Michael Kenna's Japan: A Love Story

Mark Edward Harris

For Michael Kenna, born in 1953 in Widnes, Lancashire, England, Japan was both literally and figuratively a half-world away. But once he did make it in 1987 to the land of dramatically rising and setting suns, a profound love affair began. And neither party has any desire for it to end.

During his 50-year career, Kenna's handcrafted black-and-white silver gelatin prints have been shown in nearly 500 solo exhibitions in galleries and museums throughout the world, including 2024 exhibitions at the Daikanyama Hillside Forum and Gallery Art Unlimited in Tokyo; the Peter Fetterman Gallery in Santa Monica; the Sala Pares Gallery, Barcelona; and the Asia House in London.

Michael Kenna, by Mark Edward Harris

In Kenna's latest book, *Japan: A Love Story*, published by Nazraeli Press in association with the Peter Fetterman Gallery, Japanese photography critic Kohtaro Iizawa describes the photographs as being "characterized by a feeling of floating or lightness, with landscapes that are weightless, as if they are suspended and dancing in mid-air." He continues, "By employing unique compositional arrangements in which 'small objects' are positioned as though in a miniature garden, and by including few elements, I suggested that his photographs could be read as pictures written in short poem form, like visual haikus."

In the book's afterword, Kenna states, "Whereas I agree with my friend Pico Iyer, who refers to photographs as prayers, I would even argue that it is not too far-fetched to consider these photographs to be a series of intimate love letters to a treasured beloved."

Black & White: Why have you kept coming back to Japan since 1987?

Michael Kenna: It is difficult to encapsulate the continued attraction of this marvelous

Rock Formations, Study #4, Yoichi, Hokkaido, Japan, 2023

White Copse, Study #4, Wakkanai, Hokkaido, Japan, 2020

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country in a few words. There is just something mysterious and wonderfully alluring in the Japanese land. It is visually manifested in the omnipresent interactions between water and earth, and in the constantly changing seasons and skies. It can be felt in the engaging intimacy of scale in its terrain, and in the deep sense of history contained in its earth. I feel a deep reverence and honor towards the land.

Physically, Japan has similarities to my home country of England. It's relatively small, reserved, inhabited for centuries, surrounded by water, every patch of land and part of the sea-front containing a story. Japan is also a volatile place, sometimes unpredictable and potentially dangerous, with typhoons, earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions possible. It is a country where the land is alive and powerful, where the elements are strong. I believe that experiencing Japan accentuates an awareness of the fragility and beauty of our transient world.

Let me reference my scribbles in the Introduction to my new book: "I recall, with some degree of nostalgia, memories from my initial visit to the ancient capital of Kyoto, 36 years ago, when everything about Japan was new and exciting to me. I explored, observed and photographed. I remember wandering along the lanes of Gion, shyly entering dark, exotic Buddhist temples and colorful Shinto shrines. I attended ritualistic tea ceremonies, marveled at beautiful scrolls with inscrutable kanji characters. I discovered the mysteries of hot ofuro bathing, and slept on tatami floors in an old riverside ryokan. I dined in convenience stores and attempted my first faltering words of Japanese. Falling in love with Japan, then and there, quickly, quietly and inexorably, was inevitable." This initial infatuation with Japan was long before I discovered my jewel in the crown, Hokkaido.

BW: What is it about Japan's northernmost main island that you find so appealing as a photographer?

MK: Hokkaido is a particularly intriguing place—gently seductive, dangerously wild and hopelessly romantic. Visually, it has been a paradise on earth for me, a veritable winter wonderland. Surrounded by water and home to exquisite lakes, graceful mountains and countless majestic trees, photographic subject matter continues to be ubiquitous. I feel the starkness of Hokkaido's winters accentuates an awareness of one's immediate environment. The reduction of sensory distractions, leafless trees, absence of color, eerie silences, demands a more concentrated and pure focus on the land. These conditions have been of the utmost importance in my ongoing creative process.

