

# Alec Soth's Archived Blog

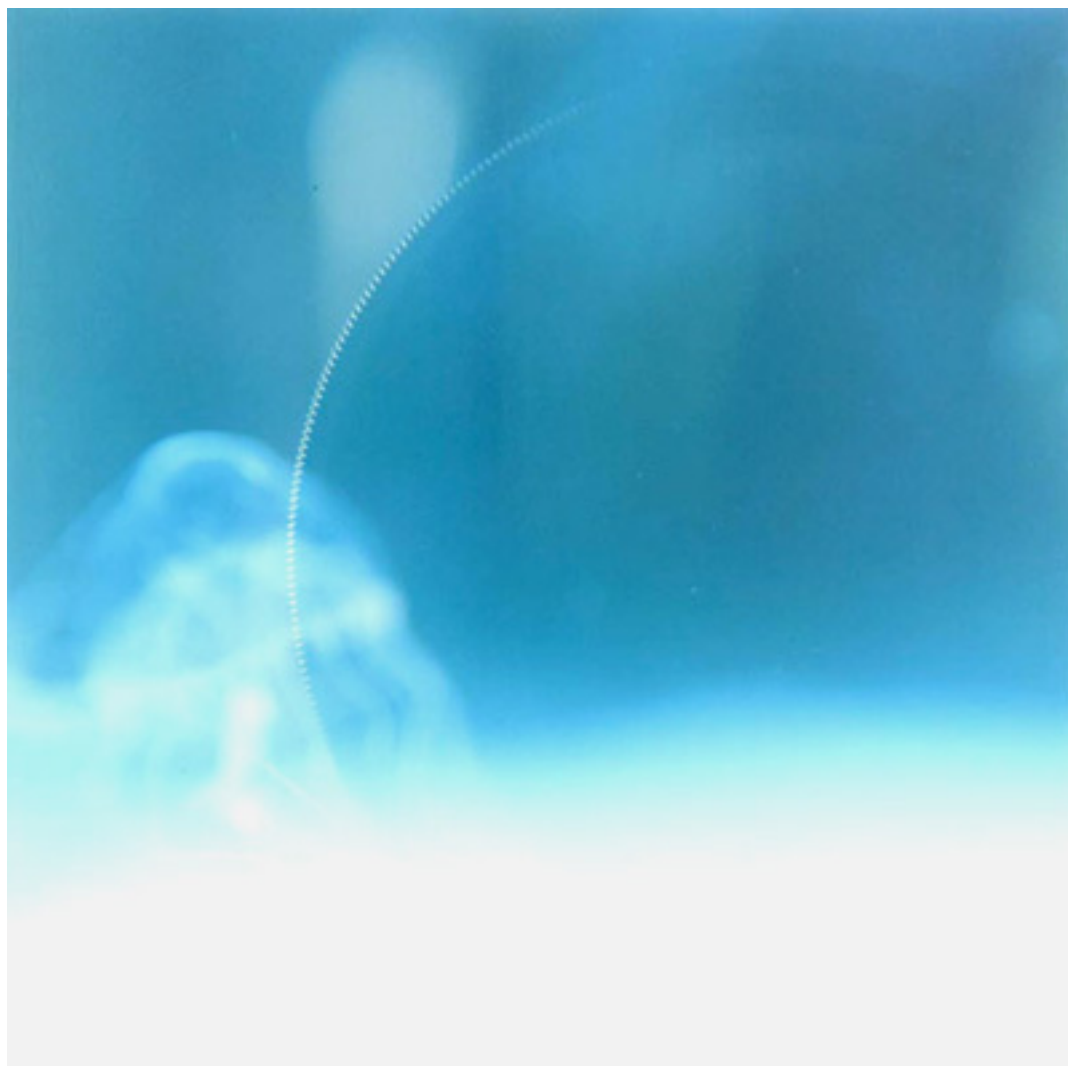
July 25, 2007

## Baby Eyes

Filed under: artists,circles n\` bunnies — alecsothblog @ 3:00 am



Rinko Kawauchi



Her photographs are almost always square, but Rinko Kawauchi makes me think of circles. They say that newborns see the world upside down. I wonder if it sort of looks like Kawauchi's world.

