing you talk about these works, it almost feels like a portrait; as you mentioned, it's about an anonymous individual who we can imagine and the social history around the East End of London. Equally, as you're referring back to your time in America and this interest in the formal configuration of photography, there's that intersection between form and narrative.

I was just thinking, even with the title of the work, *Heat*, because actually what you're seeing on the wall is overexposure, heat that's warped the paper and stained it. Even the idea of exposure relates to photography and the nature of how those images are produced. Also, just to make the point evident in the tones of the photograph, it's a silver gelatin print. This has consistently, from the very beginning of your career, been an important medium within your photography. Would you mind actually sharing about that? Because silver gelatin is unusual as a medium, especially for contemporary photographers to be returning to.

Tomoko Yoneda: Well, when I was studying photography, my first film was in black and white. It's very hands-on: you process it yourself with very little equipment and print it. It's quite simple. I also studied colour photography. But the quality of capturing the light is more pronounced in black and white because it's only black, grey tones and gradual white. You can see more of the form.

When I took the photograph, I had to set it on a tripod. You can't really carry it. The works I'm showing at Daiwa are 120 centimetres tall. It feels almost real, like part of the wallpaper from the room where the family used to live. It's quite amazing what I've been able to accomplish in this photograph.

Melanie Pocock: You're right, the scale of these, particularly at Daiwa, it almost seamlessly blends in. You could think it's an extension of the space and yet it takes you to quite another. But, you know, also thinking about silver gelatin prints, we associate them with history, and looking back at the past.

This leads us nicely on to perhaps what we could say is one of your most well-known series, which bears the title of *Scene*. In these photographs, you are revisiting sites that were somehow significant in how the Second World

War played out. Many of these relate to East Asia and Japan, and the kind of matrix that relates to longer histories of colonisation and war between Korea, Japan and China. In all of these images, what often appears is what feels very joyful or innocuous, almost that cliché of the pictorial landscape. Yet, when we read the captions, the titles to these works, we realize that actually within this landscape, there lies a darker history, a geopolitical history. Within the exhibition, as we can see on the screen, a wedding on a boat goes off romantically into the distance with a couple who have just married, with their families looking on. However, it is also the border that divides North Korea and China. But alongside this print, we have another image in the scene series. This is the image of the crash site of a B29 airplane in North Yorkshire, and we spent a lot of time talking about this image in preparing for the show, and I realized with hindsight that it feels the only image in this series where you are directly evidencing the remnants of conflict. When you're looking into this image and you see the broken bits of aeroplane, it's very strong and very literal, whereas the other images are kind of these allusions to the past and deflect your gaze with something of the present which is why it doesn't feel like conflict at all. I know that this image was also important to us for this show because it's the only one in this series that has been taken in the UK.

So my question to you is partly about the significance of the B-29 aeroplane because we know this has a longer significance and history in your work, but also the fact this image was taken in the UK and how that sits alongside the broader *Scene* series for you.

Tomoko Yoneda: Well, this was shot in 2015. So it was the 70th anniversary of World War II. Prior to this, I didn't know about the B-29 crash. I did some research and found out it participated in Operation Crossroads, photographing the atomic bomb tests at Bikini Atoll. I'd been searching for images of the B-29, which my parents witnessed when they were little in Japan – it could be the countryside or it could be Tokyo or Kobe, Akashi, Kochi, where my mom and dad are from. It was an image I hadn't witnessed.

There is also a connection to the atomic bomb, which happened to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Those tests were heavily done pre-war and after the war, and are still happening. We are currently living in fear and uncertainty of how these massively destructive weapons could be used.

But as you said, this particular work is very different to my other series.

Melanie Pocock: Actually, mentioning these recent incidents – the wars that are going on right now in the world and how we think about borders – takes us to the exhibition title, *Fault Lines*. This is to do with Japan and the significance of geological fault lines with earthquakes and how all the fault lines that run through Japan are the root cause of some of the catastrophes. You then have dealt with the aftermath so poetically in your work.

But we do tend to think of geopolitical borders, particularly, nowadays or at times like the Second World War as fault lines. These are the fractures in our geopolitical landscape which cause such conflicts – governments fighting over borders and land and territory. Yet from the air, a bit like the sea, they're sort of invisible.

We also have your work from the *DMZ* series, which were taken on the temporary border between South Korea and North Korea. It's sort of an indefinite situation of ceasefire. Because of that, there are areas that have fencing, but then there are others that are just sort of landscape. In one of the images we have in the show, you capture this visible remnant of barbed wire that encircles a flower. Again, this is an unsuspecting yet quite a conflictual feature that's in the landscape.

