Two master photographers from Japan

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Exhibitions of pre-World War II Japanese photography are rarely held in western countries. Visual arts courses generally ignore the period, focussing almost entirely on European and American photographers. English-language photographic histories provide little information, one or two paragraphs at the most, and usually without reproductions.

Light Pictures, at the Art Gallery of NSW in Sydney until October 17, attempts to redress this imbalance with an exhibition of 82 photographs by Nakayama Iwata (1895-1949) and Nojima Yasuzo (1889-1964), two masters of pre-WWII Japanese photography. The exhibition also includes free screenings of three classic Japanese films: *An Inn in Tokyo* (1935) by Yasujiro Ozu; *Apart From You* (1933) directed by Mikio Naruse; and Kenji Misoguchi's *Osaka Elegy* (1936).

Nakayama and Nojima lived during one of the most volatile periods in contemporary Japanese visual arts; their work encompassed the transition from Art Photography to the modernist New Photography style of the late 1920s and 1930s.

The two photographers, who met some time in the late 1920s, established *Koga* (or Light Pictures), a short-lived but ground-breaking photographic magazine. Published from 1932 to 1933, *Koga* is now regarded as one of the most important records of the New Photography school.

The artistic climate in which these photographers worked was conditioned by the stormy rise of Japanese capitalism in the preceding decades. In a few short years, beginning with the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan's closed-in feudal society was broken up and a modern capitalist economy created with a strong state apparatus, substantial industrial base and up-to-date military machine. This was established, not by a popular democratic movement but bureaucratically, from above. In the ten years from 1895, Japan, anxious to secure its place on the world stage, waged war against China (1894-95) and Russia (1905).

Leon Trotsky, writing in 1933, alluded to the explosive social and political contradictions produced by the rapid, and bureaucratic, development of Japanese capitalism:

"[L]ate-developing Russia, which traversed the same historic course as the West in a much shorter length of time, needed three centuries to get from the liquidation of feudal isolation under Ivan the Terrible, through the Westernising of Peter the Great, to the first liberal reforms of Alexander II. The so-called Meiji Restoration incorporated in a matter of a few decades the basic features of those three major eras in Russia's development. At such a forced pace, there could be no question of a smooth and even cultural development in all fields. Racing to achieve practical results with modern technology—especially military technology—Japan remained ideologically in the depths of the Middle Ages. The hasty mixture of Edison with Confucius has left its mark on all of Japanese culture."1

In fact, it was this "hasty mixture of Edison with Confucius"—modern capitalism alongside the old social and political forms—that gave artistic and cultural life in early 20th century Japan such an eclectic and combustible character. Modern capitalism was undermining centuries old traditions. But ruling circles—army and navy officers, rural landowners and government officials—regarded the orientation of many Japanese artists, writers and intellectuals with great suspicion and in some cases outright hostility.

Japanese artists were resident in large numbers in London, Paris and Berlin in the 1910s, 20s and 30s and active participants in the various art movements of the period. Although each new international trend gave rise to new trends in Japan, the first organised challenge to the official Japanese art world, which between 1907 and 1918 was largely controlled by the Ministry of Education, was made by avant-garde artists.

Fusain-kai, established in 1912, was one of the first avant-garde groups, followed by the Second Section Society in 1914 and the National Painting Creation Society in 1918. These groupings were hostile to the conservatism and favoritism that prevailed in the official art salons and explored all the latest American and European techniques and trends.

Socialist-minded artists and others inspired by the Russian revolution and contemporary Russian art also formed their own art associations and groups; others were inspired by the surrealists, the Bauhaus, Futurism, the Constructivists and other currents.

After World War I, against the backdrop of an economic boom and under the relatively liberal rule of Emperor Taisho (1912-1926), wider layers began challenging traditional Japanese social values. The most common expression of this cultural shift was the *moba* (modern boy) and *moga* (modern girl) phenomena. This diffuse urban social movement regarded American jazz, western films, music hall dancing and modern fashion as an alternative to, and a means of, challenging the old and stultifying customs. The *moga* and *moba* provided an important social base and audience for the almost feverish experimentation of artists and intellectuals.

One of the most significant cultural events, and one that inspired scores of artists and photographers, was the 1931 *Film und Foto* exhibition in Tokyo and Osaka. This display of over 1,100 works, by leading European and American avant-garde artists and photographers, figures such as Renger-Patszch, Rodchenko, Steichen, Imogen Cunningham, John Heartfield, El Lissitzky, Florence Henri, Lazlo Moholy-Nagy and others, was widely attended, encouraging further experimentation by photographers and other visual artists.

