



Kyotographie 2019: the vibe of Japan's new era

▲ Untitled #56 from the Traces series,
2015–2017. Photograph: Weronika
Geszicka/Jednostka gallery

The Kyoto photographic festival endeavours to take the pulse of the country.

The [Kyoto photographic festival](#) endeavours to take the pulse of the country. From an examination of the elderly from the perspective of a bento box delivery man, to ancient erotic art and a humorous look at the ideals of 50s America, [Karin Andreasson](#) picks out some of the highlights

Thu 25 Apr 2019 15:08 BST



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Kyoto's annual photographic festival, coinciding with the start of Japan's new imperial era, will attempt to read the country's mood and expose its hidden problems.

On 1 May [Japan](#) enters the *Reiwa* era. Depending on how you read it it is either a welcome break from the past, marked by the 2011 tsunami and nuclear meltdown at Fukushima, or a sign of an increasingly authoritarian dominance (*Rei* stands for order, which comes with militaristic overtones and *Wa* means harmony).

And in works on display at *Kyotographie*, which has adopted the theme *Vibe*, we find a bubbling unrest under the surface of polite society.

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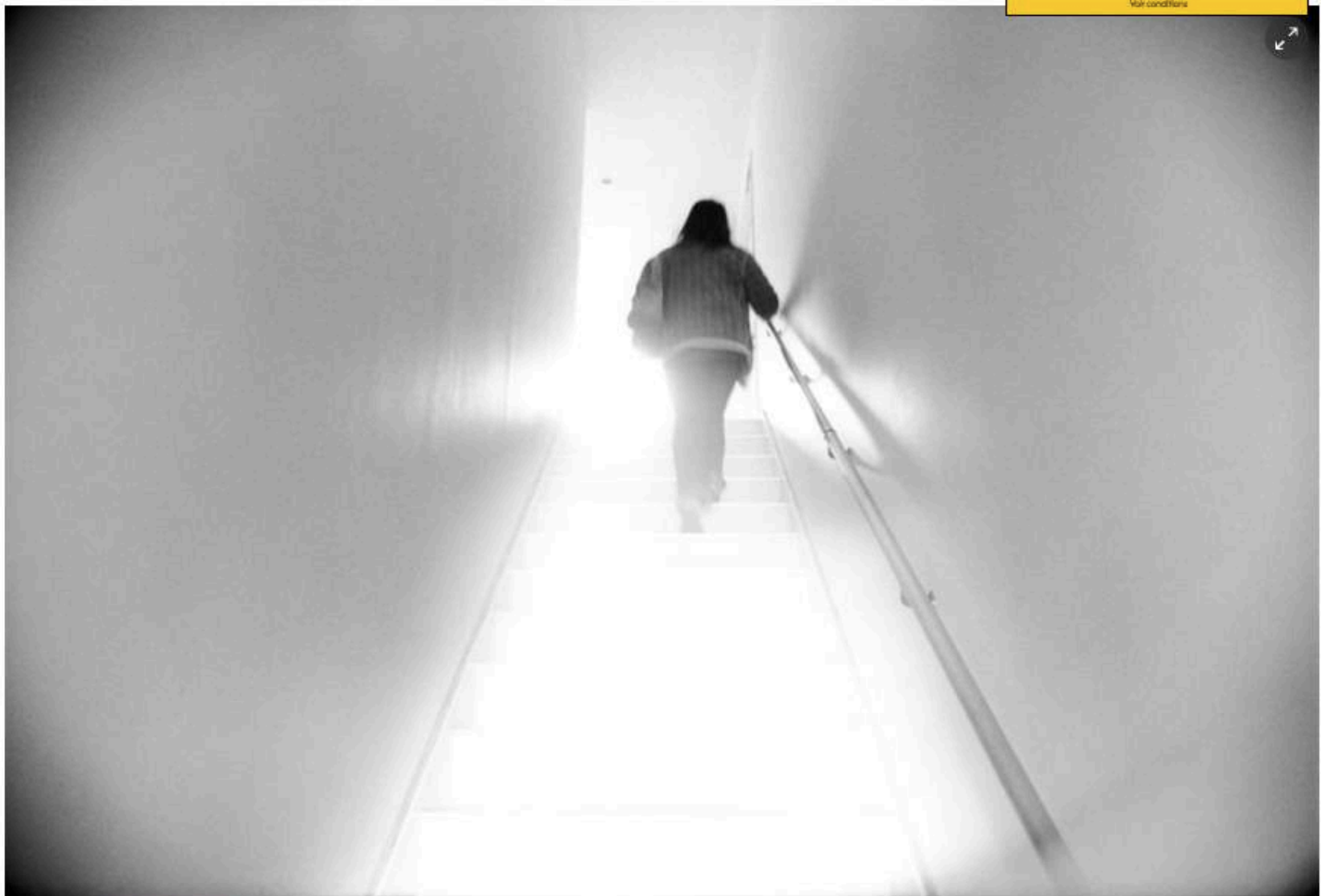
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Ibasyo, self-harm among young people in Japan, 2007.

