

Reviews

Watanabe preserves life in portraits, observations

Exhibit: Hiroshi Watanabe at [Oswald Gallery](#), 14 January 2005 through through 10 March 2005.

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AUSTIN, Texas (Fotophile.com) — **Hiroshi Watanabe's** exhibit of monochrome photographs displays an expert presentation of subtle beauty and exquisite prints. A native of Japan, Watanabe lives in the U.S. but travels frequently to Japan and other countries to record the beauty of his world, as reflected in most of the art in the exhibit.

Half of the 40 photographs focus on portraits of Matsuo Kabuke — amateur, Japanese actors dressed in traditional attire. The remaining photographs reflect the artist's striving to preserve ephemeral aspects of life that he witnessed in his travels. All of Watanabe's medium-format photographs feature subtle toning and beautiful printing.

Watanabe approaches his subjects as a neutral observer, freezing time to record his rapidly changing world. Nowhere is this more obvious than the artist's portraits of the *kabuki* players, each of which show individuals in traditional costumes. With a playful attitude, the artist includes portraits of these costumed actors dressed as bunnies, shogun warriors and geishas. One portrait displays the gentle sloping neck of a geisha above her kimono and below her heavily ribboned and tied hair. Another image focuses on the bare feet of an actress below her boldly striped dress. The subjects' sad or angry eyes stare at the viewer through many of these photographs.

Watanabe culls his second portfolio on display, titled "Observations," from his travels across the globe including Burma, India, Ecuador and New York City. One photo features a white bulldog resting at the feet of his owner seated in a dark, New Orleans bar, evoking the feelings in **Henri Cartier-Bresson's** portrait of William Faulkner.

"American Museum of Natural History" depicts the shadowy figure of a young girl before a diorama of four African oryx, causing the viewer to wonder which image is real — the girl or the African plains. Another image confronts the viewer with the giant, bell-shaped dome of a temple in Mandalay, Burma, put into perspective by a tiny, silhouette of a young boy standing on the monument's base.

A common theme throughout many of these photographs is the sensation of viewing the subject through a veil, such as the pattern created by screens, fabric or wrought iron. Watanabe variously uses this technique to obscure, highlight or beautify his subjects. One such photograph shows a worker building a structure of metal rods in Quito, Ecuador. As we stare up at the sky, through the grid formed of the rods, we see the shadowed worker placing a rod on the structure, but the real subject seems to be the clouds far above his head.

The show's standout image is "White Terns, Midway Atoll." Again, the view is up, this time through a thin, gauze-like tent. A flock of terns sits on the tent, their bodies seen as shadows while their webbed feet are seen directly.

Master printing of Watanabe's images is the glue that holds together the images in this display. The beauty of his use of mist, shadowy figures and gauzy veils would be lost without his ability to render these subtleties on photo paper. Accentuating Watanabe's beautiful printing skills is his use of toning to further capture and convey the moods of his images. [2005.02] | [TOP](#)