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SUNDAY LIFE & TIMES

22 July 2012 | last updated at 11:34PM [Email](#) [Print](#)

Shifting paradigms

By Amanda Suriya Ariffin 0 comments

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Michicko Kasahara, Chief Curator of Tokyo's Metropolitan Museum of Photography, gives Amanda Suriya Ariffin her views on gender issues and feminism, and how they impact female artists



Michiko Kasahara

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UPON first meeting 55-year-old Michicko Kasahara, an established authority in Japanese contemporary art, I place her as not a day over 42. The soft-spoken curator, sitting with impeccable posture, has a dry wit that she exhibits at the most unexpected moments.

Having first become a curator with the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography in 1989, this graduate in sociology from Japan continued

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her studies at Syracuse University in New York.

She admits easily without embarrassment, “my English was not so good, and I took a photography course, because photography didn’t require me to speak English,” to which she adds, noting my amusement, “but my teacher really liked my work so I changed my major (from sociology) and then I realised: photography needs more English, especially with the technical skills!”

Kasahara visited Malaysia recently for the first time to speak at, and be part of, the continuing series of the Vision Culture Lecture programme organised and hosted by the Shalini Ganendra Fine Art gallery. She joins the roll call of past luminary speakers and curators that include Debra Diamond of the Smithsonian and Christopher Phillips of the International Centre of Photography.



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GENDER ISSUES

But the switch was a happy one, as she notes: “The issues I saw in sociology were the same as the field I pursued in photography: gender issues and feminism.” And she has plenty to say about these issues, as she relates how she grew up in “the rural countryside in Japan” with a strong grandmother and mother who ran the family business with a firm grip.

Shattering preconceived notions of the stereotypical demure, submissive Asian woman further, Kasahara is unapologetic about her views on female artists grappling with the themes of sexuality and gender, more so in the 1980s.

CRITICAL AGE

“I was 28 years old at that time, in ‘80s Japan, and there was social pressure on women - with marriage, and sex, and the social context after marriage,” Kasahara states, her composure belying the steely edge in her voice, “and I was interested in photography critique, in other artists’ work, like that of Nan Goldin and Cindy Sherman.

“In the ‘80s and the ‘90s,” she adds, “women’s consciousness had been changed dramatically.” Artists such as Sherman, she relates, analysed women’s roles.

“I’m not married and I don’t have children, and this year I will be 55. I saw, in the ‘80s, 24 was seen as the critical age for women; they said women are like Christmas decorations; after 25, nobody wants to ‘buy them’.”

Kasahara grew up with strong female role models within her own family (“even though, you know, in the Japanese system, men are in power — and they are still,”) and with her love for photography, it is no surprise that she dedicated her efforts to curating milestone exhibitions in Japan that were, by her admission, not only controversial but also ground-breaking. She was one of the very few to curate exhibitions with a strong gender theme.

REDEFINING ROLES

“This is the main issue,” Kasahara emphasises, remembering her immersion in American culture in the ‘80s when gender roles were being redefined, hinting it may have been a serendipitous extension of her having grown up with take-charge women in her family.

“At that time, almost all of the curators in Japan were men. I am part of the second generation of women curators,” she remembers, “but the first curator dealing with gender issues.”

From the 1991 exhibition, where she featured international artists depicting contemporary women to the 1998 Love's Body exhibition of nudes in photos, Kasahara was celebrated as a star curator in her homeland, after the initial wave of controversy within conservative quarters had died away.

"It was the professionals who really loved my exhibitions," she says, smiling as she recalls. "But there were so many conservatives and there I was breaking the rules."

In part, she says she tried to convey the message that we should view each other as people, without gender clouding the picture. And her efforts did not go unnoticed for Kasahara holds the distinction for having been appointed the Commissioner for Japan at the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005. (The event is a major contemporary art exhibition that takes place once every two years in Venice.)

And she raises an interesting paradoxical viewpoint when she confidently states she gets "irritated by otaku, manga and anime" because she likes "mature, adult art," even though the former is known for producing androgynous icons.

But she is determined to push paradigms of gender and sexuality by curating works of photography that give voice to these issues.

I ask her about the best part of her work. She purrs in response. "When the exhibition has taken a long time to put together, after the final installation, the day before opening, and it's just me, and the art, and nobody else."

The Shalini Ganendra Fine Art gallery is also home to various other works, including Chin Kon Yit — Revisited (Sketchbook Watercolours). It features 58 original watercolours depicting Malaysian architecture and scenes, from now until Sept 15.

For more details, call 03-7960 4740 or visit www.shaliniganendra.com

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