

# MIYAKO YOSHINAGA

547 WEST 27TH STREET SUITE 204 NEW YORK NY 10001  
T +1 212 268 7132 WWW.MIYAKOYOSHINAGA.COM TUESDAY-SATURDAY 11AM-6PM

## Photocritic International

A. D. Coleman on Photography and New Technology

Early this year Miyako Yoshinaga, a Chelsea gallerist, invited me to attend the March 2nd opening of a mini-retrospective, “Ken Ohara: Extreme Portraits 1970-1999,” and meet the photographer. She seemed surprised when I accepted. But I sensed something ceremonial about the occasion, and thought I should go.

In the late summer of 1970 a peculiar book by a photographer of whom I’d never heard made its way to me through the mail, and on September 17 of that year I published the following review in my “Latent Image” column in the *Village Voice*:



*Coincidence brings us, at the same time, two books by photographers who have both worked for and studied under Richard Avedon and Hiro. These are “One,” by Ken Ohara, and “Words & Photographs” by Aram Saroyan. ...*

*Ohara’s “One” is equally strange, in a quite different way. Devoid of text, it consists exclusively of life-size, full-face portraits — from forehead to chin — of a wide variety of people of all sexes, races, and nationalities. (The book is unpaginated, but I’d estimate there are roughly 500 portraits.) They are technically identical — the only differences are in the faces of the subject.*

*I’ve been “reading” this book for several weeks now, off and on, and I’ve found it to be alternately — sometimes simultaneously — funny and frightening. (It also has a hypnotic effect when used as a flip book, which the photographer may or may not have intended.)*



Ken Ohara, “One” (1970)

“One” is a truly odd and imaginative project, for it takes us into an area rarely investigated by photographers — the psychology of the medium itself. We do not frequently look at length at anyone’s face — our impressions of those people we meet are usually formed, visually speaking, by the totality expressed in the currency chic phrase, “body language.” And even those faces we do look at closely, eye-to-eye, are generally in motion — not caught, as they are in “One,” during moments of expressionless expression.

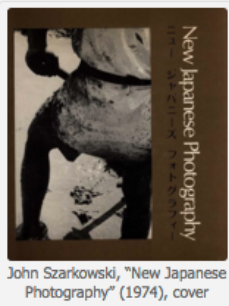
*What Ohara has done is to standardize everything — technique, pose, print, expression, lighting — in order to point up the astonishing differences in each individual human face. This approach works marvelously — I’ve never seen a group of photographs that made me so aware of the physiognomic variety of man. Each time I go through the book I find myself becoming aware of some part of the face — nostrils, freckles, eyebrows — in a way I was not before.*

*I also find the book affecting me emotionally each time I turn to it. Each human face is, after all, the chart of its bearer’s history, and to be confronted with so many detailed maps is an overwhelming experience. “One” is a highly original venture, startling and insightful. I think we’ll be seeing more from Ken Ohara. ...*

# MIYAKO YOSHINAGA

547 WEST 27TH STREET SUITE 204 NEW YORK NY 10001  
T +1 212 268 7132 WWW.MIYAKOYOSHINAGA.COM TUESDAY-SATURDAY 11AM-6PM

I heard nothing from the photographer, which didn't strike me as odd; I didn't even know if he resided in the States. A few years later I had occasion to mention this project briefly, in an April 7, 1974 *New York Times* review of the exhibition "New Japanese Photography," curated by John Szarkowski for the Museum of Modern Art:



*Ken Ohara's "One" — some 500 close-up studies of faces, identical in size and technique — could hardly be adequately shown, but is available at the museum's bookstore. (Recommended, too, though with a caveat; after fifty pages, you realize you can't tell what sex people are from their features.)*

*Ohara and Shigeru Tamura (who photographed a landscape from a fixed vantage point over a year's time) are working in an area which overlaps conceptual art, but are using photography more pertinently and intelligently than most within those purviews.*

That was the last I wrote about Ohara and this project, and the last I heard of him until Yoshinaga's invitation.



Somehow Ohara and I, who had never met nor even seen pictures of each other, recognized each other immediately in that crowded space, resulting in an unexpectedly emotional reunion of two complete strangers. In conversation, I learned a bit more about Ohara: At the age of 19 he left his native Japan, abandoning his study of photography at Nihon University, and — speaking no English — came to New York, studying on his own, supporting himself by working in a Japanese restaurant, and eventually apprenticing himself. He has lived in the States ever since, making his home now in California. "One," which got little attention here (mine appears to have been its only U.S. review), made a splash in Japan, but nowhere else.

"One," for which Ohara asked randomly selected people on the streets of New York for permission to make their portraits, has gone through several subsequent editions, including a limited-edition sampler version from Nazraeli Press and a full 1988 reprint from Taschen, reissued in 1997. Ohara has had some shows along the way, including a major touring retrospective in Germany, 2006-07, curated, coincidentally, by a former student of mine, Sally Stein.)

The exhibition offers several pieces extrapolated from "One," including a few clusters of gelatin-silver prints of the individual portraits, mounted side by side, and an enormous piece, "Grain" (1993), a composite based on one of the portraits. But there are works on view that owe nothing to "One." "Diary" (1972), shown here for the first time, followed on the heels of "One." Taking the form of a tiny folded book that snakes around a table in the gallery, it is a lengthy sequence of 35mm contact prints of one-a-day self-portraits, each paired with another contact-printed image in one of the classic forms of representational art — landscape, nude, still life. (Bring a magnifying glass.) For the series "with," from 1999, Ohara asked 100 people — strangers, acquaintances — to pose in one position for exactly one hour before the open lens of his 4x5 camera.

What struck me about this sampling, more than anything, was the uniqueness of each piece, in both concept and form. Though certain threads connect Ohara's works, and he returns again and again to the territory of the

# MIYAKO YOSHINAGA

547 WEST 27TH STREET SUITE 204 NEW YORK NY 10001  
T +1 212 268 7132 WWW.MIYAKOYOSHINAGA.COM TUESDAY-SATURDAY 11AM-6PM

portrait, no two pieces look anything alike. I found myself recalling something I read long ago about the artists of the classic woodblock tradition in Japan: that they would develop a personal style, bring it to a peak of perfection, and then not only change style dramatically but change the name under which they worked as well, leaving behind whatever recognition had accrued to both. Starting fresh or, as we would say today, reinventing themselves. Ken Ohara's work exemplifies the enduring idea that resides at the core of that tradition.