But this experimentation and flowering of artistic creativity was increasingly strangled under the growing militarism and regimentation of Japanese social life in the mid-1930s. With the onset of the Depression and in the aftermath of a series of crushing defeats of the working class, Western values were deemed to be responsible for all social evils. By the mid-1930s, liberal academics were dismissed from the universities, progressive journals were closed down and the Communist Party and various proletarian art groups suppressed. In 1937 a national art salon was established under the direct control of the Ministry of Education and, in the years leading up to WWII, art, photography and film brought under direct government control.

The most important change in creative photography in Japan in the 1920s and early 30s was the decline of Art Photography, the Japanese equivalent of pictorialism, and the rise of the modernist New Photography.

Pictorialism, a trend pioneered by Peter Henry Emerson in Britain in the late 1880s, specialised in romantic, meditative shots of people and landscapes, and often applied pigments to prints or used other methods to give their images a more painterly quality. This genre held sway in Japan up until the mid-to late 1920s, long after it had passed out of fashion in Europe and America.

Emerging as part of Japan's modern art movement, New Photography was a reaction against the romanticism, picturesqueness and sentimentality of Art Photography. New Photography favoured form and structure, emphasising energy, motion, distortion and experimentation over the somewhat dreamy lyricism of the pictorialists.

According to New Photography adherents, photographers should recognise the unique qualities of the medium and create works that could stand alone, without borrowing directly from the fine arts. Pictorialism should be left to the salons, and conventional conceptions of beauty to the picture postcard and hobby photographers. These conceptions were outlined in Ina Nobuo's 1932 essay "Return to Photography".

"The photograph," Ina said, "is a product of industrial society. It uses machinery to give expression to events and objects. Giving expression by machinery, through machinery, is the most critical, essential moment in the process of creating a photography. Without machinery, photography is not possible. (Here, by 'machinery' I mean not only the camera itself but all photographic equipment, including light-sensitive materials.) The distinctive quality of the photograph is its mechanicalness.

"Sever all connections with 'art photography.' Destroy every conception of established 'art'. Break down the idols! Keenly recognise the 'mechanistic nature' unique to photography! The aesthetics of photography as a new art—the study of photographic art—must be established on these two premises.

"...we must not forget that man with a camera is a social being. When he isolates himself from society, he abandons his splendid character as the creator of a record of contemporary times and is once again tinged with meaningless aestheticism and goes down the same path to decline and fall as the other arts. We men with cameras, by means of giving the finest expression to our age through the art of photography, are, above all, social beings in the highest sense."2

Nakayama and Nojima, who worked in and became masters of pictorialist and New Photography genres, evolved from one style to the other more or less independently of each other. *Light Pictures*, which includes portraits, nudes, still-lifes, nightshots, abstracts and experimental photographs, traces this transition.

Nakayama was a professional photographer who worked in America and Europe for almost a decade and although, at first, a proponent of Art Photography, soon embraced the ideas of the European and American avant-garde. He began his career in 1918 after graduating from the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. The first photography graduate from the school, he was sent to the US for further training by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture.

After studying in California, he moved to New York in 1919 and two years later opened a portrait studio on Fifth Avenue. Five years later he moved to Paris where he established a studio and exhibited in the 21st International Photographic Art Exhibition. Nakayama met Surrealist artists and writers and was influenced by the Bahaus and Constructivists and other avant-garde movements. In 1927 he travelled to Spain before returning to Japan later that year via Berlin and the Soviet Union.

In 1930, Nakayama co-founded the Ashiya Camera Club, one of the pioneering organisations of the New Photography movement. New Photography based itself on the teachings of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Man Ray, Alexander Rodchenko and other photographic experimentalists. The Ashiya Camera Club held three major exhibitions between 1930 and 1932, including one featuring Man Ray's work. These exhibitions opened up a new era in Japanese photography.

Nakayama also wrote for several photographic magazines during the 1930s and became a leading figure in the New Photography movement, experimenting with photograms, photo-montages or the use of obtuse angles, distorted reflections and time-lapse exposures.

Light Pictures includes Nakayama's early Art Photography work in America. The European photographs, which have a languid almost ethereal quality to them, include two interesting Spanish bullfight shots, taken in 1926. These photographs have a stylised, charcoal sketch feel. Nakayama's portrait of Foujita Tsuguharu, the Japanese painter most integrated into the Parisian art world, is also a striking image. Foujita is in his Paris studio, seated in front of one of his paintings.

While Nakayama's talents are apparent in these images, it was not until he returned to Japan and fully embraced New Photography that his real artistic skills began to flower.

