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# Yasufumi Nakamori Interview about Ysuhiro Ishimoto

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Interviewer: Katherine Cloutier

RE Artist: Yasuhiro Ishimoto

Interviewee: Yasufumi Nakamori, friend of Asian American Photographer, Yasuhiro Ishimoto

Phone interview: Chicago/Houston

Date: 5/6/09 4:30pm

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring quarter 2009 as part of the **Asian American Art Oral History** research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies.*

Yasufumi Nakamori is the Assistant Curator of Photography at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. He is a PhD candidate for History of Art and Visual Studies at Cornell University where he taught 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art History and Writing on Photography. Yasufumi's dissertation deals with the collaborations between architects and photographers from 1953-1970 Japan, and gives one chapter of the dissertation to Ishimoto's collaboration with architect Tange Kenzo in his book, *Katsura: Tradition and Creation of Japanese Architecture* (1960 Yale University Press). For the dissertation research, Yasufumi met with Ishimoto a dozen times in 2007-2009, and accepted a gift of 300 photographs from Ishimoto for the museum in 2009. Yasufumi has organized Ishimoto's exhibition, *Ways of Seeing: The Photography of Ishimoto Yasuhiro* (2009 at The museum of Fine Arts, Houston), and will organize another Ishimoto exhibition in 2010 at the museum, preliminarily entitled, *Katsura: Confluence of Postwar Avant-Garde Photography and Architecture in Japan*.

(As told by Yasufumi Nakamori)

**Facilitator (K.Cloutier):** Hello Yasufumi, my name is Katherine Cloutier from DePaul University, and I want to thank you for taking the time to tell me some information about photographer, Yasuhiro Ishimoto. So what this assignment will do is help create an archival set of information gathered by various students in an Asian American Arts class, which will help document the history of Asian American art and artists. Why don't we start off with you telling me what you do, and how you have become so close with Ishimoto?

**Yasufumi Nakamori:** In my doctoral dissertation I gave a chapter to him. When I was actually doing my field research in Japan I got to know him pretty well. He actually gave about 300 prints of his to the Houston museum, which is where I work. He has given some more of his prints to many museums across the United States. Currently I am doing a show with about 68 pictures of his from his time in Chicago.

**Facilitator (K.Cloutier):** That's really great, now can you tell me some biographical information about Ishimoto?

**Yasufumi Nakamori:** He was born in 1921 to Japanese immigrant parents, farmers from Kochi, Japan. A lot of Japanese people immigrate to US for economic reasons, and Ishimoto's father was the youngest of ten siblings, so he chose to leave Japan for better opportunities - that's why his parents went to the US; they must have come in the 20's. The family returned to Japan in

1924, when Ishimoto was age 3. So he really grew up in Japan, and once he finished high school, he went to a Japanese high school of agriculture, to take over his parents business. When he finished high school Japan was about to go into the fascist era so his mother encouraged him to return to the US; she felt it wasn't good for her son to stick around in Japan when politics was going in the wrong direction. So, he went back at the age of 18 in 1939. He was born in San Francisco. Then he was in California, he was going to college while working for a Japanese American farmer family. Then, as I understand, he was studying agriculture, but there was a horrible order to send Japanese Americans to a war location. In 1941 or 1942, he was sent to Granada for relocation (Amachi Internment Camp). Ishimoto was trained to become a silk screen artisan, meanwhile he also had studied photographs. In the beginning the detainee was allowed only one item, and they were not allowed to bring in high tech things like cameras. So Ishimoto had to make a camera. So he started shooting his fellow detainees. After the Midway Battle, when Japan lost big time, Japan was no longer a threat to the US by 1945. That's when US loosened up the restrictions, and Ishimoto's cameras were actually sent to the camp. He was soon released after this. So, he was born in the US, had left once, and had come back. He was categorized as second generation Japanese American. He was also classified as a high suspect, so he was not allowed to go to any of the coastal cities in the US. So, he chose to go to Chicago. At the time, I think he was going to Northwestern for architecture. The Japanese cities were mostly destroyed, but he was in the US when the war ended and he did not see how bad the city was destroyed. He didn't last in architecture, so he joined the Ford Dearborn Camera Club. Ishimoto was still working in Chicago and had a good income to buy cameras. From here he continued with his schooling and practice of photography, and in 1948 he applied for a Bachelor of Science program. He realized that his home was now in Chicago. In 1948 the school's culture was changing around that time, especially for photography.

**Facilitator (K.Cloutier):** How would you explain to me what Ishimoto's work is about? Where does he get his inspiration and what does he want the audience to learn or feel from his work?

**Yasufumi Nakamori:** At times he would go out and talk to children and then he would photograph them. He really liked to go out on the street and take pictures. He would incorporate science, art, and industry. Photography really provided students to have another set of eyes. As I mentioned before, he did a lot of photographs of his fellow detainees as well.

**Facilitator (K.Cloutier):** And what type of photographer would you consider Ishimoto to be?

**Yasufumi Nakamori:** He definitely had a street photography time, but after he went back to Japan in 1953 and his first project there he shot 17<sup>th</sup> century Japanese tea house and gardens. So he spent one month photographing solely these things. That was departure from his street photography.

**Facilitator (K.Cloutier):** Which exhibits/works do you feel Ishimoto was most proud of? Can you tell me some more information about those pieces?

**Yasufumi Nakamori:** He was a part of *The Family of Man*, which he was very proud of. There was another exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, called the *The New Japanese Photography Show*. He showed about 12 photos of Katsura in that exhibition. He also had some solo

exhibitions at the Art Institute. He thinks that his pictures from Katsura are the best pictures he created.

**Facilitator (K.Cloutier):** Can you also tell me about Ishimoto's sense of identity as a Japanese artist?

**Yasufumi Nakamori:** He feels like he doesn't belong in either the US or Japan. He chose to become Japanese in 1971, he gave up his American citizenship. He knew he was going to live in Japan and instead of continuing to get American visas he just gave up his citizenship. His photography is not appreciated enough in Japan because people in Japan think he is not a Japanese artist. He wasn't a high selling artist in Japan, but he wasn't that way in the US either. He feels he was caught in between 2 countries.

**Facilitator (K. Cloutier):** Does Ishimoto often identify as an Asian American artist? Is that something that is important to him?

**Yasufumi Nakamori:** I think he just really doesn't feel like an American. After the war Japanese people were not the most favored people in the US. He was very interested in the ethnic racial issues at the time.

**Facilitator (K.Cloutier):** One thing I found particularly interesting is that Ishimoto gave up his American citizenship. Can you tell me why he did that?

**Yasufumi Nakamori:** He was very committed to Japan, he got married. I think by that time he really developed his identity as a Japanese artist. He knew he was going to stay there.

**Facilitator (K.Cloutier):** Now I know Ishimoto has returned to Japan due to health issues, but do you know if he is currently working on anything?

**Yasufumi Nakamori:** He doesn't see well; so I think his wife passed away in 2005. His wife was really an inspiration for him; he used her shoulder as his tripod. His last picture was shot in 2006. He couldn't carry a heavy camera; he couldn't set up a tripod himself. Kochi Museum is where his cameras are now.

**Facilitator (K. Cloutier):** Thank you so much for talking with me today. It has been a lot of help and this information will be a great asset to the archival database we are creating here at DePaul University.

**Yasufumi Nakamori:** You are very welcome and good luck with the project!

**Facilitator (K.Cloutier):** Thank you, goodbye.

**Yasufumi Nakamori:** Goodbye.

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