

Exhibition Review

Land of Sustainability, Cradle of Divinities: Ise and Izumo Kami no Miya

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Photography has always revolved around the idea of creating evidence of what has happened, allowing any viewer to become co-observers through its products. This becomes possible though the inherent ability of photographs to illustrate and authenticate (Sontag 42) because what is captured in a photograph is reality in a past state, the evidence of what has been (Barthes 76-77). The central tool, the camera, ensures that the ability to facilitate this photographic activity is within reach. It enables the bearer to make the fleeting permanent and the invisible, visible. To a certain degree, photography becomes an experience in itself.

In *Land of Sustainability, Cradle of Divinities: Ise and Izumo Kami No Miya*, Paris-trained photographer Yukihiro Masuura worked with the photographic idea of illustration cum certification by turning his camera toward one of the most sacred practices in the belief system of Japan. Masuura's exhibition chronicled his journey between places and spaces of spirituality, from the Gothic cathedrals of Europe to the Izumo region of the Shimane Prefecture, the site of the two most revered Shinto shrines in Japan. Using his camera, the photographer allowed the viewers of the exhibition to follow him through this important journey.

The exhibition focused on the Shinto ceremony of renewal called *Sengû*. During this rare event, which is considered a foundational concept in the minds of the people of Japan, old shrines undergo repair or are completely rebuilt with the objectives of ensuring the structural integrity of the site. Essentially, the carrying out of the *Sengû* secures the sacred status of a building making it suitable to house a specific deity. The Ise Grand Shrine conducts the *Sengû* every twenty years, in effect, continuously inheriting traditional shrine building and woodworking techniques practiced and refined for over 1,300 years. Through this exhibition, Masuura was able to establish the discourse of cultural continuity as a context to his experience a photographer moving between different cultures and types of spaces.

Upon entering the gallery, the first set of images introduces Masuura's background as a Japanese photographer who has based his practice in the West. Having spent a considerable amount of time living and working in Europe, Masuura creates a starting point to the discourse of sacred spaces by showing details of architectural structures and artworks from Europe. He further makes this connection by highlighting one of the defining characteristics of photography, the ability to make the latent image visible, in other words, creating artefacts as evidence of an experience.

By framing the desired composition and utilizing extended photographic exposures, Masuura relies on the environment to create the images for him. Selected photographs from his *Genesis* series (photographs of church interiors and works found within these structures) show the role played by the environment beyond the status of the photographic subject as the photographer allowed the camera to capture whatever light is available be it in the form of low-level ambient light or stray light from a passing vehicle's head lamp. The other three photographs from this section, *Profil* (two photographs of sculptures by Bourdelle) and *Khaos* (a photograph interpreting Rodin's *Gates of Hell*) accentuate movement in the pieces through the execution of deliberate motion blur. Masuura, through the method of intentionally shifting the camera during exposure, veils the static sculptures using perceived movement as a contrast to the works. In the photographs titled *IZ-08* and *IZ-09* (*The Tozai Mikadono Kami no Yashiro Karidensenza-sai ceremony II and III*), the choice of using a slow shutter speed or long exposure, produces an atmosphere of meditation that resembles *jôgyô zanmai*, a form of self-cultivation through continual walking (Yasua 10-14). The photographs in this particular section of the collection featured a building with Shinto priests in the foreground moving in unison with their white ceremonial garb forming a soft white mass that helped frame the structure.

The decision to highlight [architectural] structures and movement became the dominant theme throughout the rest of the exhibition as Masuura re-creates the narrative of the *Sengû* through his large-format digital prints. The part of the collection of images specific to the *Sengû* started with a photograph of the *Rômon* or the tower gate (*IZ-01*) that signifies the main portal into a sacred space. The photograph featured a tower gate placed at the center of the frame. At the bottom, two lines formed by the pathway led the eyes of the viewers towards the portal of the structure. The image of the main door of the *Rômon* gave the viewers a glimpse of the other/sacred space. The Shinto priests echoed this mode of defining sacred space during the exhibition, by purifying the exhibition hall, essentially, preparing the site as a part of the opening ceremonies.

Going through the photographic collection (made up of colored and black and white images printed on *washi*, or traditional Japanese paper), this reviewer observes that the transitions between frozen frames, intentional motion blur or movement, and the architectural structures together with the descriptive titles provide a way of viewing, reading, and to a certain extent, understanding the event as it happened (Goodnow 351-361). Masuura, though privileged to witness such a rare event, still had to consider respect for the key figures performing the ceremonies in the form of distance between the subject/s and the camera. Nevertheless, he tried to create intimate portraits by utilizing a lens with a longer focal length during documentation. This allowed him to “zoom in” in order to get a tighter composition for the portraits in the collection. The lens also produced a flatter photograph since longer focal length lenses have the tendency to compress space visually. An example of this effect could be seen in *IZ-15 (Hoden Senza Hoshuku-sai celebratory festival V)*. The photograph features two Shinto priests wearing their white ceremonial garments. One of the priests, about to ascend the stairs, had his back turned toward the camera, while the other priest situated near the middle of the frame appeared to be moving toward the right. Though there is a considerable amount of space between them, they seem much closer to each other because of the compression of space. A stark contrast to this approach was his choice to use a wide-angle or a shorter focal length lens for his landscapes and architectural photographs. This particular type of lens, apart from providing a wider angle of view or image coverage, exaggerated space and perspective distortion. The images produced using a wide-angle lens resulted in a much more expansive visualization of the photographed subject.

The images exhibited by Masuura strengthen the idea of cultural continuity, as the photographs are no longer just documentation of the continuous practice of the transmission of tradition. The photographs become products of cultural continuity. Masuura directly references this concept by specifically selecting the material for the images. To create the digital prints, he utilized *giclée* printing, a highly specialized method of digital printing based on inkjet technology, on a very traditional substrate. He used *washi* as the substrate for the images. This type of handmade paper has been the choice substrate for various forms of creative expressions in Japan from book binding to *moku-hanga*, or woodblock printing. The production of *washi* itself is a result of countless generations maintaining, refining, and transmitting knowledge and production methods to succeeding generations to ensure its survival.

With traditional printmaking methods where a printer uses water-based pigments to create the image, the substrate is first prepared by allowing it to soften through prolonged exposure to moisture. Unfortunately, paper alone would not hold image detail effectively. To address this prior to printing, the application of a rice-based paste to the printing block combined with the pigment creates a matrix to maintain

image fidelity. Masuura adapted this method through the application of a paste made up of powdered pearl to receive the ink during printing. This process not only creates a layer that prevents the ink from bleeding into the paper, it also produces a substrate that prolongs the life of a photographic print by making it less acidic as pearl is made up of calcium carbonate.

Through this exhibition of photographs, which constitutes a form of material deposit and condensation (Winkler 297-315), Masuura presented the importance of material persistence and cultural continuity. As the natural deterioration of the shrines triggers the practice of the Sengû, the event itself results in the renewal of a shrine, which due to degradation over time would once more require the performance of the Sengû as a way to rejuvenate it. This cycle of renewal and rejuvenation not only ensures the sacred nature of the sites, it also secures the existence of the practice as an agent for transferring and refining knowledge across generations.

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