

# SHOMEI TOMATSU



Fundación **MAPFRE**

5 June to 16 September

Fundación MAPFRE Casa Garriga Nogués Exhibition Hall

Barcelona

# Fundación **MAPFRE**

Fundación MAPFRE is delighted to invite you to the press conference for the exhibition *Shomei Tomatsu*, to be held on 4 June at 10.30 am in Fundación MAPFRE's Exhibition Space on Carrer de la Diputació, 250, Barcelona.

The presentation will be given by Juan Vicente Aliaga, curator of the exhibition and professor at the Universitat Politècnica de València, and by Pablo Jiménez Burillo, director of Fundación MAPFRE's Department of Culture.

Press conference: 4 June 2018, at 10.30am

Exhibition dates: 5 June to 16 September

Venue: Casa Garriga Nogués, Carrer de la Diputació, 250, Barcelona

Curator: Juan Vicente Aliaga

Production: Fundación MAPFRE

Exhibition produced by Fundación MAPFRE with the collaboration of the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum



<http://exposiciones.fundacionmapfre.org/v>



@mapfrefcultura #



@mapfrefcultura #



facebook.com/fundacionmapfrefcultura

---

## Dirección Corporativa de Comunicación

Alejandra Fernández Martínez  
Tlf.: 91 581 84 64 – 690 049 112  
[alejandra@fundacionmapfre.org](mailto:alejandra@fundacionmapfre.org)

Cover:  
Shomei Tomatsu  
Eiko Oshima, Actress in the Film *Shiiku* (Prize  
Stock), 1961  
Collection of the Tokyo Photographic Art  
Museum, Tokyo  
© Shomei Tomatsu – INTERFACE / Courtesy of  
Taka Ishii Gallery Photography / Film

## INTRODUCTION

Fundación MAPFRE is delighted to be presenting the exhibition *Shomei Tomatsu*, the first to be devoted in Barcelona to the unique work of this great Japanese photographer whose oeuvre encompasses the key events in the history of Japan after World War II.

The work of Shomei Tomatsu (Nagoya, Aichi, 1930 - Naha, Okinawa, 2012) arose “in the shadow of the war” in a context of devastation and poverty, as he himself noted in his writings. Japan at that date was a defeated country under American occupation: a country where the echo of the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki still resounded in the collective memory.

Shomei Tomatsu was twenty when he started to take photographs. He was already familiar with the technique as his two brothers enjoyed photography and even had an improved dark room in a cupboard. His first image, in a Surrealist style, was criticised by his teacher, who encouraged him to follow a realist approach. Tomatsu thus redirected his gaze towards reality, but without any concession to photo-journalism. The 1960s were crucial for defining his distinctive aesthetic.

The exhibition surveys the artist’s career through 180 images divided into 11 thematic sections which reflect the subjects and issues that attracted Tomatsu’s attention. His commitment is evident in his choice of themes and their visual treatment, which is never literal or direct. Shomei Tomatsu’s work is that of an observer attentive to both the everyday and to the past and present of his country. Produced by Fundación MAPFRE and curated by Juan Vicente Aliaga, professor at the Universitat Politècnica de València, the exhibition includes exceptional loan from the Estate of Shomei Tomatsu - INTERFACE and others from the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum, Tokyo; The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; the Colección Per Amor a l’Art, Valencia; and Taka Ishii Gallery Photography / Film, Tokyo.

## THE WORK

Tomatsu's aesthetic is striking for its uniqueness, involving an avant-garde and personal gaze which often introduces an unexpected and visually dazzling viewpoint. This aesthetic dimension is emphasised by the daring angles that he used to capture his images, often high- or low-angle, as well as his audacious approach to compositional arrangement.

Tomatsu was innovative as a photographer. In some cases he reorganised his images, giving them a new title or juxtaposing them in a different order, thus allowing for new readings of them in his photobooks and exhibitions.

Over the course of his career he benefitted from the support of important magazines such as *Camera Mainichi* and *Asahi Camera*.

