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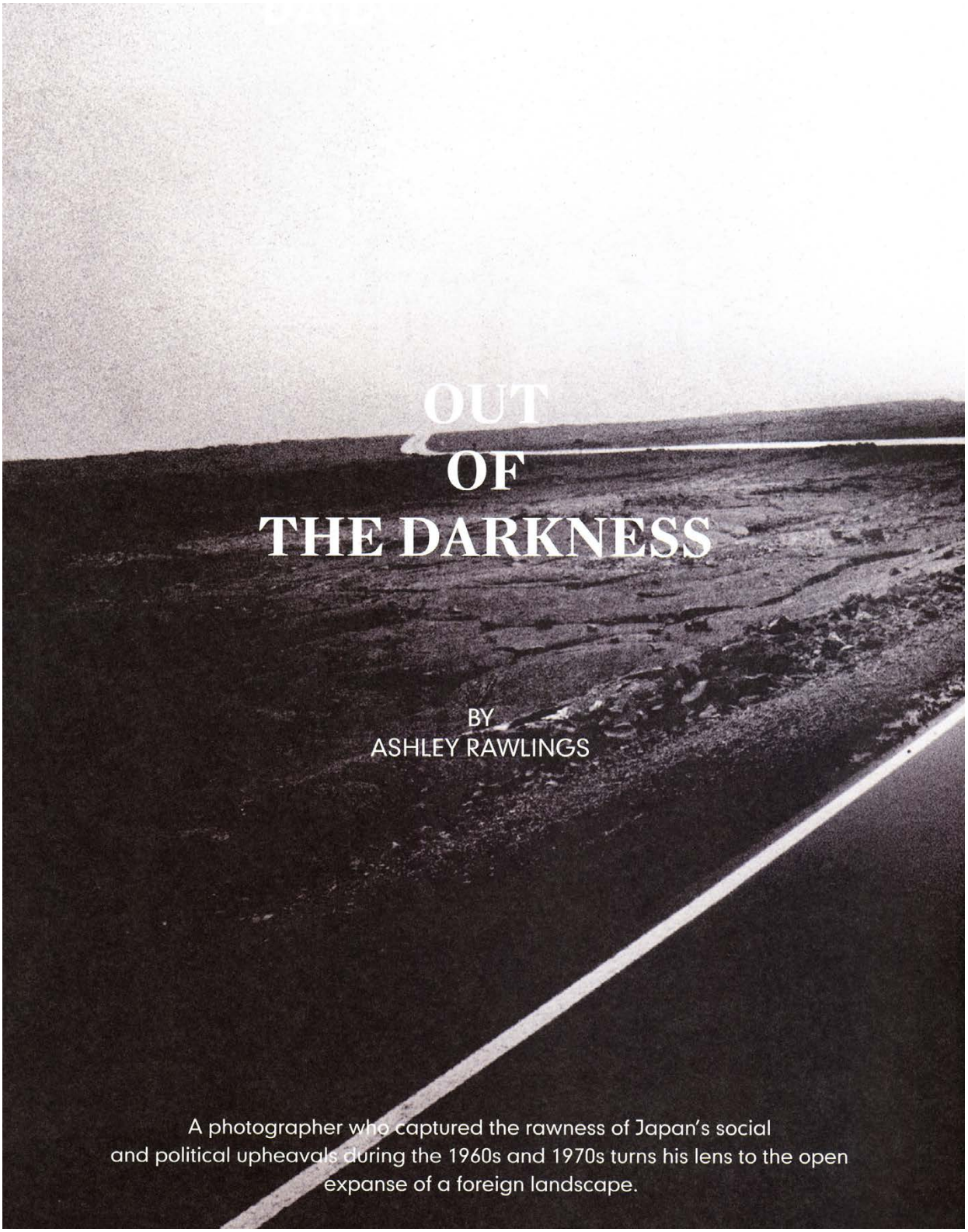

OUT OF THE DARKNESS

BY
ASHLEY RAWLINGS

A photographer who captured the rawness of Japan's social and political upheavals during the 1960s and 1970s turns his lens to the open expanse of a foreign landscape.

