

Society of the spectacle › Art › Hitoshi Fugo: “Every image attempts to create an impression by establishing an analogy...

Society of the spectacle Art

# Hitoshi Fugo: “Each image attempts to create an impression by establishing an analogy with the violence innate in human nature”

By **Jonathan Goodman** 01/16/2025

43

Hitoshi Fugo

1 of 10 < >



*KAMI 1, 2001, gelatin silver print*

Hitoshi Fugo is a mature photographer, well into his seventies. Born in 1947, he lives in Tokyo and often works in sequences, with series of individual images that share a common theme. In the case of *KAMI*, as we shall see later, Fugo found a partially burnt roll of paper on the street. The origin of his find was a printing press fire. The artist was inspired by the incredible textures that the fire created on the paper and set out to make a series of photographs with an emphasis on the texture of the paper and a penetrating

focus on the damage caused by the fire. In many cases the focus was so close that the image is unintelligible, completely abstract. The impact of *KAMI* lies in the artist's transformation of a humble industrial material into a result of explosive lyricism. The photos express physical damage that is intensified by their skewed focus on deterioration and takes on metamorphic qualities. The object is humanized to a greater or lesser extent by symbolizing human attributes. This interview is an investigation into Fugo's incredible transformation of trivial destruction into vivid realism with human attributes.

**— Could you describe your beginnings as a photographer? Did you study photography academically or did you have a mentor? You mentioned that your parents are not artistic. Why photography in particular?**

—When my father was young he would have liked to become a painter, but he had to give that up in order to make a living. After the war he ran a camera shop in Yonezawa City in the northern Tohoku region. When I was five or six he gave me a toy-like camera and I started taking photographs for fun. During my teenage years he took me to art exhibitions in museums, including those in Tokyo. That's how I grew up and became more familiar with art. I majored in photography at Nihon University in Tokyo, but I didn't have the opportunity to further my studies because the university was closed during the violent student protests in the late 1960s. After graduating I began working as an apprentice to Eikoh Hosoe in his studio in Tokyo. It was only after working for Hosoe that I began to see photography as an art and started taking my own fine art photographs.

**— In 1973 you left Japan to work as a freelance photographer in Paris and New York. What was your life like in these two cities? What impact did your experiences in these cities have on your work as a photographer in Japan?**

—In Paris and New York I worked for Japanese magazines and for my series *Floating Around*. The two cities are very different from each other. My work in Paris and New York exposed me to new cultures, lights and sounds that I had not experienced in Tokyo. My experiences in the New World have probably made me adopt a more complex perspective. When I discovered that museums in Paris and New York recognized photography as a legitimate art form, I was impressed, amazed and almost jealous.

**— The word 'kami', which means 'paper' in Japanese and 'deity' in the Shinto religion, gives title to his current extraordinary project, which began in 2001 and continues to this day. In 2022 he returned to photograph**



**images of the burnt roll of paper that he found by chance on the streets of Tokyo.**



—*The KAMI* series began in 2001, but it is not finished yet. Some time ago, while I was looking at the burning scroll in my studio, I had the idea of ending it with the image of the scroll engulfed in flames. However, I could not find a place to burn it, and other projects forced me to postpone the photo shoot for many years. When I finally found a suitable place for the photo, Ms. Yoshinaga proposed to exhibit the series, which made me take up the project again. Unfortunately, my attempt to capture the image of the burning scroll was a failure. However, during the preparation for the exhibition, I took several new photos. I think I will try again to capture the image in the flames, and if I manage to photograph it, I will be able to bring a conclusion to the series.

**— Could you describe the details of 'KAMI' and its creation? How many photographs are there in the series? What was it about the 1.20-meter-long roll of burnt paper that inspired you to begin the project? Do the 31 photos, 11 of which are on display at the Miyako Goshinaga Gallery, follow a particular sequence? Why do you continue to take photos of the burnt paper?**

—In 1994 I found a partially burned scroll of paper in an area destroyed by fire, and I kept it in my studio for a long time. In 1995 there was an earthquake in western Japan, the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake. After going and photographing the damaged areas I felt that I could express my feelings and thoughts about the catastrophic destruction by photographing the burned scroll of paper. So I started taking pictures of it in my studio in 2001. The series is almost finished, but there is still some work to be done. I will continue taking pictures until I feel that it is finished. For my new show at the Miyako Yoshinaga Gallery in New York I made 31 new prints. Eleven of the images were exhibited at the gallery. When I complete the series I would like to publish a photo book, then I will probably use more images in the sequence. I would say that the concept behind the *KAMI* series is a photographic challenge for me, namely the elimination of the subject's attributes and meaning. By working in this way, I feel that I can open up a new horizon for conventional photography. In my previous series, *Flying frying pan*, I attempted to dismantle the characteristics attributed to a frying pan and the general idea attached to the object. By photographing a frying pan in a particular way, I achieved an abstract image that makes it impossible for the viewer to identify the object. For the *KAMI* series, I photographed the partially burnt roll of paper measuring 1.20 meters long by 46 centimeters in diameter. I also cut the roll with a chainsaw. Due to the forces exerted on the roll, its visual existence became disconnected from its meaning and