It should be noted that despite the individual nature of his work, in 1959 Tomatsu was involved in the founding of the influential VIVO photographic agency, alongside Ikko Narahara, Eikoh Hosoe, Kikuji Kawada, Akira Tanno and Akira Sato. He also curated an important exhibition at the Seibu department store in Tokyo in 1968 entitled *A Century of Photography: History of Japanese Photographic Expression in the Past 100 years*. This allowed him to present the public with a historical scope of Japanese photographs, from anonymous images to famous ones, dating from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to 1945.

One of the defining moments in Tomatsu's career took place in 1960 in Nagasaki when he was invited to photograph victims of the atomic bombings. In a tactful and respectful manner, he met some of the survivors (*hibakusha*), subsequently remaining in contact with them for many years.

Tomatsu had the good fortune to witness and record the student protests as well as the emerging Japanese counter-culture, which he knew at first-hand and portrayed in his photobook *Oh! Shinjuku* (1969).

From the 1980s onwards he turned his gaze to other realities, including the traditional culture of temples and religious festivals depicted in the *Kyoto* series. At the same time those years also saw the artist focus on cherry trees in bloom (*sakura*), one of the Japanese symbols of the ideal of beauty and rebirth, which he photographed in colour at different times of the day and in different places, showing them in all their beauty.

In 1986, following a coronary illness and a lengthy convalescence, he began to focus on the waste material accumulated on the black sand of the beaches in Chiba Prefecture. The artificial and the natural coexist in the strange photographs which make up the series *Plastics* (1988-89).

Tomatsu said that he associated the use of black and white with the American presence in Japan, whereas colour was an affirmation of life, rediscovered in Okinawa which he first visited in 1969 and where he spent his final years.



Shomei Tomatsu  
Hateruma Island, Okinawa, 1971  
Collection of the Estate of Shomei Tomatsu -  
INTERFACE, Okinawa  
© Shomei Tomatsu -INTERFACE / Courtesy of  
Taka Ishii Gallery Photography / Film

## SECTIONS OF THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition includes 180 photographs divided into 11 sections, as follows:

### THE AFTERMATHS OF WAR

The hardship of everyday life during a time of economic depression after the devastation of the war is the principal theme of this section. Particularly notable are the images of the damage caused by the conflict and the consequences of floods.

Shomei Tomatsu  
Prostitute, Nagoya, 1957  
Per Amor a l'Art Collection, Valencia  
© Shomei Tomatsu -INTERFACE /  
Courtesy of Taka Ishii Gallery  
Photography / Film



### THE AMERICAN OCCUPATION

This section focuses on the lives of the troops in the US bases installed on Japanese territory. Tomatsu maintained a critical position with regard to the foreign presence but was also able to positively appreciate some of the Americans' habits and traits, particularly their uninhibited nature, which contrasted with rigid Japanese protocol. He was also powerfully struck by the constant presence of planes flying over the occupied territory, capturing them as threatening, frightening objects.

## NAGASAKI THEN AND NOW

Tomatsu's first contact with some of the atomic bomb victims produced an enormous impression on him. He portrayed them with great tact, always asking their permission to show the world the infinite suffering that still afflicted them. He also captured the effects of the bombing through various everyday objects (a watch, a bottle, a shirt).



Shomei Tomatsu  
A Bottle Melted and Deformed by Atomic  
Bomb Heat, Radiation and Fire, Nagasaki, 1961  
Collection of the Tokyo Photographic ArtMuseum, Tokyo  
© Shomei Tomatsu -INTERFACE /Courtesy of Taka Ishii Gallery Photography / Film

## THE EXPERIENCE OF EROS

In the 1960s, Japan was the setting for a range of political, cultural and also sexual manifestations which gave visibility to the serious discontent felt by one sector of the population in the face of a markedly conservative society. The rebellious nature of these groups, mostly of young people, was expressed through practices that transgressed sexual norms. Tomatsu reflected these transgressions in images taken at night in striptease clubs and rented rooms.



