

Asakusa Portraits  
by Hiroh Kikai



Front (above left): An older man with a penetrating gaze, 2001.  
Front (above right): A performer of butoh dance, 2001.  
Front (bottom left): A man who said he was self-employed, 2003.  
Front (bottom right): A lady with the self-employed man, 2003.  
Above: A man dressed in leather, 1985.

***Asakusa Portraits by Hiroh Kikai*** is the first major solo exhibition of Kikai's work to be offered outside of Japan. Following the publication of his 12th book, *Hiroh Kikai: Asakusa Portraits* (Steidl, 2008), this exhibition presents 55 photographs, many of which are reproduced in the book.

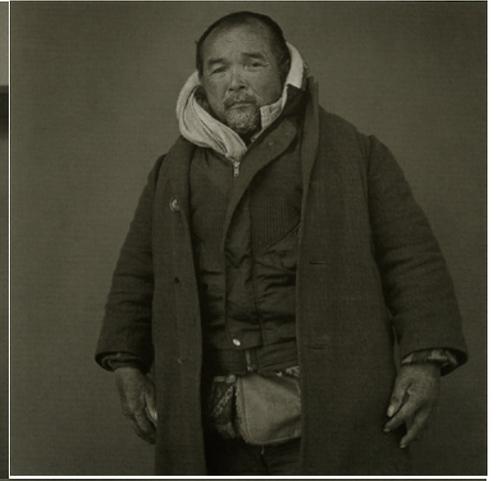
Born in 1945, the youngest of eight children in a farmer's family in Yamagata, Japan, Hiroh Kikai was employed as a clerical worker at a local government office at age of 18. After studying philosophy at Hosei University in Tokyo, he worked many different jobs, including tuna fisherman, truck driver, and factory worker. After encountering the work of Diane Arbus, he became a photographer in 1969. In 1973, at the age of 28, he started to photograph people in the Asakusa section of Tokyo. This project has continued until today; Kikai has taken over 600 hundred portraits of people in Asakusa.

Once the home of the city's historic pleasure quarters, Asakusa today embraces a stubbornly independent popular culture that encompasses traditional comedy and houses of erotic entertainment. A quarter that attracts outcasts from Japan's modern consumer society, Asakusa is also the home of the famous Senso-ji temple, which attracts floods of tourists from all over Japan.

Kikai's subjects, who are plucked out of the stream of passersby and posed against the bare walls of the Senso-ji temple, are strong, severe, lonely, lovely. They radiate a shared sense of hard-won, idiosyncratic individuality. The photographs are accompanied by Kikai's own pithy, sometimes humorous descriptions of his subjects. Taken together, ***Asakusa Portraits by Hiroh Kikai*** amount to a classic meditation upon the timeless complexities of the human condition.

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Noriko Fuku is an independent curator and professor at Kyoto University of Art and Design. She has curated many exhibitions by artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Cindy Sherman, Nan Goldin, Keith Haring, and Man Ray. She also co-curated *Heavy Light: Recent Photography and Video from Japan*, which was shown in International Center of Photography in New York in 2008 and includes a selection of Kikai's portraits. The exhibition will travel to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2009. Together with Christopher Phillips, Fuku edited *Hiroh Kikai: Asakusa Portraits*, published by Steidl.



## Checklist

- 55 photographs
- 16 x 20 inches each
- Titles of works

- 1) A man wearing ten-yen coins as earplugs, whose hobbies are jazz and, Japanese-style painting, 2003.
- 2) A little nip, and I'm bubbly all night, 1999.
- 3) A waiter at a club in Ikebukuro, who responds politely to my queries, 2003.
- 4) A sumo wrestler, 2001.
- 5) A reader of the great literary works of the past, 2002.
- 6) A ninety-year-old fortune-teller living in a provincial city, 1986.
- 7) A girl who had come from a town with a US military base, 1994.
- 8) A man who took up writing tanka verse while serving time in Aomori penitentiary, 2003.
- 9) A lady with the self-employed man, 2003.
- 10) A man who said he was self-employed, 2003.
- 11) A chief carpenter, 1985.
- 12) A short-tempered man, 2002.
- 13) A man who said his skin got itchy when dry, 1994.
- 14) A smiling old lady, 1986.
- 15) A man who clucked impatiently because it took me a while to take his picture, 1998.
- 16) An instructor of Japanese dance, 1986.
- 17) A young man with a Seagull camera made in China, 1986.
- 18) The man with the Chinese camera, now turned forty (fifteen years later) 2001.
- 19) A woman with a vast wardrobe, April 27, 2001.
- 20) A woman with a vast wardrobe, November 23, 1991.
- 21) A bookbinder, 1990.
- 22) A bookbinder, 1991.
- 23) Her husband, who'd been living with the doll for twenty-eight years, 2001.
- 24) A woman who told me she'd been raising a doll for twenty-eight years, 2001.
- 25) A man who said he'd just had a drunken quarrel, 1985.
- 26) A clerk who was letting her hair grow long, 1987.
- 27) A polite young man who powders his hands, 2002.
- 28) A seller of footwear who suffered from a bad leg when he was a child, 1985.
- 29) A lady who lived abroad for a long time, 1995.
- 30) A truck driver who says he always wears kimonos when he's not working, 1999.
- 31) A maintenance man for industrial dishwashers, 2002.
- 32) A farmer who had come 120 km by bicycle, 1994.
- 33) A young man who walked here from far away, 1999.
- 34) A body-building beautician, 2001.
- 35) A young man in a purple suit, going to a vocational training center, 2001.
- 36) A man who came on the wrong day, thinking this was the day of the fireworks show, 2000.
- 37) A cleaner of office buildings, 1986.
- 38) A man watching the horse races on his portable television set, 1999.
- 39) An old man who was speaking to a doll while he was walking, 1993.
- 40) A woman living by herself and her pet, 1985.
- 41) A man who muttered "That's an expensive camera," 1986.
- 42) A woman whose hair-do is just like an anime character's, 2001.
- 43) The taciturn laborer, whom I hadn't seen for a long time (fifteen years later), 2000.
- 44) "I've always wanted to be different since I was a kid, and I've always been knocked around for it" (eight years later), 2002.
- 45) A middle school student who was walking alone in a crowd of people, 1998.
- 46) A woman who's crazy about the teen idols Morning Musume, 2001
- 47) A performer of butoh dance, 2001.
- 48) An older man with a penetrating gaze, 2001.
- 49) A man dressed in leather, 1985.
- 50) A man with rapid-fire speech who told me that he used to be a beautician, 1999.
- 51) Celebrating Shichi-Go-San, a gala day for girls at ages three and seven, 2001.
- 52) A woman carrying a paper bag containing a potted plant and a big box of mosquito coils, 2000.
- 53) A man in a coat he said was made from the pelts of twenty-eight raccoons, 1999.
- 54) A student of law, 1994.
- 55) An old man wearing woolen long johns, 1973.