I was also thinking about what you were saying with anniversaries and the fact that this image that we're looking at here was taken in 2015. You obviously had in mind that we are all collectively in society often reminded of that through collective moments of remembrance commemorating the end of war. I thought that would actually take us nicely on to our next image, which is a new series which you're working on. This was with another anniversary in mind, thirty years after the great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake, which also for you has a very personal significance because it's the area where you grew up. In this series, you are taking portraits of people who were born on the day of the earthquake in the midst of this turbulent moment.

I also want to remark here that it's your first series dealing with portraiture. When you've done other images, perhaps the portrait has been metaphorical, with objects or landscapes represented. But here we see a figure, and they are gazing back at us. I find this a really astonishing new development in your work. So I'd love to hear more about this turn to portraiture for this series and why.

Tomoko Yoneda: Yes. I have a series called *A Decade After*. So ten years after the Kobe earthquake happened in 1995, I was invited to learn about what the earthquake was and how people have dealt with the scars of this tragedy. Everyone has different kinds of feelings and ways of dealing with it. I completed my work in 2005. A decade later, I had a show in Tokyo, and a curator came from Kobe and said: 'Tomoko, we're having an exhibition about the Kobe earthquake, the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake.' I wasn't in Japan at the time, but that's where I'm from. He asked me if I could do a series based on it. At the time, it was only ten years after the earthquake. So when I went back, I saw many old buildings, old houses, as well as new buildings. Some of the houses became a plot of land; it was all erased, and just a flat piece of land. There was a new road that was built, and all the houses looked very similar, like perfect 'model' houses.

There is quite a lot to see in this photograph. In the centre is a river. The building, Riverside, used to be a temporary housing building for people who lost their house. In the distance you can see the regeneration housing project. I knew I had to take a photograph of it. When I went to set up, there was a little boy playing in the middle of the water. So I snapped a photograph of it, just in the moment. I think this photograph shows that there is still hope, even though the landscape has some big scars that act as a reminder of what happened.

Then this year was the thirtieth anniversary of the Great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake. I was approached again to do some work about the earthquake. Thirty years is a long time – many people have left the area where the earthquake happened. Even though it's been a long time, it's obviously still a very sensitive issue, as it changed the course of many lives.

It's difficult to heal from it. I thought about how I could preserve the memory of what happened. So I thought maybe I should take a portrait of the people.

I thought about how when the earthquake struck, so many people had to go to the hospital; I mean, people had to be pulled out of crushed houses. But also, people were born on that day. So doctors and nurses were trying to save people's lives while also helping bring new life into the world. Then I thought, I want to meet these people. They were thirty years old on that day. The fact that they were born on that day, and made it to thirty years old signifies the length of time that has passed, and they represent hope. So I wanted to photograph them.

These children who were born thirty years ago felt they couldn't talk about their birthday because of the tragedy of that day. But they are the survivors. Their mothers and fathers were also survivors. I wanted to celebrate and commemorate them. I wanted it to be a celebration of life.

Melanie Pocock: I mean, it's a beautiful portrait. For all the reasons that you've mentioned, in the midst of this catastrophe, there was hope, there was birth. It's the ultimate contrast with an event that for so many people signalled death. It really carries me on to also thinking about some other images in the exhibition that have this kind of poignancy, and where, although we are dealing with traumatic events, there is a hope. There is a sense of peace, even with the trauma of the past, like sort of accepting that that's happened and this desire to move on. Even in this portrait, there's a certain vulnerability that you've alluded to for these individuals, where their birth date to an extent feels a bit taboo, that they are also incredibly resilient. The posture of this lady who we're presented with is so strong in a very understated way.

If we move on to the next slide, thinking about some of these other images where these are portraits of a kind, so you're not seeing the individuals or any particular individual at least in the case of *Chrysanthemums*. But in the case of that image, we've also talked about the way that, for you, it in some way signifies a family of three facing up to the loss and suffering following the 2011 earthquake and tsunami that hit northeast Japan. So that's where that date is sort of tethered to.

But then with *Sadako's paper: Cranes of Prayer*, here we have a very literal remnant of hope. I think I should let Tomoko explain the history of Sadako. Many people won't realise that this is actually one of the paper cranes that Sadako, this young girl who was severely affected by radiation after Hiroshima, made. In the hope afterwards when she was suffering from leukemia and was in hospital, she had a mantra that if she could make a thousand origami paper cranes, by the end of that process she might be healed; maybe enough time might have passed and a miracle may have happened. Tomoko, if you could just share a bit more about these two particular works, both made in the same year, both dealing with very poignant and very human sort of vulnerabilities in the face of trauma. Yet two very different photographic approaches.

