# ???? / hiroshima: Beautiful and poignant images of the everyday, but is that enough?

**Paul Mitchell**
**21 September 2025**

*????/hiroshima, Daiwa Foundation Gallery, London until November 24, 2025*

A photographic exhibition at the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation in London explores "Hiroshima's experience as history's first nuclear target."

The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II in August 1945 is one of the most harrowing chapters in modern history. Some 120,000 people were incinerated instantly and 300,000 more were killed by the after-effects.

Eighty years later, the world again faces the danger of nuclear war. The use of tactical nuclear strikes is openly discussed in the media, and US President Donald Trump described the airstrikes he authorised on Iran's nuclear facilities last June as a decisive act that "ended the war" with Israel, much like the atomic bombing.

Over the decades, Hiroshima has been represented in countless visual forms, from iconic black-and-white images of devastation to stark documentary evidence and evocative memorials.

In recent years, however, a movement has emerged with the declared aim of moving beyond direct representation of death and destruction. This is a daunting task for an artist. How is it possible to explore artistically mass deaths resulting from wars and military conflicts, genocides and ethnic cleansing, famines and disease outbreaks without the risk of downplaying the horrors or avoiding a critical assessment of the causes?

Three of this movement's leading representatives have been brought together here for the Daiwa Foundation Gallery's eightieth anniversary commemoration. On display is a small selection—16 photographs and one video—of the works of three women artists who, in "different ways," address the "everyday realities" and "personal memories" of today's inhabitants of Hiroshima, which have "largely been overlooked."

Ishiuchi Miyako, who curated the exhibition, presents vivid, large-scale, colour photographs of personal belongings of Hiroshima atomic bomb victims, from her long-running ???? / *hiroshima* series. She also took part in a discussion panel on the exhibition's opening day, September 9.

Fujioka Aya contributes street photography capturing present-day Hiroshima's tensions and vitality in *Here Goes River*. Sasaoka Keiko offers a photographic exploration of Hiroshima as a *Park City*, documenting traces of the past in the urban landscape.

Of the three, Ishiuchi Miyako is the oldest, the most experienced and internationally acclaimed. Born in 1947, she was raised in the postwar port city of Yokosuka—the largest US naval base in the East after World War II. Her Tama Art University education took place as mass opposition erupted in the late 1960s/early 1970s to the continued US military presence in Japan.

Her early work is marked with a sense of alienation. *Yokosuka Story* (1976-77) employing grainy, monochrome prints documented life under US occupation, *Apartment* (1977-78) explored Tokyo's postwar housing estates with their tiny apartments and *Endless Night* (1978-80) the underworld of night workers.

Ishiuchi began to move from documentary photography to memorialising material remains and bodies, with intimate studies of aging bodies (*Scars*, 1994-ongoing) and a deeply personal series, *Mother's* (2002–5), using her recently deceased mother's personal possessions.

In 2007, commissioned by the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, Ishiuchi embarked on her ???? / *hiroshima* series, turning her lens on the personal effects of atomic bomb victims.

Since then, Ishiuchi has photographed hundreds of objects in stark, often unexpectedly beautiful colour, shooting with forensic detail on neutral backgrounds. Her pictures bring home the fact these objects once belonged to real people going about daily lives that were soon to be horrifically cut short. Among the works on display in London are a grey translucent dress, a jacket with multiple patchwork repairs, a pair of children's felt slippers, a partially melted watch and a snapped pair of spectacles, the glass turned opaque by the heat and radiation.

Fujioka Aya, born in Hiroshima in 1972, belongs to a younger generation but has achieved a stature comparable to Ishiuchi. She says her *Here Goes River* images, begun in 2017, should be seen as metaphors for memory, change, and continuity. The series focuses on the city's rivers, where thousands sought relief on the day of the bombing. Incidental details, like a woman in a red dress stepping hesitantly into a river, or a group of girls striking a pop pose with the Atomic

Bomb Dome in the distance, are meant to capture the complicated interaction between the city's present and past.

