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Street Photography in Postwar Japan: The Work of Daidō Moriyama

Kathryn Smith

Before the horrors of World War II descended upon the world, Japanese photographers tended to follow the Western example of soft-focus Pictorialism in the 1930s, as well as other Western styles, such as the more abstract forms of Modernism and Surrealism (Marien 328). Pictorialism in Japan was dominated by landscape photography, specifically depicting the countryside, as well as some depictions of more everyday life (Ryūichi 108). However, these types of images were soon replaced by ghostly images of the remains of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the war, as Japanese journalists rushed to document the destruction and scraps left behind by the atomic bombs in 1945. Unfortunately, these images were very shortly banned by the United States occupational troops stationed in Japan and were either published secretly or years later (Marien 328). It was also in this postwar era in Japan that photographers began to focus on documenting the effects of the atomic bombs on Japan's social life and population in ways that were less directly visible. In so doing, in the wake of the intense political confrontation between Japan and the United States during World War II, Japanese photographers began to explore new documentary styles in their works (Kōtarō 214). In the process, some shifted toward rejecting westernized imagery and instead, promoted a revival of traditional Japanese culture and religion. One photographer who stands out in this postwar era is Daidō Moriyama, who expertly captured the sense of "social decline" experienced in the wake of wartime, as Japan faced many economic, political, and social problems (Marien 335). Moriyama created some of the most eye-catching and iconic images of Japanese society during the years following World War II that reflect the more everyday life of the average person in Japan through his dark, moody aesthetic, extreme angles, and snapshot-like photos.

Daidō Moriyama was born in Ikeda City, Japan, in 1938, near the city of Osaka (Phillips 9). It was during his time at the Osaka Municipal School of Industrial Art that he decided to pursue a career in photography. He left shortly in 1961 for Tokyo in hopes of joining the photographer's group VIVO (Phillips 9). VIVO was a very important group in Japanese photography during the postwar period. Their goal as a group was to establish a distinct aesthetic focused on the new Japanese society and culture that had emerged after World War II, rather than deploying earlier Pictorialist and journalistic aesthetics (Phillips 10). As curator Sandra S. Phillips writes about this new photographic culture and its publications, "The photography magazines... reflected not only Japan's exhilarating political and social turmoil but also the imaginative visual language of the new generation of photographers who responded to this fertile postwar tumult" (Phillips 13). Additionally, Iizawa Kōtarō describes the VIVO group as such: "Absorbing the styles of contemporary American and European photography, these artists confronted head-on the transformation of postwar Japanese society. The activities of VIVO, a photographers' group formed in 1959 by Tōmatsu Shōmei, Narahara Ikko, Hosoe Eikoh, and others, is a prime example of this trend" (210). Although this group disbanded shortly after his arrival, Moriyama was able to be hired as an assistant to a member of this group, Hosoe Eikoh (Phillips 9). Moriyama would be able to learn this mentality and aesthetic from his employer and studied the work of those who were in the VIVO group, specifically Tōmatsu Shōmei, who would become an inspiration to Moriyama.

Hosoe started as a student photographer but soon gained notability through “his rough, direct treatment of sexuality in his one-man show *Man and Woman* (1960) at the Konishiroky Photo Gallery in Tokyo” (Kōtarō 219). Hosoe then went on to become very successful internationally with exhibitions in both Europe and the United States (Kōtarō 219). Tōmatsu became well known through his work documenting populations of people living in postwar society. He eventually used these photographs for his show *People* in 1959. Arguably Tōmatsu’s most famous work is in his [series of Nagasaki](#) in 1961 where he documented a broken watch with the time frozen at the exact time the atomic bomb had exploded at 11:02 (Kōtarō 219). It was these photographers with strong and intense photographic styles that inspired Moriyama during his career.