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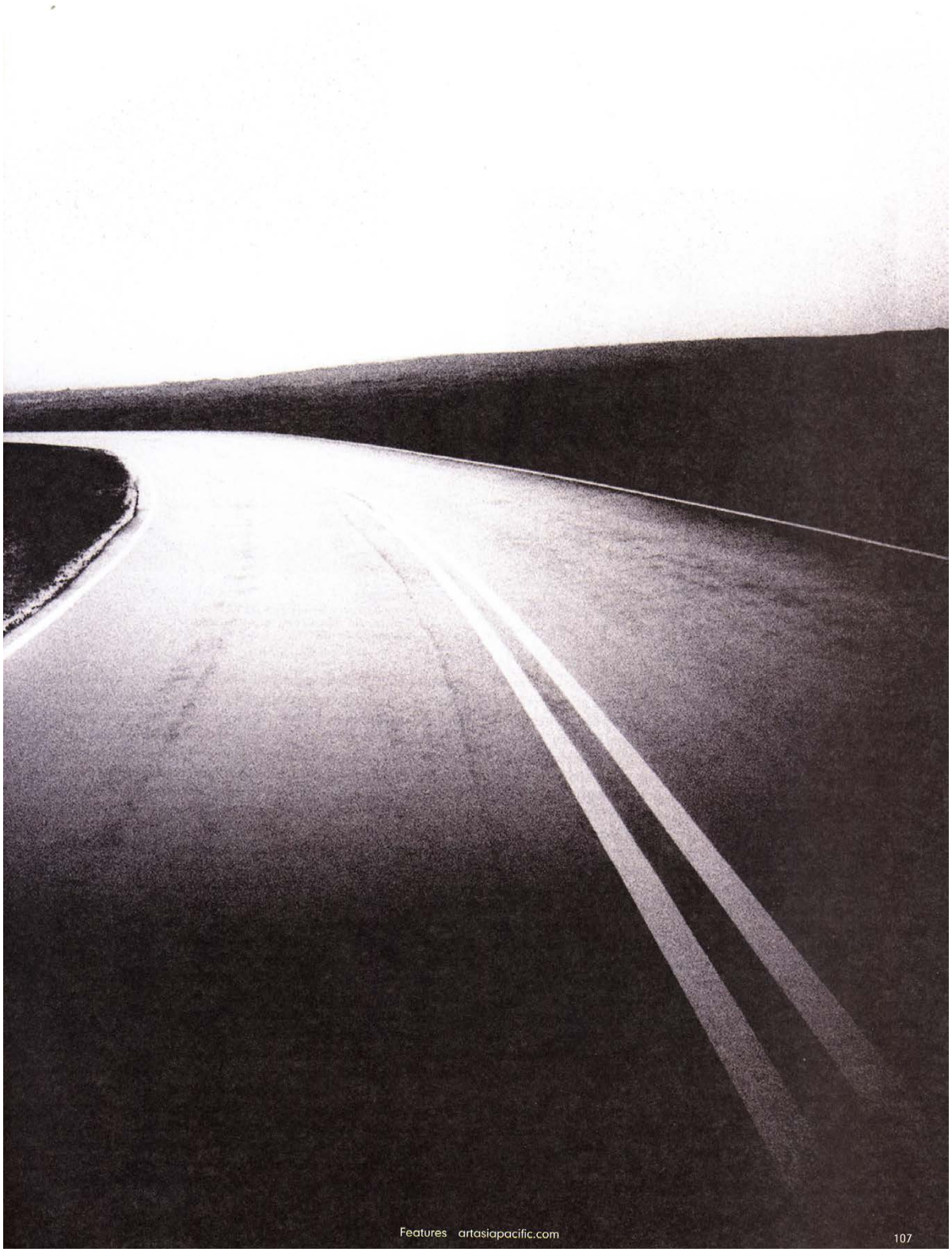

