

Japanese Swordsman with a Camera

By Rena Silverman | Sep. 30, 2014 | The New York Times

Postwar Tokyo's bustling streets might seem very different from a traditional Japanese coastal festival. Not for Issei Suda, whose approach has always been the same.

"My shooting method was once compared to an ancient sword trick in which one slashes his enemy at the same time as he removes the sword from his sheath," Mr. Suda, 74, said in an interview translated by Miyako Yoshinaga, who has recently curated "Issei Suda: Life In Flower, 1971-1977." The show, which runs through Oct. 18 in her Chelsea gallery, consists of 37 of Mr. Suda's precise 6×6 silver gelatin prints.

Looking at these images, nothing exemplifies his sword method more than the light that seems to have been quickly cast upon each of his subjects. In one Tokyo street scene, Shinjuku 1977, a man ascends a staircase in the shadows while his hat and paper bag illuminate the photo. It is impossible not to ask Mr. Suda about his use of his flash, which it turns out, is part of his method.

He laughed. "I use the flash even when I am not sure of its effectiveness," he said. "I snapshot a passer-by or an object that I find interesting while walking. Sometimes, I photograph a person from behind. Surprised by my flash, the person often turns back, yet looks unsure if I have photographed him or her. When I take snapshots without talking to my subjects, they are of course surprised and often perplexed. They wonder who I am, and why I photographed them. I must say I am quite rude."

His motivation?

"The complex expression my subjects wear as a result of thinking various things instantly and simultaneously."

He first became interested in these harsh lighting techniques because of American film stills he noticed growing up in occupied Japan.

"I was attracted to the pan focus, as well as the strong contrast between black and white I found in Orson Welles films, which may have influenced my technique," Mr. Suda said. "And I loved still photographs of the movies. I felt the power from just one image that was able to represent the entire movie."

He bought his first camera when he was 20. He liked to wander around the streets and stop in a local photo studio, where he admired the owner's vast photo book collection. Eventually, Mr. Suda's mother gave him a Rolleiflex, the square format for which he is so famously known today. He decided he was indeed serious about the craft and enrolled in the Tokyo College of Photography, despite his father's wish for him — as the only son — to carry on the family's small business.

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“I did not always know I wanted to become a photographer, but taking photographs was the only future I could imagine,” Mr. Suda said.

Things were a little more challenging when he arrived at the college, because he had only a few sessions with the photo studio in Tokyo. “I remember my teacher once said to me sarcastically, ‘You only have a very good camera.’”

Still, he got through college and graduated in 1962.

A few years later, he landed a job photographing for an avant-garde theater troupe, with which he worked and traveled through the 1970s before becoming an independent photographer, and contributing photo essays about folk songs and festivals to magazines.

These festivals, which allowed him to travel the country when Japan was in a cultural revolution, were originally assignments and did not matter much to him at the time. But years later, he started to set aside his own photographs that he took on the side, and these photographs took on another meaning.

“In the high spirits of festivals there is a kind of collective madness,” he explained. “People liberate themselves from their daily, often depressed, feelings. People transform themselves. The festivals I visited were local, all of the participants and spectators were local.”

One image, from 1977, shows a kimono-clad woman leaning forward, into a wall of rocks, smiling with all of her teeth bared. Her face is bright, she laughs, unaware that she is being photographed. There are so many patterns, between the flowers on her traditional outfit, the rocks, and her teeth, and all are in focus. According to Mr. Suda, “she was chatting with her friend before she joined in dancing, demonstrating the rush of her joy and the festival’s high spirits.”

Most of his images are of people, but one is of a goat that looks almost staged. With ropes and leaves hanging from his mouth and his head twisted off to the side, the creature looks down, his highlighted body and legs contrasting a blackened background, forming triangles.

“While traveling, I wandered around and saw this struggling goat with a tangled rope amidst the branches,” he said. “I instantly released the shutter of my camera. People often say it looks like an extraterrestrial or sacred creature. When I take pictures, I think about nothing. Do not worry: After shooting this goat, I fixed his rope and he was fine.”

Mr. Suda lives in Chiba, just southeast of Tokyo. He said that recently he had noticed his vision had changed.

“Not because I am getting old,” he said. “In the past, I approached and photographed subjects that attracted me. Now, I seem to be attracted to those subjects removed from the line of sight. There is a word *shinra bansho*, meaning ‘all things in nature,’ ‘whole creation’ or ‘universe.’”

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Photography takes only a small part of this whole creation away, while the subjects I choose exist equally.”

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