After this period of training and exploration, Moriyama’s photographs developed a distinct and iconic style in his photographs. Kōtarō explains that in the wake of the intense political confrontation between Japan and the United States in 1960, Japanese photographers began to explore new documentary styles in their works (214). This confrontation between the two countries would become a theme in Moriyama’s aesthetics and works. Phillips writes about his style, “[He] is an expressionist: he possesses a dark, intense eroticism and an appreciation for the tragic. He understands the conflicts in Japanese society—between acceptance of Western culture and the quest for a separate Japanese identity, between acceptance of modernity and admiration for the traditional Japanese ritual and custom” (11). Furthermore, similar to Hosoe and Tōmatsu, Moriyama exposes photography’s “graphic properties to express fierce emotion” (Marien 335). His photographs are the epitome of horror, strangeness, and queasiness. He utilizes tilted, grainy, and often out-of-focus shots to express these emotions. These components all come together to create Moriyama’s distinct aesthetic and iconic imagery.

It was not until later in the 1970s that Moriyama and other contemporary photographers in Japan started receiving recognition for their work in the United States. Phillips expands on these ideas, writing, “Moriyama’s photography was discussed in the brief catalogue essays for *New Japanese Photography* and presented as second only to that of Tōmatsu. The organizers of the show recognized the existence of a ‘distinctly Japanese photography,’ in which Moriyama was acknowledged as a principal figure” (Phillips 24). To this day, Moriyama remains a shining example of Japanese contemporary photography and presents work that is beautiful in a terrifying and dreadful way. In the remainder of this essay, I discuss six key works of Moriyama’s, starting with his most well-known photograph, and chart his aesthetic development during the postwar period. In addition, I show the shift late in Moriyama’s career from exploring a new documentary style to represent postwar Japan and exploring the seedy underbelly of postwar Japanese culture to returning to more traditional Japanese subject matter and styles and a more straightforward photographic aesthetic.

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Fig. 1. Daidō Moriyama, *Stray Dog, Misawa, Aomori*, 1971

Stray Dog, Misawa, Aomori of 1971 is arguably Moriyama’s most iconic photograph. As historian of photography Mary Marien Warner writes, “Moriyama’s stray dog, an unwanted and

dangerous animal, is an outcast and a loner and blends the photographer's sense of himself as an angry outsider with the perception that his country is irretrievably conquered" (Marien 335). The distinct tilted angle of the image, along with the grainy and high contrast, both play into the horror and "dirty" style of Moriyama's images. The dog was found near a U.S. Air Force Base in Misawa and was captured via Moriyama's camera spontaneously in 1971 (Phillips 9). Little did he know how iconic this image would become within the postwar street photography movement.

This happenstance image of a random street dog would go on to become an icon of Moriyama's photos. It is distinctly different from the "grand, poised pictures in the tradition of street photography" (Phillips 9). Instead of following the previously established rules, the photo seems rushed, as the image is not framed properly, particularly the cut-off parts of the dog's legs and tail. Additionally, a sense of vertigo is experienced when viewing this photo due to the strange angle at which Moriyama had captured the hound. Moving beyond these components of the image, the subject of this photograph also requires commentary. Looking at the dog's body position and facial expressions, it is evident that this dog is wary of Moriyama and is even potentially growling at him, further producing off-putting emotions in the viewer. While capturing this image was completely coincidental, it could be seen as a perfect representation of the intense relationship between Japan and the occupying United States. It was this type of internal conflict that Moriyama loved to explore in his photographs. To this day, *Stray Dog* remains a monumental image in the street photography movement in Japan.