Shomei Tomatsu  
Blood and Roses, Shinjuku, Tokyo, 1962  
Collection of the Estate of Shomei Tomatsu –  
INTERFACE, Okinawa  
© Shomei Tomatsu –INTERFACE / Courtesy of Taka Ishii Gallery Photography/ Film



Shomei Tomatsu

## REBELS AND PROTESTS



Shomei Tomatsu

*Riot, 1968*

Collection of the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum, Tokyo

© Shomei Tomatsu -INTERFACE / Courtesy of Taka Ishii Gallery Photography / Film

Discontent and a spirit of rebellion brought Japanese students onto the streets in the 1960s. Among other issues, they protested against the Vietnam War, the occupation of Okinawa, the militarisation of the country and the universities' lack of independence. The revision of the Security Treaty between Japan and the USA was seen as an offence. Tomatsu captured the clashes between police and students but as more than a mere onlooker: his images are filled with ghostly tones of black and white or colour, with the camera moving away or zooming in very close to create a type of chaos that reflects the actual experience of those demonstrations.

## **AFGHANISTAN, 1963**

In August 1963 Tomatsu visited Afghanistan, sent by *Taiyo* magazine to document daily life in a country that was still a monarchy, long before the Soviet invasion and the Taliban oppression. On his arrival he encountered a place of arid landscapes scorched by the sun and with a largely nomadic population. What most attracted his attention was the lively movement of people on the dusty streets, despite the evident poverty.

## **WHAT THINGS HAVE TO SAY**

From the outset of his career, Tomatsu looked at the most everyday things and objects, particularly the humblest ones, seeing them as an extension of human life. The series *Asphalt* and *Plastics*, which are the focus of this section, are good examples of this gaze. While *Asphalt* depicts microscopic objects that seem to have fallen onto the pavement and mingled with the tarmac (nuts, screws and steel shavings) as a metaphor of a contaminating, throw-away society, in *Plastics* the artist looked at the fusion of the natural and the man-made: bottles and pieces of clothing alongside shells and dead animals on the black sand of the beach.

## **THE LURE OF OKINAWA AND THE SOUTHERN SEAS**

When Tomatsu was able to travel to Okinawa thanks to a safe-conduct pass, he was extremely struck by the massive presence of American troops. Nonetheless he captured a way of life barely touched by the western world. Nature, the sea, the countryside and animals are the protagonists of this section, with images that reveal how ancient rituals and customs had survived.

## THE ROOTS OF JAPAN

Tomatsu's extensive trip around his native country allowed him to discover aspects of Japan that were new to him as well as ancient traditions which attracted his attention. In 1961 he photographed the *chindonya*, impoverished actors and musicians who wore Edo-period clothes and offered their services to advertise shops, parading around the streets. In the 1980s Tomatsu's interests turned to different religious rituals, which he photographed in colour in the *Kyoto* series.

## THE FORMS OF NATURE AND BEAUTY

While Tomatsu experienced urban life intensely for a period, he never ceased to be fascinated by nature. It became particularly important in the 1980s in his series *Sakura*, in which the tree in blossom is a metaphor of beauty.



Shomei Tomatsu  
Minamiyamashiromura, Kyoto, 1982  
Collection of the Estate of Shomei Tomatsu  
- INTERFACE, Okinawa  
© Shomei Tomatsu -INTERFACE / Courtesy  
of Taka Ishii Gallery Photography / Film

## **MODERN JAPAN**

Japan changed over the decades and this transformation expressed itself in the avant-garde buildings and skyscrapers, which sprang up all over the archipelago. The political class used events such as the 1964 Tokyo Olympics to promote a country which considered itself unstoppable. Tomatsu, however, remained sceptical, opting to show the other side of reality: soil pollution, smoke pouring from petrochemical plants and the dense tangle of cables within the structure of a building.

## **CATALOGUE**

The catalogue that accompanies the exhibition includes texts by its curator Juan Vicente Aliaga and by the photo historian Ryuichi Kaneko and Hiromi Kojima, the curator of the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, making it a reference work for a detailed knowledge of Shomei Tomatsu's work from the 1950s until his death in 2012.

## CHRONOLOGY

### 1930

Shomei Tomatsu was born on 16 January in the industrial city of Nagoya, the capital of Aichi Prefecture.

### 1950

He embarked on studying economics at the University of Aichi. During his student years he started to teach himself photography.