Sasaoka Keiko was born in Hiroshima in 1978. In 2011, she photographed the effects of the terrible earthquake and tsunami in eastern Japan that killed nearly 20,000 people, left thousands missing or injured and triggered the meltdown of the Fukushima nuclear power plant.

The Daiwa Foundation exhibition includes the latest images from Sasaoka's *Park City* series, begun in 2001 as an exploration of the Peace Memorial Park using straightforward black-and-white documentary type compositions.

By the 2010s, Sasaoka's Hiroshima photographs began to incorporate slow shutter speeds and ghostlike human figures, evoking the lingering presence of history and the anonymity of modern urban life.

In her latest iteration, Sasaoka introduces a striking new method overlaying pre-atomic bomb photographs of Hiroshima with contemporary images, using the three primary colours (red-green-blue) to distinguish the different time periods. This technique is particularly effective in her video of a drive through the city's streets, fusing images of the city's past and present.

There are problems with these artists' works though. Alarm bells rang when so many reviews stress their "uniquely gendered perspectives," their challenge to the dominance of male-centred documentary and resistance to "grand narratives" (by which is meant Marxist historical materialism), offering instead intimate, human-scale reflections on trauma, survivorship, resilience, and remembrance.

The use of personal objects and everyday routines can be a powerful tool to evoke collective memory, but over-emphasising or "beautifying" horror, of which Ishiuchi has been accused, risks individualising or depoliticising suffering. It can descend into an aestheticised passivity and retreat from critical engagement with the forces (class struggle, imperialism, capitalist alienation) shaping those experiences.

Art is the cognition of life, but Ishiuchi is reacting against that. "Photography conveys, records. Its purpose is clear… But I really dislike that," she has said in the past.

She makes a virtue of not struggling for objective truth and indeed working against it. In what she called a declaration of "her stance," she once said, "I cannot understand the true pain and tragedy that the bombed places carry. But it can only begin from that place of 'not understanding'."

In the panel discussion, Ishiuchi reiterated this, saying, "I don't have a particular message in my work. If you find a message it's up to you."

But she did have a message, though, and that was the problem of men. Occupied Yokosuka, she told the audience, had "a smell of men and America," and the history of Hiroshima has been dominated by a "very male theme."

Ishiuchi belittled photographer Domon Ken who produced viscerally shocking portraits of forgotten bomb survivors fighting to get their voices heard in the late 1950s. She said he "had a documentary style and a strong message of being anti-war and pro-peace. When I first saw his photographs, I felt a bit queasy. There were all these men taking documentary style in black and white." They were all part of an "old boy's club," she agreed, to a comment from one of the discussion panellists. "We don't need men. They're such a bother to deal with", Ishiuchi concluded.

These comments come from someone of the generation that lived through and sympathised with the volatile political and cultural struggles that rocked post-war Japan. They reflect a sharp retreat from the historical insight that spurred Domon, a pioneer of *riarizumu shashin und?* (realism photography movement), who played a critical role in documenting the human cost of war, its sanitisation by the US and Japanese governments and capitalist "modernisation."

Domon championed "absolute unstagedness", embracing raw, everyday life while rejecting propaganda and crude didactism. His *Hiroshima* series (1956) was an emotive and unashamedly emotional response, fighting against a controlled propagandist presentation of the bombings. He criticised Japanese photographers who "diverted their eyes from current reality" in exhibitions that did not even mention the war.

Domon's unique contribution and towering stature were recognised by ?e Kenzabur?, the 1994 Nobel Prize winner in Literature. ?e publicly praised Domon's photography as a foundational artistic response to the atomic bomb, declaring that "to depict living people who are fighting against the bomb, rather than those who have died because of the bomb is to face up head-on to the essence of art from an entirely human perspective."

Domon's work became a visual stimulus for anti-nuclear advocacy and the development of humanitarian and socialist movements. It is difficult to imagine the ???? / hiroshima works doing the same.