Fukusuke-Tabi (1930), a stylistic closeup of Japanese slippers, *Night, Drink, Woman* (1933), *Woman from Shanghai* (1936) and two self-portraits are the more important of his photographs on display at the AGNSW. The self-portraits and distorted shots taken in bars and clubs have an unsettling quality, an edgy premonition of the catastrophe later to befall the Japanese people.

Woman from Shanghai, taken the year Japan invaded Shanghai, is a dark and somewhat mysterious work. The woman, who could be European or Chinese, is smoking a cigarette. Her face, which fills most of the frame, is in shadows, the smoke from her cigarette billows around her eyes. While Nakayama's attitude to Japan's military adventures in China is not known, the photograph has an undertone of repressed fear. The photograph surely must have been at odds with official government attempts to present Japan's occupation of China as a philanthropic exercise.

Nojima Yasuzo's history and social background differed markedly from Nakayama's. Born into a wealthy family, Nojima was a gentleman amateur photographer and, unlike Nakayama, did not travel outside Asia. He did, however, maintain close friendships with some of the most significant contemporary Japanese artists and participated actively in the vibrant artistic and intellectual life of the 1920s and 30s.

Nojima started taking photographs in 1906, two years after he began studying at the Keio Gijiku University in Tokyo. In 1907, at the age of 21, and after entering many photographic competitions, he was admitted to the prestigious Tokyo Photographic Study Group.

From 1915 until 1920 he ran the Mikasa Photo Shop and held his first solo exhibition in 1920. The Mikasa Photo Shop was the first of several galleries he managed or owned during his life. This included the Kabutoya Gado gallery, the Nonomiya Photography Studio and Nojima Tei, a photographic salon established at his home in 1922. Nojima sponsored many photographic and art exhibitions. In 1928 he became a member of the Japan Photographic Society, a leading but somewhat conservative Art Photography club.

In the late 1920s Nojima's work began to change from mannered pictorialism to simple, subtly lit and seductive portraits and nude shots to produce some of the most enigmatic images seen in pre-World War II Japan. In a notebook entry, titled *Fictions and True Stories*, Nojima, wrote that "if an artist fails to weave his intent and feelings into his art it will remain stillborn."

"What they call art photography, he wrote, "is nothing more than a catalog of the absentminded, the vague, the falsely significant or deep, the diluted, and the weak. They are therefore not the qualities the age demands."3

The exhibition features some of Nojima's earliest work, *Muddy Sea* (1910) and *Woman Leaning on a Tree* (1915)—the most memorable—and

traces his gradual evolution into an outstanding practioner of New Photography.

Miss T. (1931), *Miss Chikako Hosokawa* (1932), and various untitled photographs of a woman referred to as Model F, are precursors to Nojima's *Photographs of Women's Faces, 20 pieces*, a series of intensely personal portraits exhibited in 1933. These are some of the most remarkable photographs produced in pre-WWII Japan.

The Japanese word for photography is *shanshin*, means to "reproduce reality". Nojima's images transcend the mechanical reproduction of reality and uncover truths not seen or understood by previous Japanese photographers. Against the convention of mainly using western women or celebrities as models, Nojima chose unglamourous, earthy Japanese women for his portraits. The carefully composed but simple images reject the overblown flattery of the pictorialists and attempt to unlock the inner soul of the subject.

Miss Chikako Hosokawa (1932) is Nojima at his best. This sophisticated photograph, framed to show half a woman's face, operates on several levels. The shadowed, half-visible face gazes directly at the camera with a blank, almost cold look. On closer examination, however, this apparently emotionless face, is filled with an intense, almost excruciating melancholy or world-weariness.

The dominating component of the picture is the woman's hand, gently resting against her face, one finger on her upper cheek. The skin textures are reproduced with almost scientific detail. The only bright tone in the picture is the white of her eye. The contrast between the gentle relaxed pose of the woman's hand and finger, which draw the viewer into the image, and the darker shadows on her face, creates tremendous visual and emotional tension. This is an extraordinarily beautiful and enigmatic image.

Nojima once explained that a photographer should use light shadow, shape and style to create an expressive aesthetic. "[I]n the final image," he said, "a portrait does not bring out the individuality of the subject, but rather the individuality of the photographer... the emotional tone [the photograph] expresses is that of the character of the artist."

Nakayama Iwata and Nojima Yasuzo are seminal figures in pre-World War II Japanese photography. Hopefully the current exhibition will generate wider interest, as well as further investigation of the period in which they worked, by visual art historians, photographers and artists.

Notes:

1. "Japan Heads for Disaster", *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1932-33)*, Pathfinder Press, page 291
2. "Return to Photography", Ina Nobuo, *Koga* Vol.1, No. 1., 1932
3. *Nojima and Contemporaries Exhibition*, The Shoto Museum of Art, Tokyo & The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto