

MI-YEON



Mi-Yeon was born in South Korea but has lived and worked in Japan for over a decade. With a deep interest in philosophy and theology, she uses photography to explore her

existence in the world. “I don’t tell personal stories,” she said. “I prefer to tell universal stories in a personal way.”

Among her standout photography projects are *Alone Together*, *Yomogi Soshi – And who might you be?* and *I and Thou*, all of which are deeply intuitive and poetic. Mi-Yeon’s work has been exhibited widely, but is also beautifully represented by her photobooks, such as for *Alone Together* and *I and Thou* (a handmade artist book that she produced in collaboration with Reminders Photography Stronghold). She has also published a collection of essays.



From the series 'I and Thou'

How did you first get interested in photography?

I first started becoming interested in photography because of my father. When I was little, he took many photographs of me. I was like a model for him. He had a darkroom in his workplace, where he made the black and white prints himself. In our family album, we have many family photographs made by my father, especially lots of pictures of me.

Several years later, I happened to see a black and white photograph of a tiled roof in high contrast at the atelier where I went to. I don't know who took the photo, but I was attracted to the beauty of light and shadow. That was probably the first moment that I was conscious of the possibility of being a photographer

You were born in South Korea, studied photography in France, and now living and working in Japan. Has moving around and living in different places influenced your photography at all?

Yes, I think so. France was my first foreign country. I remember that I thought the subway of Paris, where there were all kinds of people, was like a zoo. In France, I came to recognise race for the first time and felt that Asian people are very endearing. In Japan, I am also a foreigner, but I enjoy the differences. Little by little, the distinction of an Oriental or a Westerner disappeared inside of me. Now, I think we all are not so different. Moving around and living in different places have evidently influenced my photography. The photographs reflect the life of the photographer.



From the series 'Alone Together'

I understand that the idea for *Alone Together* was sparked by a miscarriage in the late 90s. I am sorry for your loss, but how did it change the way you view the world, and subsequently, how you worked with your photography?

I wasn't able to take photographs for about a year. After that I went out for a walk near my house almost every day. The small life of weeds on the roadside that I had not notice till then attracted my eye. I loved watching them. They were little and transitory but strong. And one day I met a weed named Himemukashi-yomogi. I began to take photographs of Himemukashi-yomogi and other weeds. That continued for around two to three months. It became the series *Yomogi soshi*.

Subsequently for around 10 years, I worked as a writer. In this period, I had taken photographs outside of my daily life and routine, especially when I travel. I looked for something simpler and deeper in the photography. As a result, those photographs became the series *Alone Together*.



You said in the book's preface that: When in a large crowd of people, "I" vanishes. Within the "countless I's", the "big I". You are referring to the interconnectedness of people, how everyone is related. Can you elaborate on this idea?

I was very interested in Buddhism and Eastern thought so I read many books about them. I realised the teachings of various religions and thoughts say the same things, even if they are different in the words and in the way they are expressed. The universe consists of our consciousness. And our consciousness is connected, with or without the body. In fact there is not anyone that is unrelated. Because we all have the same ancestors.

Every thought we have becomes the consciousness of the universe, both good and bad. All of the universe is inherent in one human being. It depends on his environment and the tendencies of the person, which appears during the life. Our body is made up of various materials. Maybe "I" is a body in which the mind lives in temporarily. Though we cannot see it, we have the common point in all of us. It doesn't happen all the time but I feel it clearly when my mind is clear.

The "big I " is the universe, our consciousness connected, or an assembly of "Is"; in other words, the "countless I's".



From the series 'Alone Together'

Your photographs are more evocative than descriptive, coming from an inner place. What is your state of mind or emotions when making a photograph?

Normally I make a photograph without thinking about anything. I sometimes feel that I totally become an invisible person. If this state continues, my mind becomes empty, and I face the world with my camera, like two people facing each other in a true sense.

Can you tell us about your process in developing the project, *I and Thou*? What was your thought behind the project?

This project is a sort of meditation about our existence. I intended to express our story in the universe by mixing images from the different locations I've travelled to, and people of any race or gender. The world may be mutable. All comes and goes; everything is variable, and not fixed.

The pigeon in the series *I and Thou* is a metaphor. The pigeon is considered a symbol of peace and was a sacred bird in Greek myth; it is also said that it has a superior sense of direction.

The concept of the series *I and Thou* is that there are an infinite “Is” dwelling in a single “I”, and those infinite “Is” are the various aspects of the single “I”. The theme is the same as *Alone Together*.



From the series ‘Yomogi Soshi’

***Yomogi Soshi – And who might you be?* is a charming story about a weed trying to survive in a crack on Tokyo’s pavement. Where was the location of this weed? And what attracted you to it?**

The botanical name of the heroine of the story is *himemukashi-yomogi* in Japanese and *Canadian fleabane* in English. It appeared alone near our house on the route which I took to my daughter’s nursery school every day. The rainy season had just begun, and the weed

was shooting up taller each time I saw it. So I looked forward to monitoring the progress of that weed day-in, day-out as I passed by each morning and evening.

I think that it was growth of the weed that attracted me the most. The figure of the weed was cheerful and stately.



From the series 'Yomogi Soshi'

What themes are you interested in exploring with your photography, and why?

We think about living as long as we live, and imagine about dying. I think our lives and death are connected by the spirit.

Because I'm interested in our existence and matters concerning the spirit – and wish to know more about it – I love to work along these themes. As the spirit is invisible, it's interesting how I can visualise the invisible with photography.

Your earlier works, *Alone Together* and *Yomogi Soshi*, are in black and white, why did you choose this method of expression for these works?

I began taking photographs with black and white film for the first time as homework given by the school of photography I was studying at in France. So it was with printing black and white in the darkroom. The expression of composition, and of light and shadow was straight and beautiful, as much as it was not disturbed by colour. Another good point for me was that I can personally control the entire process, from the taking to the printing of photographs, according to my preference to a certain degree.

And one more thing, I love Henri Cartier-Bresson's photographs.



From the series 'I and Thou'

But with your recent work, *I and Thou*, you seem to be moving into colour. Why?

I've been taking photographs with colour film long before while I was travelling. I took photographs in Morocco only in colour. The colour of Morocco was so beautiful, I was fascinated. I have many colour films which I didn't print, so I never showed the work. I decided to work with those photographs.

I tried to find a method to express those colour photographs more simply and more universally. I scanned the films into my computer and I tried printing on many different kinds of paper, especially *washi*, Japanese paper. I also tried silk screening some images. Finally, the photographs became the series *I and Thou*. I think I will use both colour and black and white for my new project.

As we are now in Reminders Photography Gallery's photobook library, do you have a favourite photobook here? Why is this book important to you?

I can't choose just one or two photobooks from the gallery's photobook library. Because there are so many photobooks which seem to be interesting, I see many books at a time rather than see one book slowly.

But if I were to choose one book, it's Trent Parke's *Minutes to Midnight*. I can't remember where I saw this book for the first time, but it might be at Reminders Photography Gallery's photobook library. It is a beautiful photobook; I was very attracted to it and immediately bought a copy for myself.

I love this book – the beautiful cloth-bound cover, the high quality printing of dark ink in expressive black and white, and the amazing preface. It's between fiction and non-fiction, or a story in dream. And of course the photographs are fantastic. I appreciate Trent Parke's artistic work.

I don't know whether they are connected with each other but "Minutes to Midnight" is also the title of an album by Linkin Park.



From the series 'I and Thou'

This is a relatively busy year for you with exhibitions in Japan and in France. Where and what will you be showing?

Yomogi soshi-who might you be? , Gallery mu-an, Nagaoka, Japan (July)

Alone Together, Gallery Niigata-eya, Niigata, Japan (August)

I and Thou, Anne Clergue Gallery, Arles, France (September)

I and Thou, Le Salon du Panthéon, Paris, France (September~December)

What are you working on now?

I'm working on a new project with the tentative title of *Psyche – go on pilgrimages*. It's a project about god, our souls and the universe. I will be visiting sacred places, as well as places or persons concerning shamanism, animism and other religions. This is a long-term project.

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