The Photographer's Gallery

CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE PHOTOBOOKS

Books are personal objects. They are designed to be touched. We carry them about, treasure them, and pore over them in solitary moments; a glass box display just doesn't do them justice. So when I first heard that The Photographer's Gallery would be opening a show of photobooks, my immediate thought was to the question of display: how could the intimacy of a photobook translate in an exhibition space?

Contemporary Japanese Photobooks courtesy of The Photographers' Gallery

Whilst TPG couldn't hope to recreate the experience of private contemplation, it has produced a pleasingly tactile, informal display. In a relatively small gallery, the books are casually laid out on shelves and trestle tables. On arrival, visitors are presented with a pair of white gloves and, thus equipped, are free to browse at their leisure.

Since its flowering in the post-war era, the photobook has become a lynchpin of the Japanese photography scene. Photobooks are seen not just as collections of reproductions, but as art objects in their own right. The form of each book—its design, paper, print quality, and the story it tells (or doesn't tell)—is a part of the artwork. Such is the dominance of the photobook in Japan, that co-curator Ivan Vartanian suggests 'the nature of Japanese photography requires a different way of viewing photography: not as isolated images mounted on a wall but as a sequence of images that are bound together'. In Photobooks vistors have the opportunity to do just this: in each book there is an entire series in sequence, laid out as the artist intended.

There are several books from Daido Moriyama, co-founder of seminal '60s magazine Provoke, and books from other established artists like Sakiko Nomura. Yet the show really excels as an opportunity to discover something new. Photobooks is full of artists who are less well-known (that is, less well-known in Europe) and I came away with a list of photographers of whom I had heard either very little or nothing at all.

Personal favourites included Nao Tsuda's Storm Last Night (2010) and Eye Ohashi's Unchained (2008). Tsuda's book is a collection of long, narrow landscapes, taken on the Irish coast. Alive with the textures of the sand and the grasses, the cliffs and the water, it ripples with blues, greys, and glowing whites. Unchained also focuses on nature, picturing woodlands and meadows. In scenes awash with dots of light, soap bubbles float in front of the lense, forming transluscent circles of sky blue, green and lavender.

For pure joy though, the winner is Kotori Kawashima's Mirai Chan (2011). A bestseller in Japan, the book is a frankly adorable study of a little girl. With the informality of family snapshots, the pictures see 'Mirai' in everyday situations, whether happy and rosy-cheeked or snotty and stroppy. Keeping the right side of saccharine, it is a simply executed and genuinely endearing book.

This is a dense show and encompasses over 200 volumes, many of which are unavailable in the UK. Yet the volume of books is a frustration as much as a pleasure. The scope is at once exciting and overwhelming, and one doesn't quite know where to begin (or end for that matter). This isn't really a criticism: too many may be overwhelming, but too few would be disappointing. It does mean, however, that the exhibition works best for those who can revisit. If you can only visit once though, do: Photobooks is a unique and unusual show, unconventionally displayed and refreshingly informal.