For eight years Kosuke Okahara followed the lives of six young Japanese women who habitually self-harmed, something not openly discussed in Japan where there is an ingrained culture of shame. The project pursues his long-term interest in the term *Ibasyo*, which means the physical and emotional space that a person inhabits. One of the women said “there is no space for me”, a statement that reverberates powerfully in a society where outsiders are shunned and people are expected to conform.

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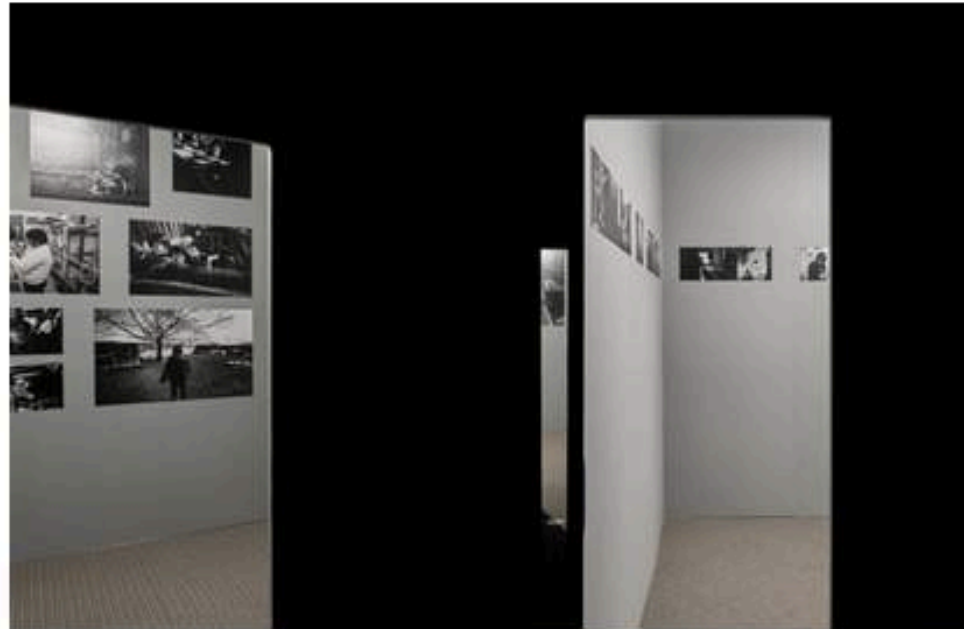


Akane, 26, has had depression and self-harmed for more than four years.

The women Okahara photographed began to self-harm as a way of coping with traumatic experiences, but the shame they felt from doing it deepened their feelings of worthlessness and drove them further away from the society that shunned them. There is very little mental health support in Japan and a denial of abuse, especially when it happens within the family, means convictions are rare. Photographing something as taboo as self-harm is as rare as discussing it, so it is a testament to Okahara's sensitivity as a photographer that he was able to document these fragile lives. Likewise it shows a great strength from the women that they are willing to have their lives on display.

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Kosuke Okahara installation.

Sensitivity towards the subjects as well as visitors is evident in the design of the exhibition. Such intimate and graphic images needed to be handled with care, so each subject was given their own room, small and intimate, divided from the next with dark passageways. The spaces, like the bedrooms the women found refuge in (they all experienced panic attacks when they went outside) are lit with the cool light typically found in Japanese homes, but jarring in a gallery environment. A small entrance forces the visitor to bow as they enter the space, thereby showing respect and physically slowing down.



Teppei Kaneuji's exuberant Splash Factory is installed in an old newspaper printing works.

Special attention to exhibition design is consistent throughout the festival. Exhibitions are held in unconventional and culturally significant spaces such as shrines and an ancient samurai palace. Getting access to these spaces has taken time (this is the festival's seventh year) and an approach that is both determined and sympathetic to the local culture.





Tepppei Kaneuji's Paper and Liquid #1, 2018-2019.

The festival was started by Lucille Reyboz and Yusuke Nakanishi, a French/Japanese couple with no previous experience in curation or running large events. Reyboz was a photographer and Nakanishi a lighting designer. They believe their outsider status is the key to their success. They rely heavily on private funding, looking to big sponsors such as Chanel and Ruinart champagne. While this puts them somewhat in the pocket of big business, it leaves them free from the constrictions and bureaucracy of Kyoto officialdom, which they believe would be far more controlling.