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<https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/92.319/>

Fig. 2. Daidō Moriyama, *Hiratsuka*, 1966

The photograph *Hiratsuka* (1966) is a prime example of another style of photography Moriyama would adopt. This photograph features Moriyama's iconic high contrast, resulting in a very dark image. As Iizawa Kōtarō describes, "Moriyama's photographs combined a sharp physiological vision, which he himself called 'the eyes of a dog,' with a radical experimental consciousness" (221). This vision can be observed here and in his other photographs. *Hiratsuka* is similar to *Stray Dog* in that it also has a spontaneous and unplanned feel. The model even seems unaware that his photo is being taken, as he is looking at the person next to him rather than at the camera. Phillips provides insight into Moriyama's thoughts and ideas behind this aesthetic, "As Moriyama has said: 'My underlying thought was to show how in the most common and every day, in the world of the most normal people, in their most normal existence, there is something dramatic, remarkable, fictional. This kind of chaotic everyday existence is what I think Japan is all about'" (Phillips 16–17). It is these kinds of everyday people—such as theatre performers, sex workers, and the lower class—that Moriyama loved to explore in his photographs.

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<https://emuseum.mfah.org/objects/52622/tokyo>

Fig. 3. Daidō Moriyama, *Tokyo*, 1970

Moriyama's *Tokyo* of 1970 also displays his iconic aesthetic. The face pictured is an extreme close-up, cropped in a way so that the identity of the model remains unknown to the viewer. The high contrast of the previous work is still present, with half of the face in deep shadows, adding to the anonymity of the model. However, this image is different in one important way from *Stray Dog* and *Hiratsuka*. This photograph lacks the spontaneity of Moriyama's street photos, setting it apart from these, though still creating an eye-catching image.

It was in 1966 that Moriyama moved to the city of Shinjuku, a densely populated area in Tokyo. Later on in 1968, he was invited to publish a few series within the avant-garde magazine *Provoke* (Phillips 18). It was here that Moriyama explored ideas of eroticism under the direction of his friend and the founder of *Provoke*, Takuma Nakahira. Phillips writes that "Moriyama's erotic pictures were powerful and bold" (19). While *Tokyo* is not one of the more explicit nude photographs that Moriyama and others were also publishing within *Provoke*, it displays similar aesthetics to the soft, delicately blurred nudes that Moriyama took in so-called love hotels.

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Fig. 4. Daidō Moriyama, *Untitled* from the series *Tsugaru*, 1976

An untitled piece from 1976 from Moriyama's series *Tsugaru* fully captures the distinct aesthetic he has created in his street-style photographs. This image is very similar to his other photographs in that it encapsulates the observer in this eerie, hair-raising image of an alleyway. The components of this piece are very similar to that of *Stray Dog*, in that it is taken at an extreme angle and with extreme contrast, so that the viewer can barely make out the person standing in the shadows. The image again has a very grainy, saturated look that exhibits Moriyama's iconic style. The technique that Moriyama used to take his street photographs such as these is a strange one. As Matthias Harder writes in his essay "Fast City, Fast Pictures":

...he walks casually and unobtrusively through the urban underbrush, holding a tiny camera in his right hand dangling by his side, ready to shoot. Many of his images are realized unconsciously, indeed uncontrollably. He also takes pictures from moving cars, often going unnoticed....Moriyama seems less like a professional photographer than a tourist in his own country. (5)

This was likely the method that Moriyama used to take this untitled still which contributes to the horror-like aesthetic.

However, it was at this point in his career that Moriyama suddenly got bored with photography and wanted to try new things. As Phillips quotes, "Moriyama recalls: 'at that time I was getting tired of my everyday life and the photos I'd been taking. I wanted to get in touch with nature, to see the original geographic features of Japan and the origins of the Japanese soul'" (Phillips 23). This was a trend amongst other Japanese photographers at this time, as many of them started to return to more traditional Japanese themes in their works. This leads him to then take some time away from his iconic city-life images in order to incorporate more natural and organic objects into his images, giving them the romantic feeling of the Pictorialist aesthetic that had dominated

Japanese photography before the war (Marien 328). Thus, a new era of Moriyama's photography began, as he explored these new aesthetics and ideas.