I've never been keen on labeling anything as my favorite—except my wife, Mamta—but if one could formulate a "favorite" place-measurement scale by directly correlating it to the quantity of time spent in a particular location, I suspect Hokkaido would come out on top. I return there year after year to find new material and inspiration. I have tried to describe my attraction to Hokkaido in a previous question, but as a side note, I should add that the onsens (hot springs) and inviting karaoke bars are added attractions.

BW: What other places in Japan are you particularly drawn to?

MK: My affinity with Kyoto continues to grow. In 2023, I had a collotype portfolio made at the Benrido Collotype factory in Kyoto. Then there is Shikoku, home to the eighty-eight Shingon Buddhist temple pilgrimage, and Mt. Koya, Honshu, also known as Koya San, where the mountaintop headquarters of Shingon Bud-

Sand Mounds, Kamigamojinja, Kyoto, Japan, 1987

Chikui Cape Trees, Muroran, Hokkaido, Japan, 2002

“Winter is my favorite season to photograph in Japan and pretty much anywhere.”

dhism is based. It is claimed that the founder, Kobo Daishi, resides there in eternal meditation. In 2006, I stayed in a different residential temple every night, sleeping on tatami floors and dining on vegetables, roots and nuts. I attended exquisite rituals and services, photographed monks and pilgrims, the inside and outside of temples, sand gardens, stone lanterns, tombstones and the truly spectacular Okunoin cemetery, which contains 200,000 graves and monuments. The whole experience was thrilling and life-changing. I view all of Japan as a never-ending visual treat with endless possibilities. I could go on to describe many other wonderful places in Kyushu and Okinawa, but I think I am starting to sound too much like a travel agent...

BW: Do you have a favorite season for photographing in Japan?

MK: Winter is my favorite season to photograph in Japan and pretty much anywhere. I am not so fond of sunny weather with bright blue skies, unless I can relax with a drink and read a good book. Details and accurate description has never appealed to me visually. I prefer “conditions”—snow, rain, fog, clouds, wind, et cetera—for my photographs. I know that I am repeating myself, but winters in Hokkaido are exceptionally beautiful. I like to describe and compare the frozen snow-covered landscapes to sumi-e ink paintings on a white canvas. Everything is reduced to visual haiku—a few elements suggest a whole universe. I have visited Hokkaido in other seasons and, don’t get me wrong, it is truly beautiful, but at least for me, not as interesting to photograph. For another photographer, it would be the exact opposite, as it should be. We all see in our own individual and singular ways, and respond to subject matter accordingly.

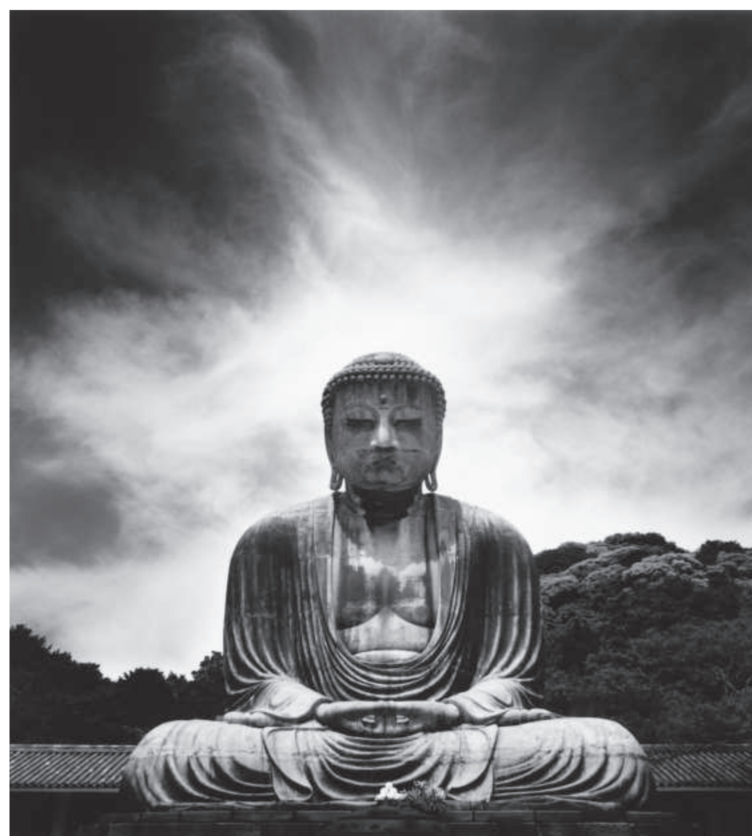
Hyomon, Study #1, Kussharo Lake, Hokkaido, Japan., 2020

