



Taka Ishii Gallery

Photography Paris

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Yasuhiro Ishimoto – Katsura

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In 1953, the 32-year old photographer Yasuhiro Ishimoto visited Katsura Imperial Villa in southwestern Kyoto for the first time. He had just returned to Japan after a long period of artistic training in the United States and the Museum of Modern Art in New York had asked him to photograph the villa to illustrate the catalogue for an exhibit they were mounting. The photographer took advantage of this commission to channel his technical savvy and artistic beliefs into a series of black and white images that quickly became symbolic and are now inseparable from their subject.

Built in three phases between 1620 and 1658, Katsura Villa is a gem of traditional Japanese architecture and today still serves as a source of inspiration for many international designers. Architect Walter Gropius, who visited it in the 1950s, described it as a construction that "appeals to our emotions because, here, for once, design has been linked closely to the human being, to his style of life and to the realities of his existence."¹ Its space was truly treated as an artistic medium, favoring the uniformity of the property.

Space is also a material that Ishimoto worked within this series of photos. Created between 1953 and 1954, his images are, first and foremost, spatial compositions. Mindful of honoring the harmony that characterizes every aspect of the villa and of reflecting it in his photos, Ishimoto sought out purity in forms and lines and a painterly quality in light and its different values. Going beyond the documentary function of the commission, he composed like a painter, referencing the formal exercises of the artists of his time and of their predecessors, whom he never stopped contemplating.

Indeed, his most assured photographs seem to echo the abstract world of the artists of the 1920s and 1930s who were featured in the Dutch journal *De Stijl*, and especially Piet Mondrian. They are also closely linked to the painters who emerged in the early 1950s and levelled their own challenges at definitions of art. For example, the American Ellsworth Kelly, who was also inspired by architecture, began painting his *Windows* series in 1949. On his first visit to the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, the only thing that impressed Kelly was the building's windows, which he immediately decided to depict in their simplest geometric form, devoid of any context or perspective. This frontalism – perfectly suited to the two dimensions of a plastic screen – is found in the photos of Katsura Villa.

¹ "Architecture in Japan", Walter Gropius, in "Tradition and Creation in Japanese Architecture", Gropius, Tange, Ishimoto, published by Yale University, 1960

A number of books have been published about this imperial estate, but the photographs they contain are often tinged with a painterly influence from another era and do no more than illustrate their authors' words. What Yasuhiro Ishimoto offers is a vision that respects tradition, but is also radically different, personal and rooted in the avant-garde, belying the heritage of a life spent crossing borders.

Born in 1921 in San Francisco, Ishimoto, an American citizen, was raised in Japan. He took his first photos at the age of 10 and turned up farming, the trade of his parents. The 18-year old returned to California in 1939 to study modern agriculture, but was sent to an internment camp for Americans of Japanese descent when the United States declared war on the Empire of Japan.

For two years he learned photography techniques from other prisoners. Released before the end of the war, Yasuhiro Ishimoto headed to Chicago and began studies in architecture, which he quickly abandoned to devote himself to photography. He then enrolled at the Chicago Institute of Design, which had been founded as the "New Bauhaus" by László Moholy-Nagy to give new life in the United States to the teachings of the famous German school of applied arts. Ishimoto studied there under the tutelage of Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind, two great American photographers whose aesthetics hewed closely to those of the abstract expressionist artists who were at their apotheosis. Siskind, whose work was inspired in part by details in nature and architecture, had a definite influence on his student. It recurred throughout Ishimoto's lengthy career: in his photos of the Chicago streets when he returned to work there from 1958 to 1961, in his images of numerous masterpieces of Japanese architecture and in the frames brought back from his frequent world travels.

So in 1953 it was a man steeped in modern Western culture who returned to Japan. He still carried an American passport, which is how he came to be featured in the "Always the Young Strangers" exhibition put on by photographer Edward Steichen at MoMA to assemble the works of 25 young American photographers being shown for the first time. But his next appearance at MoMA, in 1974, was as a Japanese citizen; he was part of the very important exhibition "New Japanese Photography", in which he showed 10 photographs of Katsura Imperial Villa. Japanese publisher and critic Shoji Yamagishi, who arranged the show with curator John Szarkowski, mentioned him in the catalogue as the person who took the essential elements of modern photography to Japan.²

In 1989, a portfolio containing 15 prints from this series of photographs was published; only 31 copies were made. It is one of these very rare editions that we are pleased to present at the gallery.

In 1996, the Japanese government named Yasuhiro Ishimoto a "Person of Cultural Merit". He passed away in 2012 at the age of 90 after having donated his archives and their 7,000 images to the Kochi Art Museum in Japan in 2004.

² In "New Japanese Photography", edited by J. Szarkowski and Shoji Yamagishi, published by the Museum of Modern Art, 1974.