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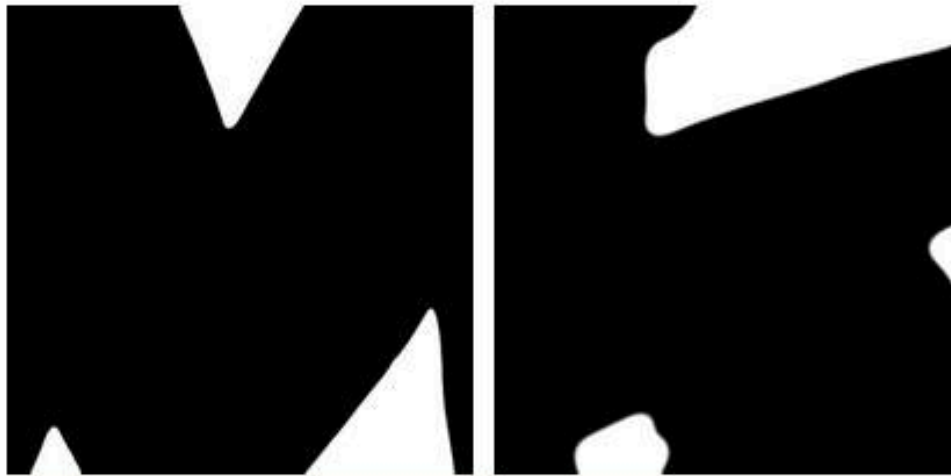
Light Snow in Spring by
Keisai Eisen, 1822.

An exhibition of early shunga pictures from the Edo period (1603-1867) was only possible because Chanel hosted it. The beautiful though explicit images are still widely considered taboo. There has only been one museum exhibition in Japan (2015 at Eisei Bunko) of these historically important images and that came about after years of failed attempts, and only after a hugely popular British Museum exhibition.

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Kaitlin John 2015, and Yumiko Ana 2017 by Pierre Sernet. The French performance artist's work has been exhibited with the shunga art.

With the power and cache of big brands, Reyboz and Nakanishi have gained the respect of the Kyoto government, which has allowed them unprecedented access. They are not afraid to present issues that are taboo. They created Kyotographie after the Fukushima disaster to unite a society that was broken, and they say the damage is still felt. They see it as part of their mission to open up a discussion of problematic issues in Japan by bringing an international perspective through exhibitions and a series of symposiums and workshops.

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Polish artist Weronika Gęsicka's work subverts the image of perfect family life in 1950s America by distorting and manipulating stock images. The disturbing and sometimes humorous pictures mix the personal with the social and political. She sees a similarity between the desire to project a perfect self-image in today's social media and the idealised postwar American family.

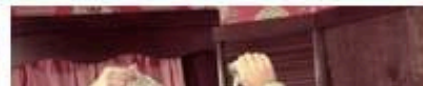




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Images from the Trace series examine the idealised postwar American family.



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It is impossible not to draw parallels with the notion of the Japanese nuclear family when seeing this work exhibited in the heart of Kyoto. The seamless images, which take up to three weeks to complete, are hung in a space designed to look like a 1950s home, complete with curtained windows and period furniture - it is actually an old sake factory. All of which makes the experience of looking at her pictures more unsettling.



Ehrhardt in Ryosokuin
tatami room overlooking
Chisenkaiyushiki garden.

The sense of an undercurrent of discontent is reflected in the installation of Alfred Ehrhardt's Tideland series in one of Kyoto's oldest Zen temples. Ehrhardt (1901-1984), was a German avant-garde artist who studied at the Bauhaus and was later dismissed from a teaching post in Hamburg when the National Socialists seized power. He retreated to the North Sea coastal town of Cuxhaven where he began methodically photographing the tidal flats and the sea organisms he found there.





Ehrhardt's Ripple marks in the ground, 1933-36, and Halite, Wieliczka, Poland, 1938-39.

Large images of rippled sand are positioned on the tatami-floored tea room overlooking the garden. The forces of nature depicted in Ehrhardt's work sit in conversation with the quiet beauty of the garden outside. The room, intended for contemplation and meditation, reverberates with these opposing and complementary scenes.



Atsushi Fukushima's Box Lunch is Ready.

The fate of elderly people in Japan who are not well-off and do not have family to care for them is laid bare in Atsushi Fukushima's *Box Lunch is Ready*. Fukushima's job as a bento box delivery man opened his eyes to the fate of many unfortunate elderly people. He often carried his camera around his neck when he knocked on the door and, as he got to know the people he visited, they would start to ask about his camera and wonder when he would photograph them. From there a series of touchingly sensitive images grew.





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The fate of the elderly is
examined by Fukushima's
series.



The intimacy of the images reveal the closeness of the relationships he built. Fukushima was often his subjects' only visitor and his companionship became as important as the food he delivered. The images highlight a complete lack of state care alongside the changes in family life and traditional responsibilities in an increasingly ageing society. At the same time they force the viewer to contemplate their own undeniable fate.

In the UK, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 or emailjo@samaritans.org. In the US, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-8255. In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is 13 11 14. Other international suicide helplines can be found at www.befrienders.org.