BW: Trees seem to play a particularly important role in your Japan photographs.

MK: I think that trees play an important role wherever I photograph. As a young boy, growing up in my hometown of Widnes in North West England, I had a favorite tree on the edge of a field in Victoria Park, not far from my home. My four brothers also had their own preferred trees, all conveniently located close to the playground. We would often sit high amongst the branches, shouting across to each other, safe from the prowling wild animals on the ground, the evil space ships attacking us from the sky, or the pirate ships waiting to drag us off to a life of endless slavery. The trees were our safe zones, where we were hidden from the world. Occasionally, I would visit my tree alone and spend hours amongst the leaves in flights of fanciful imagination. The tree would then be the center of my universe, as well as my best friend.

Today, as a grown-up boy, I have many more tree friends scattered across the world, which I like to visit whenever possible. I don’t climb as much as I used to, but I still like to use my imagination. I have been labeled a “landscape photographer” and am often asked why I don’t make portraits. Of course I do, but of trees. When asked why, I usually answer half-jokingly that trees don’t need to primp themselves, they never answer back and always seem happy with the portraits that I make. They are also fiercely independent, graphically beautiful and seem quite happy to wait around in the cold for many hours while I make long time exposures.

Dakekanba and Snow Barriers, Hokkaido, Japan, 2020



Amidha Buddha, Kotoku-in, Kamakura, Honshu, Japan, 2007

"I consider myself extremely fortunate to have met the Philosopher's Tree. Even now, in its absence, this tree remains influential in my life."

BW: What's the meaning of the "Philosopher's Tree" in Japan?

MK: It was a large poplar in the middle of a farmer's field near Biei in Hokkaido. Standing about 30 meters tall and with a diameter of almost two meters, its name referred to the resemblance it had to a philosopher lost in thought, with its head tilting to one side. It was a striking and glorious tree. Unfortunately, it was cut down in 2016. The farmer cited the age of the tree—poplars grow quickly, but have a short lifespan—and the many trespassing tourists and photographers who would tramp through the crops during the growing seasons to see the tree, despite the many signs asking them not to. It was a sad end for a glorious presence.

I consider myself extremely fortunate to have met the Philosopher's Tree. Even now, in its absence, this tree remains influential in my life. It reminds me to acknowledge that everything, every tree, every living being, has a lifespan which we should celebrate. Desmond Tutu once wrote: "We are fragile creatures, and it is from this weakness, not despite it, that we discover the possibility of true joy." Trees are our teachers, and we can all gain some wisdom from them. We just have to learn how to slow down, be in the moment, wait a little, listen and maybe even photograph.

BW: How does the concept of wabi-sabi find its way into your approach?

MK: I have to admit that wabi-sabi remains somewhat inscrutable and difficult for me to decipher. Khotaro Iizawa, in his introduction to my new book, writes: "The words 'wabi' and 'sabi' are often used to describe a uniquely Japanese experience of beauty. Wabi comes from the verb 'wabu,' meaning to remove oneself from the world and lead a modest life, and describes a mindset of honoring and even finding beauty in that which is plain, imperfect and humble. Sabi, on the other hand, comes from the verb 'sabu,' meaning to age or fade with time, and it implies solitary and lonely characteristics." Iizawa san is very smart and wise, but my general bafflement prevails, perhaps because I am, after all, still a gaijin (foreigner). What I can say, is that in my very limited knowledge of wabi-sabi, I find there are many aspects alluded to that greatly appeal to me, including imperfection, impermanence, incompleteness, the patina of the past and the transience and fragility of the present.