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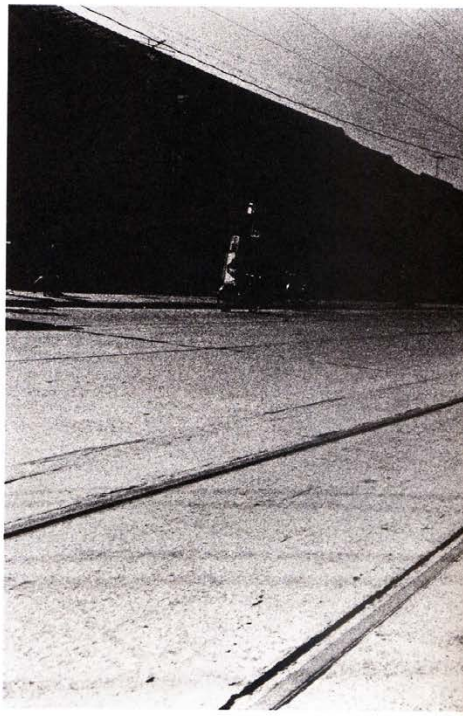
(Previous Spread) **HAWAII**, 2007,
black-and-white photograph, 100 x 150 cm.
Courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine,
New York; Getsuyosha publishers, Tokyo;
and Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo.

OCT. 21, 1969, 1969,
black-and-white print, 35.5 x 44.4 cm.
Courtesy Luhring Augustine, New York,
and Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo.



CITIES, 1971,
vintage black-and-white print, 18.1 x 26 cm.
Courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine, New
York, and Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo.

Daido Moriyama's recent photographs of Hawaii cast a certain coldness over the tropical island. Rendered in his characteristic graininess and high-contrast tones, the series of black-and-white prints offers an uncanny, mixed portrait of the US state. Familiar motifs—Hawaiian shirts and grass skirts—ground some of the photographs in a specific, if not stereotypical, sense of place. Many of these images convey Hawaii's laid-back mood; one can almost feel the breeze in a diagonally framed shot of tall palms silhouetted against the sky. Some snapshots even have a quirky, comical touch to them, such as one of a small furry pig looking into the lens.

However, there is also a shiver of unease running through the work. In Moriyama's eyes, Hawaii is at once mundane and alienating. Almost generic shots of highway signs, urban panoramas and natural landscapes—many of which could be almost anywhere in the world—are punctuated by a handful of truly haunting images. In one, a child—anonymous and androgynous in silhouette—is on its knees, digging a hole in a beach, looking as though it has collapsed in pain. In another, a dozen people in hooded, white rain jackets are clustered together on an open, barren expanse of terrain, for no immediately discernible reason.

The "Hawaii" series is dated 2007, but Moriyama took the pictures over several trips to the state beginning in 2004. The body of work is part of a recent shift in the 72-year-old Japanese artist's practice, in which he has increasingly engaged with subjects outside of his native country, including works made in Buenos Aires in 2004 and in Shanghai in 2007. Though "Hawaii" has its eerie moments, its overall aesthetic is nevertheless softer than most of the *are, bure, boke* ("grainy, blurred, out of focus") photographs for which Moriyama became famous—images that captured the mood of Japan as the country hauled itself through social and political turmoil during the 1960s and 1970s.

Perhaps his most iconic image of that era is *Stray Dog, Misawa* (1971), taken in Aomori prefecture in the north of Japan. With its body caught in a dramatic contrast of light and shade, the feral-looking animal turns its head back toward the camera, its jaw slack and its eyes dull. Numerous critics have adopted the image of the stray dog as a metaphor for Moriyama's itinerant approach to taking photographs, wandering the streets shooting whatever provokes an emotional response in him. Moriyama has embraced the association in the title of three of his books, *Dog's Memory* (1984), *Dog's Time* (1995), *Dog's Memory – the Last Chapter* (1998), and "Stray Dog" was the title of his first major international retrospective, in 1999, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), which subsequently traveled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Japan Society, both in New York, and several museums in Europe and Japan. In the conclusion to her essay for the accompanying catalog, SFMOMA's senior curator of photography Sandra S. Philips describes the stray dog as "the ultimate outsider, wild but aware of the topography of the town he inhabits. Not a participant, but an observer, somewhat discomforting but also enviable because free, always restlessly moving on, always fending for himself."