Tomoko Yoneda: I did an artist-in-residency in Tokyo, so I was allowed to stay for one year. I didn't have the opportunity to stay for a longer period. I wanted to thoroughly look back on Japanese history and learn what happened in the 2011 earthquake, as well as in Fukushima and Hiroshima, which is quite near where I'm from.

It's not that close, but when I was in school, we were taken to Hiroshima to look at the effects of the atomic bomb and how we should try to eliminate the use of nuclear weapons in the future.

When the big earthquake happened in northern Japan in 2011, I was asked to go to Japan, but I didn't know at the time that the earthquake happened. So I delayed going to Tokyo. When I went to Tokyo in May, it was just two months afterwards.

My original plan was to do a series on the problematic history which Japan had after the Meiji Restoration – that was the theme I was going to deal with. But because of what happened on the 11th of March, I changed my theme completely. I wanted to create portraits of the Japanese individuals that experienced the earthquake.

I had heard about the Chrysanthemum Flower Festival, which is held every year around autumn in the shrines around Japan. It started with Japanese imperial families competing with each other to win awards. I saw photographs of the imperial families and the Japanese crest, which is a chrysanthemum, which symbolises the Japanese people. So I took a photograph of chrysanthemums. The white flower looks like a head. In traditional Japanese weddings, brides wear a white kimono and a white hat as it represents innocence. Chrysanthemums are also used for funeral flowers as well. So it's a national symbol, as well as a symbol of mourning and family. So I took a photograph of it.

Sadako had lots of paper cranes, made of medicine papers, actually. I saw this particular one, where she had painted the beak in red and the body was a very soft white-beige color. But for me, again, like the chrysanthemum, I associated the beak with the red lipstick of Japanese brides, and the white as the bride's kimono. Many girls dream of getting married one day, getting to wear a grand, white kimono. I saw a lot of symbolism in this particular paper crane. I chose one from among many.

Melanie Pocock: It's really interesting to hear you also refer to these signifiers of Japanese identity, this national identity, and moreover ones that have an older history than the 20th century that relate to the imperial family. Japanese traditions of female dress and kimonos stretch us or take us back into a further sense of time. With the way I think you've taken these photographs, there's a kind of restraint as much as a humbleness in the face of nature, and those very distinctly Japanese sensibilities, I think, as much in art as in everyday life.

Moving on to the next slide, thinking about Japanese identity, but also how it was taken out during the imperial era or other eras where the Japanese expanded their footprint in Asia. We have this series of images called *Japanese House*, and yet these are actually houses in Taiwan that were built in the colonial area but later occupied by members of General Chiang Kai-shek's government when they fled China and the Communist Party had taken over.

There's also been this resurgent interest in this series of works, and you'll be showing them in some future exhibitions soon. My first question with this series relates to how you came to know about these houses. Why do you think that this history resonates so strongly now?

Tomoko Yoneda: I did a lot of research about that when I was commissioned to do work in Taiwan. I knew that Japan had occupied Taiwan from the late 19th century to the end of World War II. Because of the nature of my work, I wanted to deal with the relationship with Japan at the time. I then researched and found out that Japanese houses still exist in Taiwan. Then when I went around I saw that some were still intact and some had been abandoned.

When the army took over, high-ranking officials lived there, but they changed it completely to a more Chinese aesthetic – the color red. In this particular one, when I saw this wallpaper, it was quite intriguing. Because when I really looked closely at it, it was Santa Maria. Taiwan has many histories of being invaded because it's surrounded by oceans and is therefore strategically located. Whenever occupying powers arrived, they built statutes to glorify what they'd done. They would carry their own culture into the fallen land. These houses in Taiwan show a history of what they went through; a quiet testimony of their privacy being stolen, rather than the louder statues in public spaces.

Melanie Pocock: It's true that in this image we're really entering this forgotten or occluded kind of history, but that says so much about the dynamics of colonial invasion and the changing of hands and how that all becomes very blurred in this situation with multiple occupants over time.

Occupancy: we talk about domestic spaces, houses being occupied, but it's also the powers that come in and take over and occupy other countries and nations. Coming back to this idea of delving into histories that aren't so readily available to us as the wider public, I really sense in your work this strong sense of responsibility to bring these to the surface, but not in a didactic way – always in a very subtle and very restrained, specific way. It's these much bigger histories that somehow boil down to this microcosm of an interior or an object.