BW: As you mentioned, Pico Iyer refers to photographs as "prayers." What is your interpretation of that word usage?

MK: When I photograph in the landscape or visit temples, shrines, churches, synagogues, mosques and any and all places of worship, my prayers are always basically the same: simple thank yous. There is so much in life to complain about, and yet our very existence is a miracle. It is beyond my understanding to dogmatically belong to any one religion, culture, country or philosophy. The older I become, the more questions I have, the less I understand and the more I appreciate just being alive. Prayer, at least for me, is a way to reach out and attempt to communicate with that which is not visible. Photography is ostensibly about recording the visual, so this may seem like a dichotomy. However, I am heartened and influenced by Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle, which states that an observer and what is being observed affect and change each other. I am convinced that photography

Philosopher's Tree, Study #3, Biei, Hokkaido, Japan, 2009

Hashikui Rocks, Study #1, Kushimoto, Honshu, Japan, 2002

"I believe that my friend Pico [Iyer] is both accurate and insightful—photographs can be visual prayers."

works in the same way. It is why I always ask permission of whatever I am photographing. I believe that my friend Pico is both accurate and insightful—photographs can be visual prayers.

BW: Which Japanese photographers and artists inspire you?

MK: At various times in my life I have been drawn to haiku poems, particularly by the great master, Matsuo Basho. I have read and thoroughly enjoyed the works of more modern writers such as Kobo Abe, Yasunari Kawabata, Haruki Murakami and Kazuo Ishiguro. The music of Ryuichi Sakamoto has long haunted me, perhaps since watching *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* in the early eighties. I have recently become enamored by the pottery of Kitaoji Rosanjin, to the point that I have been extensively photographing his works with a view to make a sort of homage to Rosanjin with the Kahitsukan Museum in Kyoto. The list could go on to include Tadao Ando's architecture [and] the Sado Island drummers. Most recently, I have been following the salt works of Motoi Yamamoto. As for photographers, there are too many to mention them all, but they have to include Masahisa Fukase, Eikoh Hosoe, Kenro Izu, Daido Moriyama and Shoji Ueda. There are so many others that deserve to be mentioned. Japan is rich with photographers.

Six Blinds, Daisen-in Temple, Kyoto, Japan, 2001

BW: What camera equipment are you working with these days?

MK: I remain committed to Hasselblad film cameras and lenses which I have used since the mid-eighties. They are tried, trusted and familiar friends, which, quite understandably, break down from time to time due to age and overuse—a bit like me. I regard them as extensions to my vision.

BW: And you're still creating your own prints in your darkroom, which extends that vision into the print itself.

MK: Having made my own prints for over 50 years, I suppose it would be more interesting if I was inconsistent. I recently had an exhibition of 100 tree photographs spanning the years 1973–2023. The prints were exhibited "salon" style, in double rows with no regard to the years in which the photographs were made. In the press event, I referred to them as my family, insofar as they were all, at least in my imagination, completely comfortable sitting next to each other, rather like in a family gathering. Over the years, I have experimented with the size, toning, print surface and presentation of prints, but always return to a similar format. I have preferred Ilford fiber-based Multigrade since I was first introduced to it by Ilford reps in the mid-eighties. Like the camera equipment I work with, I have neither felt the need nor the desire to make any substantial changes. Perhaps the well-worn saying "You can't teach an old dog new tricks" is apt in this situation.

Addendum

Our thanks to Michael Kenna for his participation. See more of his photography at michaelkenna.com.

Temple Lanterns, Shosanji, Tokushima, Shikoku, Japan, 2010