This image is under copyright. It can be viewed online at <https://www.luhringaugustine.com/exhibitions/daido-moriyama>
See "Artworks," row 12, middle image

Fig. 5. Daidō Moriyama, *Untitled*, 1976

In another untitled image from 1976, again, the distinct Moriyama aesthetic can be observed. There is a less extreme angle than seen before, resulting in the lack of a feeling of vertigo as was typical of his earlier photographs, though the stark contrast that has become typical of Moriyama's images is still very prevalent here. The flowers are very bright, making it difficult to make out details. This can also be noted about the nude figure pictured in the rephotographed reproduction of Francisco Goya's late eighteenth-century erotic painting *The Naked Maja*, as the stark white of the image becomes a censor of sorts. This is not a complete outlier within his photos, as in his series *Sashin yo sayonara (Good-bye, Photography)* in 1972 Moriyama actually focused on taking images of other people's photographs (Kōtarō 221). Here, in this untitled still, Moriyama could be using similar techniques as he had used in the past, as he captures this infamous painting.

However, as described previously, Moriyama was facing a dilemma at this point in his career and decided to change focus with his photography. While not dramatically different from what he has previously photographed, there is still a distinct shift present. The flowers, presumably cherry blossoms—an icon of Japanese society and culture—take up a large portion of the image. It was at this time in 1976 that Moriyama published *Tōno Monogatari (Tales of Tōno)*, a book that focused on "reevaluating the essential Japan, in its pre-Western, pre-modern state, and its relationship to the engaging, alienating contemporary urban world" (Phillips 23). This new interest can be seen in this image, especially in the presence of the flowering tree, in combination with Moriyama's typical subject matter of street life and "outsiders" to society in the image of the naked woman present as the photograph's focal point. While different from what he has previously conveyed in his images, Moriyama still creates distinct images encapsulated in a style that he has made into his own.

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Fig. 6. Daidō Moriyama, *Store Opening Flowers*, 1991

Moriyama continued to make photographs until suddenly in 1979, he stopped and did not re-enter photography until 1982 with the publication of the book *Hikari to Kage (Light and Shadow)*, which indicated drastic changes from his previous photographs (Phillips 24). These photographs did away with the grainy, moody, expressive halftones and were instead more straightforward black and white images, as also reflected in the title *Light and Shadow*. It was after this period that Moriyama returned to his home city of Osaka. As Phillips describes, "This return was in many ways a time for Moriyama to reevaluate his past, to come home to his origins, to find in the karaoke parlors, the nightclubs, and the racy neon signs the imaginative

power that informed his work when he moved to Tokyo as a young man to begin his career” (25). By returning to his home, Moriyama brings his career almost full circle. Osaka is where he started, and after nearly thirty years of exploration of aesthetics, subject matter, and the creation of intense images of Tokyo city life, he returns to his origins to rediscover who he is in terms of photography.

It was after this return to Osaka that his photographic aesthetic changed once more. Moriyama’s photographs now have turned towards a softer, even more romantic, film-like appearance, as seen in *Store Opening Flowers* taken in 1991 (Phillips 25). Comparing *Store Opening Flowers* to *Stray Dog*, some might not even recognize that this is an image captured by Moriyama’s camera. While the grainy look is still present, it is significantly less so and instead, the image has a much clearer focus. Simultaneously, the extreme angles are done away with, and the photograph is a more standard upright cropped picturing of blooming flowers and a sign. Moriyama’s signature high contrast can still be seen, but yet again, it is utilized to a lesser extreme than previously seen. Moriyama’s style has drastically changed from what he initially created in his early photographs, yet it remains distinct to him and his aesthetic.

Moriyama’s photographs continue to be influential today and are featured in exhibitions across the world (“Moriyama Daidō”). Moriyama’s photographs are perfect examples of what photography was like in Japan in the years following World War II. Furthermore, he is able to expertly capture the relationship between everyday Japanese society and the influence of political, social, and economic turmoil that followed wartime. To this day, Daidō Moriyama remains an extremely well-respected photographer in the world of photography and art.

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