became abstract; the original, utilitarian state of the paper was lost from view. For me, this project was an experiment to discover how the roll of paper could transform and change its appearance as it went through different phases of destruction. Each image attempts to create an impression by drawing an analogy with the violence innate in human nature. The sequence of photos can also demonstrate an independent beauty in which the object is freed from human control, even suggesting the nonexistence of God.

**— Could it be said that the images in 'KAMI' suggest an abstract narrative? Given that the images are unrecognizable, how do you view the project: abstract or figurative? Do you think that the viewer's difficulty in understanding what they see necessarily means that the attraction to the photo is purely abstract? Some of the images seem to have been organized by you. If that is the case, how did you arrange the papers to create the resulting images?**

—My basic idea is that photography is not just about copying the subject as it is. The way I approach the subject changes depending on the series. The *KAMI* series is abstract, but not in a superficial way. The series is not composed solely of abstract images that make it difficult to recognize the paper. Rather, I focus on the process of destruction – some images show the shape and texture of the paper, while others are more abstract and make it difficult to recognize the photographed object. Beauty can be perceived in both cases: in the image of the paper as a partially burned concrete object and also in its more advanced phase of degradation, when it is unrecognizable. I could compare my process to a jazz improvisation. I briefly plan a prototype image beforehand while violently cutting the paper with a chainsaw. The resulting images are sometimes close to what I had imagined, and sometimes they are not at all. There are some pieces that I consciously composed according to a specific concept. Sometimes, I reconstruct them to have a more aesthetic effect. Thus, in the process, the unique identity of the paper roll, controlled by the human being, eventually disappears. It has not been difficult to handle the paper roll. Even becoming fragile and breaking while I move it is also part of improvisation. However, this kind of paper roll was huge and heavy, so photographing it was complicated.

**— The photographs have very dark tones. Is the lack of light a technical choice, a thematic comment, or both?**

—All the images in this series have been photographed with the same light source: a strobe in my studio. The reason for using a strobe is that the light is momentary (around 1/10000 of a second, although this varies depending on the type of strobe), so it does



not cause camera shake. This allows for sharp images. Also, unlike photo bulbs, strobes do not generate much heat, so the studio does not get too hot. Depending on their use, either more intense contrast or more dramatic images can be created. This means that any effect can be achieved depending on how the strobe lighting is set up. For the *KAMI* series I tried to distribute the light so that the subject looked three-dimensional and that dark areas were not crushed. I adjusted the shadow and contrast of the images during the printing process. I did not intend to make all the photos dark. Rather, I chose a tone that I felt was most appropriate for each image. I chose dark tones for some of the photographs when I wanted to emphasize the beauty and fragility of materials or to give a glimpse into the dark side of human nature. I believe that I can only convey my message by creating series with sequences of images, not by presenting a single image. Many photographers from different cultures think the same way.

— **You also tend to work in series. Why? Many photographers from different cultures work in a similar way. Why do you think this is?**

—To be honest, maybe I should concentrate a bit more on one series. Each series takes so much time because I'm working on several at once. Also, my goal is to compile them into a book. If I don't have the chance to publish them, I'd like to add new images and finish a series that I've put aside for years. But I feel that this way of working has given more depth to my work, although I also think that not all work that continues for a long time is necessarily excellent.

— **Do you feel that 'KAMI' has a specific meaning? Would it be too much to interpret the burnt paper as referring distantly to the historical traumas of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Or do you think that is a misinterpretation? Would you say that the texture present in these beautiful photos contributes to a pessimistic reading of art?**

—I produced this series conscious of the destructions caused by natural and man-made threats, such as war. But I never linked it to the tragedies of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. The texture highlighted in my work is not meant to be pessimistic. Although this series may evoke such feelings, it should also offer a sense of beauty; a kind of beauty that can be found even in a burnt roll of paper. I can see beauty in any object, even those that are destroyed or no longer have any practical value.