I think this brings us nicely to my last question, which more or less brings us physically to the end of the exhibition, which is the presentation in Daiwa's ground floor library, where we have one series, *Between Visible and Invisible*. These are silver gelatin prints of texts that were somehow personally significant to intellectual historical figures of the 20th century – in this case, Freud with those very recognizable round spectacles. Then to the right, a video piece, which is the newest piece in the show.

So we start the exhibition with one of your earliest pieces. We're now in the present with *The Gaze of Soldiers*. It's a short film that centres on photographs taken by an American journalist, Agnes Vellamy, of Japanese soldiers who were captured by the Chinese military in the Second World War. In that process, their allegiances started to shift. I wanted to talk specifically here just about that process of handling some of this material from the past. As a photographer, there is often difficulty in accessing certain documents. I would really like to emphasize that this is something that is deliberately layered between the visible and invisible. But the spectacles that you see are actually the spectacles worn by that person. Tomoko has taken the effort to actually get permission to hold those spectacles, then take the photograph. I think there's so much integrity to that process. I'm really curious as to why it matters to you so much, that very intimate relationship to historical material

where you, as the photographer, are actually also handling it, you know, in these works that we're seeing, and we see you handling it at least in *The Gaze of Soldiers*?

Tomoko Yoneda: I think throughout all my other series, I want to witness it in person, I want to be in a particular location or particular object, I want to be the person who wore or the person who read. When you're handling it, you see firsthand how great it is.

I need a lens to take photographs, so the lens becomes like a window or some kind of filter for yourself. I wouldn't tell you how to look at these photographs, but individually, your own lens, your own eyes look at my photograph, and I give you some of the clues. Everybody's different from how they grow up or their nationality or their world outlook. It can start discourse and conversations.

Melanie Pocock: What you were saying about this need to be witnessed, it made me think about how often photographers, as people on the front line or involved in documenting conflict are often criticized for this voyeurism, whereby instead of taking an image, you actually could have been doing something to help or actually being in the moment. There's something very ethically fraught actually about the photographic image in those contexts. I find here that you really are almost trying to be a part of that history and in a way that feels very authentically empathetic, and goes against that perception of photography, which is really heartening and it makes these histories human and relatable for all of us. I think sometimes we become insensitive and we don't have the imagination, we don't need to witness. It's not witnessing actual events, but kind of trying to understand and imagine what it would have been like. Incidents that happened in the past can very much happen now. It's not just a neighbour's problem.

I think that's a good note for us to end our dialogue. Thank you, Tomoko, for all of those very generous responses to my questions.

Q&A with the audience:

Jason James: Thank you very much to both of you; what a fascinating discussion. I'm sure it will continue to be fascinating. So if people would like to ask questions to Tomoko or indeed to Melanie, please put your hands up.

Perhaps I can kick off with the first question just to get things started. I'm interested in the way, Tomoko, that your photographs really need the captions or the context to be understood. So, for instance, that portrait of the lady who was born on the day of the Hanshin earthquake; without knowing what it is, you would just see a portrait of a youngish lady. But to really understand your work, and I suppose this is true of quite a lot of contemporary art, the captions are vital. I wonder if you could just say a bit more about that, how you see the relationship between the image and the text.

Tomoko Yoneda: While I was studying at the Royal College of Art, I was very interested in the relationship between images and text, how the image can change by what the text says. I realised that everyone has different interpretations of images. The text is just a navigator to look at my work and beyond. I try to take photographs

in a formal way, I mean, most of my photographs are formalistic, I think. The photograph itself has to be aesthetically good as well. That's what I try to do. I mean, photography isn't 'throw away' images. Maybe some people nowadays are so used to iPhones, where pictures can be erased later on. Photography is very different. I want people to appreciate the prints, and handle them with care.

Melanie Pocock: If I can add to this point, Jason, because it was also something I gave a lot of thought to in the group show that I curated with Tomoko. I find that with Tomoko's work, whilst the titles and the captions offer information and can explain certain things, I actually feel it further complicates the image. So rather than this expectation from titles that they will tell us what we need to know and it sort of ends there, full stop, it seems to open up more. I think that goes to the strengths again of Tomoko's formalistic approach and treatment whereby she creates an ambiguity even within what feels like a very straightforward depiction of a subject. It really does open more questions, I think.

Jason James: I think, Tomoko, that you're exactly the same age as me. I'm wondering where your interest in war, colonialism and borders comes from, because both of us are very much not old enough to have been directly affected by these things. Perhaps you could explain how your interest in that general subject area came about.