### 1952

He entered Camera magazine's monthly photography competitions. Ken Domon, who was on the jury for these competitions, very soon appreciated Tomatsu's talent. Tomatsu became friends with Domon, collaborating with him over the following years.

### 1954

He moved to Tokyo and worked fulltime as a photographer for the publishers Iwanami Shoten.

### 1958

Interested in the growing influence of the United States on his own country, Tomatsu began to photograph American soldiers posted to the military bases in different parts of Japan.

### 1959

Together with five other photographers who participated in The Eyes of Ten exhibition (Eikoh Hosoe, Kikuji Kawada, Ikko Narahara, Akira Sato, and Akira Tanno), Tomatsu co-founded the agency VIVO, which championed a new kind of documentary photography.

### 1960

The increasing recognition of Tomatsu's work led to a commission from the Japan Council against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs [Gensuikyo] which would mark the rest of the career. It consisted of producing a series of photographs of the city of Nagasaki as visual support for the Japanese government's campaign against the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

### 1961

He jointly published the book Hiroshima-Nagasaki Document 1961 in collaboration with Ken Domon.

### 1965

He taught at the Tama School of Art (now Tama Art University) in Tokyo.

### 1968

Tomatsu acted as general coordinator of an ambitious project: the exhibition A Century of Photography: History of Japanese photographic expression [Shashin

hyakunen: nihonjin niyoru shashin hyogen no rekishi ten], organised by the Japan Professional Photographers Society.

**1969**

He obtained a permit to travel for the first time to Okinawa Prefecture.

**1974**

Tomatsu was included in the historic exhibition New Japanese Photography at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.

**1976**

Tomatsu received the Mainichi Art Prize and the Prize for the Arts awarded by the Japanese Ministry of Education.

**1981**

The exhibition What Now?! Japan through the Eyes of Shomei Tomatsu [Ima!! Tomatsu Shomei no sekai] was held in Yatsushiro in Kumamoto Prefecture. Starting in 1984 it was shown in various European countries (Austria, Germany and Denmark) with the title Shomei Tomatsu. Japan, 1952-1981.

**1985**

Together with Masahisa Fukase, Daido Moriyama and Eikoh Hosoe, Tomatsu participated in the collective exhibition Black Sun: The Eyes of Four. Roots and Innovation in Japanese Photography at the Modern Art Oxford.

**1986**

Tomatsu had an operation following a heart attack. He moved for health reasons to Chiba Prefecture on the other side of Tokyo Bay. Now nearer to the east coast of Japan, he began to photograph both the coastal flora and the debris accumulated on the seashore.

**1992**

Tomatsu became the first Japanese artist to present a solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

**1995**

He received the Medal of Honour of the Japanese government, awarded for outstanding artistic and academic achievement.

**1998**

After decades of regularly visiting the city, Tomatsu moved to Nagasaki.

**2000**

The exhibition Nagasaki Mandala [Nagasaki mandara] at the Nagasaki Prefectural Art Museum launched the series of five “mandalas” which would be presented until 2007.

**2004**

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art organised the extensive travelling retrospective Shomei Tomatsu: Skin of the Nation, curated by Sandra S. Phillips and Leo Rubinfien.

**2012**

Shomei Tomatsu died from pneumonia on 14 December aged 82 in Naha (Okinawa).

## **PRACTICAL INFORMATION**

### **LOCATION**

Fundación MAPFRE Casa Garriga Nogués Exhibition Hall

Diputació, 250.

08007 Barcelona

Email: [infoexposbcn@fundacionmapfre.org](mailto:infoexposbcn@fundacionmapfre.org)

Phone: +34 934 01 26 03

### **TICKET PRICE**

General admissions: €3 per person.

Free entry Mondays from 2 pm to 8 pm!

### **TIMES**

Opening times\*:

Mondays from 2 pm to 8 pm.

Tuesdays to Saturdays from 10 am to 8 pm.

Sundays/holidays from 11 am to 7 pm.

\*Last access: 30 minutes before closing time.

We ask visitors to please leave the exhibition halls 10 minutes before the closing time.

### **AUDIO GUIDES**

Audio guides (English, Catalan, and Spanish):

Price: €3, 50

Sign guides and audio guides with an audio description have free admission