— **Would it be correct to say that, apart from 'KAMI', much of your photography oscillates between abstraction and the figurative? If your work is neither completely abstract nor realistic, why did you not decide to work**

**in one style or the other? What does it bring you to present work that does not move in either of these two directions?**



—I change my photographic methods or styles depending on what I want to express. I don't limit myself to just one style. For my other series, such as *BLACKOUT* and *Floating Around*, I photographed specific objects in a realistic way. However, abstract images later emerged that broke with the sense of documenting real objects. By removing the relation of the object to its original attributes and erasing its particular space and time, I can free myself from the documentary nature of photography. Only then can I express my inner world, even freeing myself from the present time in which I exist. In the series *Flying Frying Pan* and *KAMI*, I focused specifically on what it means to free the object from its attributes and the space in which it exists. On the other hand, I also did a series entitled *AKI/CHI* for which I clearly photographed specific subjects in specific places.

**— Could you name two or three other important works in your career? Tell readers what their themes are. How could they compare to 'KAMI'?**

—Since the beginning of my career I have strived to express an abstract world through photography. How can I escape from one of the missions of photography, which is to document the subject? Surrealist paintings inspired me a lot, especially the works of René Magritte. Every object in his paintings is realistic, but it can express a different dimension. I thought photography could do that too. I can talk about two important works that came before the *KAMI* series. *The Blackout* series (1972-1996) consists of more than sixty black-and-white images taken in various places and circumstances while traveling in Japan, India, and the United States. The style of the series is not surrealist. Although each image captures photographed subjects, I think this series allows the transition from the real world to an abstract world. Also, *Blackout* is an important series because it gave me the confidence to express my inner world through successive, overlapping images, like writing a novel with a series of words. Just as different architects can create completely different spaces and forms with similar building materials, I think my work should demonstrate the form of a structure and not just the flow of a sequence. When I first showed *Blackout* in 1982 I realized that this work was misunderstood. One critic praised it as a new form of “Indian” photography, which was totally wrong. If you can't escape thinking about what, when and where something was photographed, rather than reading the work itself, then *Blackout* is a frustrating and difficult work to understand because those attributes are not explicit. This experience gave rise to my next creation: the *Flying Frying Pan* series (1979-1994). Just because it is a photograph does not mean that a frying pan should be photographed



as a frying pan. A single frying pan (in my kitchen) can produce a completely different image when photographed in close-up or in various ways. I made over seventy images for the series. The *Flying Skillet* series is important because it ultimately proved my idea that it is possible to break free from the documentary nature of photography. I don't know if this series has changed the way people interpret *Blackout*, but I think it has succeeded in expanding the scope of my photographic expression. If I hadn't created these two series, I would never have made *KAMI*.

**— You have traveled and worked in the West. Do you see a difference between photos taken in the West and work done in Japan? If so, please describe what those differences are.**

—For the *AKI/CHI* series I took photographs solely in Tokyo because the series itself was about Tokyo, where I live. Most of my other works offer abstract images, so the location doesn't really matter. I have traveled and photographed not only in the West, but also in India and other parts of Asia. And again, the location doesn't matter when I'm working on creating a series.

**— You've been around long enough as a photographer to have seen great advances in camera technology, printing, paper, etc. How have these changes influenced the way you do your work?**

—It seems that in the future film, photographic paper and analogue cameras will no longer be developed or even manufactured. As photography is becoming almost completely digital I can only hope that the quality of both film and photographic paper will not deteriorate. Digital technology will continue to develop, leading to new ideas and modes of expression in photography. I am currently in the process of making a new series, applying a new method with digital cameras. I am not particularly attached to silver gelatin prints nor do I reject digital. Both mediums offer me different possibilities. The *Body and Horizontal Bar* series I am developing will continue to be photographed on film and printed with silver gelatin. On the other hand, I will use digital prints for works that can only be made with digital cameras. I don't know how many more years I will be able to continue creating works, but I will use both mediums until the end.

**— Could you predict the future of Japanese photography? What direction do you think it will take? Will it become more international, like so much art, or will it remain Japanese in its content?**

—We will certainly see Japanese photographers working in digital photography, which can convey both original expressions independent of Japanese influence and



recognizable elements of it. I also think we will see Japanese fine art photographers working in a style that dispenses with Japanese qualities. This completely new style will allow artists to free themselves from conscious cultural considerations. Thus, the idea of specifically Japanese, Asian or Western influences will no longer matter.



Readers who wish to learn more about *KAMI* or other photographic sequences are welcome to contact Miyako Yoshinaga, who curated the exhibition at her gallery. Her email is [miyako@miyakoyoshinagallery.com](mailto:miyako@miyakoyoshinagallery.com)

Translation: Vanessa Pujol Pedroso

Original text in English