Installation shots, Gallery RAKU, Kyoto University of Art and Design, 2009.



## **Hiroh KIKAI**

Born in Yamagata, Japan, 1945

Lives in Tokyo

### **Selected Solo Exhibitions**

- 2009 Jinsei Gekijo (Life Theater), Gallery RAKU - Kyoto University of Art and Design, Kyoto.
- 2008 Tokyo Labyrinth, Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York .
- 2007 Labyrinthos, Aoyama Book Center, Tokyo; Nikon Salon, Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto .
- 2005 Persona, Shomeido Gallery, Tokyo; Centrum Kultury Zamek, Galeria Fotografii PF, Poznan, Poland.
- 2004 Persona, Ken Domon Museum of Photography, Yamagata, Japan.
- 2002 Persona (2), Manggha Centre of Japanese Art and Technology, Krakow, Poland.
- 1999 Persona (1), Manggha Centre of Japanese Art and Technology, Krakow, Poland.
- 1998 India Travelogue, Shomeido Gallery, Tokyo.
- 1990 Machi no Katachi (The Form of City), Nikon Salon, Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto.
- 1989 Ecce Homo, Nikon Salon, Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto; The Hitachi Collection of Contemporary Japanese Photography, Center for Creative Photography, Tucson, Arizona.
- 1988 Ecce Homo, Nikon Salon, Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto.
- 1983 India Travelogue, Konica Photo Gallery, Tokyo.

### **Selected Group Exhibitions**

- 2008 Sander's Children, Danziger Projects, New York.  
Heavy Light, International Center of Photography, New York.
- 2007 Tokyo Labyrinth (Hiroh Kikai) / Andes Qero (Yoshiharu Sekino), Shomeido Gallery, Tokyo.
- 2006 Berlin-Tokyo, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin.
- 1997 Shashin wa nani wo katareruka (What Can Photography Tell?), Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography.
- 1995 Shashin toshi TOKYO (Tokyo, City of Photos), Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography.
- 1990 New Documents 1990, Museum of Modern Art, Toyama, Japan.
- 1988 Contemporary Photography from Japan, University of Arizona.

## Selected Awards

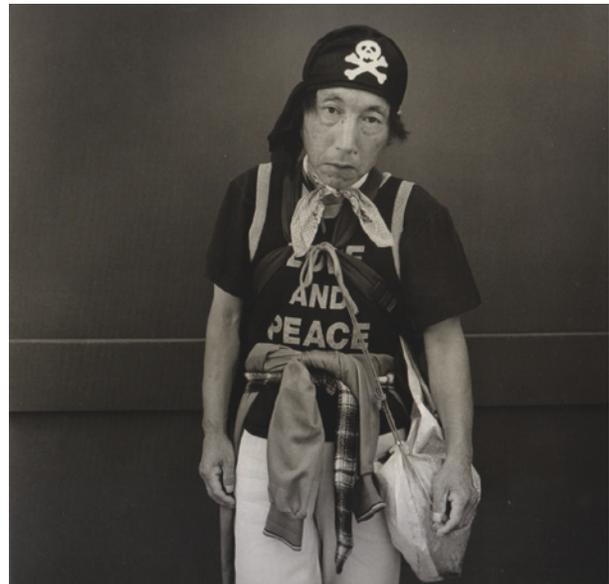
- 2004 The 23rd Domon Ken Award, Mainichi Newspapers, Japan Annual Award, Photographic Society of Japan.
- 2002 Grand Prize, 2nd Photo City Sagamihara Festival, Japan.
- 1993 5th Award, Shashin-no-kai, Society of Photography, Japan.
- 1988 Newcomer's Award, Photographic Society of Japan, Japan Professional Photographers Society.
- 1973 Japan Advertising Photographers' Association.

## Collections

The University of Arizona  
Domon Ken Museum  
Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography  
Hood Museum of Art  
The Museum of Fine Art, Huston  
The Museum of International Center of Photography  
AT&T Art Collection



A man watching the horse races on his portable television set, 1999.



"I've always wanted to be different since I was a kid, and I've always been knocked around for it" (eight years later), 2002.



A man who said he'd just had a drunken quarrel, 1985.