Moriyama trained in graphic design in his hometown of Osaka, but he quickly became fascinated by photography. William Klein's 1956 photobook *New York*, released in Japan in 1957, was highly influential to the young Moriyama. Seeing how some of Klein's snapshots of advertisements, gun-wielding children and jaded pedestrians were rendered in a grainy, rough and high-contrast aesthetic led him to realize that photography was a much freer art form than he had previously understood from looking at the more carefully composed and lyrical

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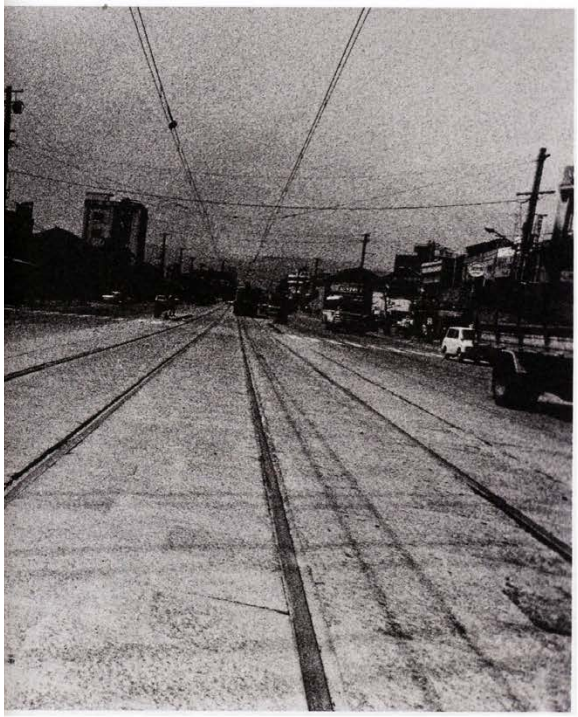

work of artists such as Henri Cartier-Bresson. In 1961, Moriyama moved to Tokyo, hoping to work for VIVO, the first professional photographer's cooperative of the postwar period, whose members, including Eikoh Hosoe, Kikuji Kawada and Shomei Tomatsu, sought to portray the changes taking place in Japanese society. The group had disbanded shortly before Moriyama's arrival, but he was able to find work as an assistant to Hosoe.

Though Moriyama has photographed all over Japan, his work is particularly associated with the artistic, social and political ferment of Tokyo's Shinjuku area during the 1960s and 1970s. The east side of Shinjuku Station, formerly the site of the postwar black market, had become a heady enclave of bars, clubs and brothels, while the vacant land on the west side of the station was being redeveloped as a commercial and business district and was the site of experimental performances and political demonstrations. Among the artistic activities that defined the location and the period, Juro Kara's Situation Theater Troupe performed in and around a red tent pitched in parks and on vacant land, in a manner that drew on the gaudy, vulgar energy of circuses and freak shows, a breach of the norm that led to confrontations with city bureaucrats, the police and even other artists. Meanwhile, the New Left student movement staged massive protests against the renewal of the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty in both 1960 and 1970, which it feared would draw Japan into US wars abroad, as well as the US occupation of Okinawa, which was not returned to Japan until 1972.

Moriyama reflected on this period while talking to *ArtAsiaPacific* in a bar in Shinjuku's Golden Gai area in July. Tucked away behind some office buildings, the tiny ramshackle bars of Golden Gai ("Golden Town"), most of which can only seat about eight or nine people, were some of

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the most important sites for intellectual debate among artists, critics, filmmakers, theater directors and philosophers. "Student activists would come in and punch out the cultural figures they didn't like," Moriyama recalls. "I didn't really like that kind of thing. It was a time when society, culture and politics were on edge. Everybody had all these thoughts and feelings within them that were bursting at the seams." Moriyama did not necessarily photograph these scenes, however. "I had no direct commitment to any politics," he states. "I observed from the sidelines. One time, in Shinjuku, I photographed a demonstration, on October 21, 1969. That's about it."