Tomoko Yoneda: I guess my parents, because they evacuated when they were little and told me stories when I was little. It was very different from how I grew up, so I was very intrigued and interested by it. They evacuated to the countryside, so there was not much food. My dad said that he was so hungry, that when he was little, he would look at a red crayon and want to lick it.

My mom was in Kōchi, which was heavily bombed. She would tell me about all these first-hand experiences of the war. It felt like a faraway thing when I was growing up. But I even saw the bomb shelter when I was little.

When the 1970s came, these utopian ideas emerged, like the big Osaka Expo, and all these very futuristic buildings. This was also the height of the Cold War.

Jason James: We have a question from the audience which leads on from this discussion, about personal memory as opposed to collective memory. Where, Tomoko, do you feel that one begins and the other takes over in your work? I guess particularly with regard to war; it's not a personal memory as such but maybe you are representing the collective memory of Japan.

Tomoko Yoneda: I think not even particularly Japan, it's more about being a human being, and it acts as a collective memory for us all when taking these pictures.

Jason James: Also your fascination with colonialism and borders has taken you to some quite unusual places. I mean, we've seen the border between North Korea and China. I think you've also done quite a lot of work at the border between North and South Korea. You have also been to the old border in Sakhalin, which used to mark

the border between Russia and Japan. What is the fascination about borders, particularly? I mean, obviously they are fault lines, I suppose, which is the theme of your exhibition.

Tomoko Yoneda: I read this very well-known story about a Japanese actress and a Japanese script writer who crossed the border between Russia and Japan, sometime in the 1930s – I’ve forgotten the particular day. I believe they were both communist sympathisers. They hired a car and pretended they were tourists so they could see the ‘inbetween’. But the story ends tragically: both of them were sent to gulags, and the scriptwriter was killed.

This struck me because these individuals were against what Japan was doing and believed the other side would be better. But in the end, it actually wasn’t welcoming to them.

But yeah, that story fascinated me.

Jason James: Someone in the chat has commented, saying he’s impressed by the level of research that goes into your work, Tomoko. He’s asking about enabling a viewer to embody or witness the view, for instance, through the spectacles in that series of work. So he says: ‘I wondered how Tomoko might feel about others occupying the same in landscapes.’ So it seems that he himself has tried to find and re-photograph the same locations in your images of Kobe. So he’s been and found your photography spots and reproduced them. How do you feel about that, Tomoko?

Audience member: I just wondered how you would feel about other people standing in the same place as you stood, as opposed to standing in the same place as where somebody else stood. I wondered how that sort of came across to you. Because, for me, trying to find the same locations was really hard, and that sort of confirmed a lot for me about just how much detail goes into your work. I suppose people talk a lot about photographers having specific ways of doing things and being very protective of their methods. In your approach, your research is very, very important to it. I just wondered how you feel about people finding things out about how you’ve come to photograph something.

Jason James: Have you been to another photographer’s locations?

Audience member: Yes, I’ve been looking at multiple pictures around Kobe in particular.

Melanie Pocock: Just to kind of feed into this point, because I don’t know if this also relates to that question about dealing with personal versus collective memory or seeing those as versus. When Tomoko was describing that moment where she saw the boy about to step on the stone and that was her in that space and time: so, of course, there is just that alignment of space-time that nobody can really replicate; even the climatic conditions are important. These images are not replicable from any other person or photographer’s standpoint.

I think there’s something in how we read photographic images of landscapes, like we generally read them as generic. So, there’s a kind of deception, like ‘Oh I can visit that place’. Like, for example, the picture postcard of

a beach in Mauritius that's been used on many adverts. But when you arrive, your expectations don't meet reality.

Tomoko Yoneda: Yeah, like the wedding boat or my blue swimming pool photograph from Hungary as well. Those photographs, and actually many others too, I wasn't going to take photographs of that particular shot. Before I go to take a photograph for that particular space, I do some research, which is then all stored in my brain. I like to photograph things that someone else would ignore. I can spot it, because I have a whole idea in my head about what I want to capture.

Jason James: That's all the time we have today. I very much hope that those of you who've been listening will come and see the show if you haven't come and seen it already. It's on until the 16th of June.

It's been a fascinating, rich discussion between the two of you. Thank you very much, Melanie, for all of your wonderful questions and indeed for curating the exhibition. Thank you, Tomoko, for answering all those questions and for the exhibition itself. So that's all for today. Thank you very much.