The photograph in question was taken on International Antiwar Day. In Tokyo, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators gathered at the west exit of Shinjuku station to protest the US military using Japan as a base for bombing runs in Vietnam. Though violent protests the previous year had spurred the government into giving the police broader powers to suppress the New Left movement and some 1,500 people were arrested that day, Moriyama's image downplays the event as a mass movement; only a few figures at the edges of the composition hint at a bigger crowd. Instead, he focuses on a single figure, anonymous and silhouetted. It is unclear whether the lurching figure is male or female, whether it is facing the camera or the other way, whether it is falling, running or in the middle of throwing something. To the right appear to be another two blurred figures. It is impossible to tell whether they are protesters or policemen, and in which direction they are running. The politicized context of the image is difficult to discern without prior knowledge, but the isolation of these small, abstracted figures within a larger, white and smoky space, as well as the tilted composition of the image, nevertheless conveys the mood of a society thrown out of kilter.

Moriyama presents his works in series organized under specific titles, but he often mixes in images from other contexts. Hence, the image of the protest was published in *Asahi Camera* magazine as a part of a 12-month serialization of the artist's "Accident" (1969) series, which depicted images of car accidents that Moriyama had rephotographed from tabloid newspapers, magazines and road-safety posters. The illusion that Moriyama shot these scenes firsthand is undone only by sheens of light reflecting off the original prints. "It's true that I did not see the actual accident, but that moment when the poster had an impact on me *was* the scene, for me," Moriyama explains. "Of course, had I witnessed the accident in person, I might have taken a photograph. But, it doesn't really matter to me either way, whether it is a copy or not, as long as it has an impact on me. I shot it because it was extremely real to me."

Moriyama pioneered this approach in tandem with photographers Koji Taki, Takuma Nakahira, Yutaka Takanashi and the poet and critic Takahiko Okada, who together in November 1968 published the small-press magazine *Provoke*. With its subtitle "Provocative Materials for Thought," the magazine advocated fragmented, contrasting imagery with no narrative logic, eschewing the idea of photography as documentation and emphasizing the materiality of the photograph itself. The *are, bure, boke* aesthetic that they became known for had its precedents in the work of William Klein and the VIVO group, but it was the *Provoke* photographers who cultivated the style. Moriyama joined the collective from the second issue, though by August 1969 creative differences among the members led to the demise of the publication after its third issue. Though short-lived and intended for a specialist market rather than a general readership, the publication caught the mood of the time, with photography critic Kotaro Iizawa referring to it as full of "pathetic images, as if capturing the sight of a world struggling out of darkness."

At this time, Moriyama began to work on his own photobooks. In 1968, the avant-garde poet, filmmaker, theater director and photographer Shuji Terayama invited Moriyama to photograph *taishu engeki*, working-class popular theater, for some essays he was writing. "Even though Terayama recommended I see this theater, it wasn't an attractive place for me at that time," Moriyama says. "Takuma Nakahira was photographing all

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these cool-looking things, and somewhere in my mind I was thinking, 'And I'm photographing vaudeville?' But once I was there, I reacted strongly to it. It was a straightforward, populist world, and I could relate to that. Even though avant-garde theater work such as Juro Kara's 'red tent' definitely had some sort of impact on me, I felt no physical response to them." Terayama never completed the essays, and Moriyama ran the photographs in *Camera Mainichi* magazine under the title *Japanese Theater* (1968), and later that year, he published the series as its own photobook. Mixed in with the theater photographs—showing actors in white makeup both on and off stage—are images of a homeless man crawling along the sidewalk, an American-style brass band marching down a street in Tokyo, an aircraft flying over the sea off Kawasaki, as well as close-ups of stillborn fetuses in jars, which he photographed in a hospital in Kanagawa prefecture.

As Ivan Vartanian explains in *Japanese Photobooks of the 1960s and '70s* (Aperture, 2009), it was the collaboration between the photographer, the publisher, the designer and the printer that defines the difference between the photobook and the exhibition print produced by the artist working alone in the darkroom: "Once a contact print had been turned over to the printing plant, contrast, tone and gradient shifts, and even burning and dodging were frequently carried out to an extent that radically altered the look of an image even before the book was on press . . . In this sense, there is no *original* apart from the photobook itself." Moriyama tells *AAP* that this collaborative process is particularly important to him. "The order of photographs doesn't matter too much, because there is no particular story to them. Mostly I leave decisions about that to the book's editor or designer, because I trust them. In fact, I feel that filtering my photographs through other people's perspectives rather than my own deepens the scope of the work."

Moriyama has not ceased making photobooks, but as he consolidated his domestic and international reputation with dozens of shows over the

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past three decades, the exhibition format has become more integral to the display of his work. Reflecting on the distinction between making a photobook and staging an exhibition, Moriyama tells *AAP* that making photobooks is a self-involved process in which he barely considers the viewer. "In some small measure I may think about who will look at them, but basically, when I'm working, it's about what *I* want to see or do, before it becomes about display. On the other hand, with exhibitions, I start by thinking about how much of an instant impact I can make on the viewers upon their entry to the venue."

At his solo exhibition at New York's Luhring Augustine gallery in February, which centered on the "Hawaii" photographs, Moriyama opted for the cleanest display possible, separating the series into landscape and portrait prints and hanging them close together in white frames in a single line on opposing walls—an effect that was direct but undistracting. Similarly, at his retrospective at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography in 2008, where "Hawaii" was given its own floor, the display was immersive. There, Moriyama filled the space with enormous prints, including one four-by-six-meter four-panel print of a light-drenched road sweeping dramatically away into the horizon. The retrospective, which also featured works from his "Paris" (1999) and "Buenos Aires" series (2004), made it clear how much of a latecomer Moriyama was to photographing abroad. "Between my first international trip to New York in 1971, and my visit to Graz for my exhibition there in 1981, I didn't travel at all. I was convinced that photographing Japan was enough. Overall that's changed now, but basically I have this very narrow belief that Japanese people should photograph Japan, New Yorkers should photograph New York, and so on. It's a principle, though one that I've broken myself."

When asked what drew him to photograph Hawaii, Moriyama replies: "I still haven't really figured that out. Buenos Aires and New York were the meccas of our youth, but Hawaii didn't give me that kind of yearning. It was this place of little importance for me. But one day it somehow dawned on me that it's more than that. In the end, I think I was searching for Japan."

Moriyama's search for a sense of home in the foreign landscape draws on the underlying sense of existential angst that has been in his work since the beginning, fundamentally connecting the "Hawaii" images to the vision of Japan that he has conveyed in his work for five decades. At the Luhring Augustine show, he created a subtle correspondence between the large "Hawaii" prints shown in the front room, and a selection of smaller prints displayed in the back room, a mixture of photographs from the 1970s and 1980s. As with the "Hawaii" series, some of these prints zero in on recognizable traits of the local environment: a traditional Japanese wooden house, a stone *torii* gateway to a Shinto shrine, a row of patterned futons airing on a second-floor balcony and a close-up on a *pachinko* pinball machine. Many of them look as though they have been shot at night with a flash, making them at once nostalgic for their intense focus on the subject matter but eerie for their stark, contrasting tones. But such obviously Japanese traits are nowhere to be found in the "Hawaii" series. One image, *Cities* (1971) hinted at the connection between the two sets of work in the gallery: a grainy shot of an empty street with tram lines receding into the distance and barely perceptible cars and trucks on the edges of the composition— an image that could have been taken almost anywhere and at any time in the 20th century.

Perhaps it is this Japan that Moriyama sees in Hawaii—one that is calm, with an indeterminate sense of time and place. The panorama of Honolulu seen from an airplane window could just as well be Nagasaki or Fukuoka. The undulating ridges of a mountainside in Oahu could equally be rural Niigata prefecture. Given that Japan's social and political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s have given way to placid consumerism, Moriyama's work is no longer infused with the same urgency and grit these days. It is his shots of open expanses and roads disappearing into the horizon—the most anonymous scenes of all—that look most like home for an artist who is constantly on the move.

Daido Moriyama with his "Hawaii" series, displayed at his solo exhibition at Luhring Augustine, New York, in February 2010. Photo by Curtis Hamilton for *ArtAsiaPacific*.