AILA(86), 2004, by Rinko Kawauchi

"People often say that I have a child's eye. For example, I stare at ants gathering around sugar, or when I seek shelter from the rain, I gaze upon snails. These are things which you often do when you are a child aren't they? I have a very similar sensibility to that." Rinko Kawauchi



Rinko Kawauchi

"I prefer listening to the small voices in our world, those which whisper. I have a feeling I am always being saved by these whispers, my eyes naturally focus on small things. Even when I walk around Shibuya, I find myself running towards a little batch of flowers. I find comfort in them. I think this is a very normal sensitivity, on the contrary to what people may think, I think its sound." Rinko Kawauchi



Untitled (from the series "Cui Cui") 2005 by Rinko Kawauchi

She has also photographed bunnies in a circle:



Rinko Kawauchi

- [Visit Kawauchi's site here](#)
- [Read interviews with Kawauchi here](#) and [here](#)

## 35 Comments

1. The soft focus is a pictorial convention similar to that of the blur. The viewer may get a sense of these images as ethereal visions from a dream while the earth toned palette of the photographer's eye suggests a firm grasp on nature.

*Comment by J Landry — July 25, 2007 @ 7:11 am*

2. Hi Alec, enjoy also the best blog about japanese phototography and books from my Friend Ferdinand Brüggemann ...  
<http://japan-photo.info/blog/2006/08/12/rinko-kawauchi-interview-at-pingmag-exhibition-in-milan/>

*Comment by Markus Schaden — July 25, 2007 @ 8:51 am*

3. Fantastic, thanks Markus.

*Comment by Alec Soth — July 25, 2007 @ 9:03 am*

4. I love the ethereal and dream like qualities of her photos.

*Comment by mike — July 25, 2007 @ 9:18 am*

5. I think of Uta Barth and Tom Sandberg...

*Comment by Nicola Kast — July 25, 2007 @ 9:25 am*

6. These are beautiful photos. Thank you for sharing them – I really love how the square format contributes to their dreamlike quality.

*Comment by An Xiao — July 25, 2007 @ 10:12 am*

7. Thanks, Alec, I didn't know Rinko Kawauchi work at all. Also, I am loving circle week.

*Comment by Zoe Strauss — July 25, 2007 @ 10:26 am*

8. Thanks Zoe, but I think you mean 'Circles n' Bunnies' week.

*Comment by Alec Soth — July 25, 2007 @ 10:34 am*

9. ....and the 1972 born Rinko is really a "Photobook-Queen" ! She did in the last years 12 books ! The book Cui Cui ( means a cats miau miau ) , she told me ,is a kind of album for her daughter, made when she was pregnant with her baby and you can see how she used the eyes from a child-perspective for her perspective on the double-eye Rolleiflex .What a great book-concept.A bit book history ala Japan. The book UTATANE has been sold in Japan in several edition over the last 6 years: around 60.000 – sixty-thousand copies. WOW!

*Comment by Markus Schaden — July 25, 2007 @ 10:38 am*

10. Rinko Kawauchi has just announced a new book on Foil's website titled "Semear". It is a series of photos of the Japanese community in Brazil. Looks like it's going to be yet another amazing book from this prolific photographer.

*Comment by chuck shacochis — July 25, 2007 @ 2:16 pm*

11. Not trying to be facetious here, but do they actually buy photography books in Japan, so much so that they're actually profitable, and this photographer could actually live off them? Or is there some other monetary situation at work here? Other than an Anne Geddes or something in that category, I've never heard of a young photographer with that many published books. Has she somehow tapped into a nerve that appeals to mass market in Japan?

Her images make me smile, and a soothing in a way. Nice work. It's just that, you see somewhat similar work as this in many places on the web, but truth be told, many times they're not even photographers, let alone publishing multiple books. Would be interesting to know about this. Interesting to see such "naivete" in personal view of the world, also mixed with multiple book deals.

*Comment by Mark Tucker — July 25, 2007 @ 2:49 pm*

12. @Mark Tucker

Yes, there is "some other monetary situation" in Japan, not to say that the 'photography as art' scene has a very different structure compared to the West.

There is no real market for prints, even there are dozens of photography galleries in Japan. That's what Japanese photographers tell me when I meet them in Tokyo. Almost all Japanese photographers I know earn their living with editorial work or teach at photography schools.

Since decades the photography book is main means of communication in Japan, in between photographers and with the audience. That's why in Japan there is a strong tradition of making photography books. In Japan the career of a photographer doesn't start with exhibitions at more or less important galleries, followed by museum shows, but rather with first winning a photography award (New Contest of Photography; Hitotsuboten) and then publishing a book, followed by more books...

In my opinion Japanese books are often more experimental, radical and/or playful than produced by Western photographers (failures included).

Ferdinand

PS: And yes, the books are bought in Japan, and some of them, like Rinko Kawauchi's books, not only by people from the photography scene.

*Comment by Ferdinand — July 25, 2007 @ 3:19 pm*

13. Something really gentle about this work, using the repetitive format also gives it a comforting reliability too. I love the idea of creating a safe and interesting visual world for someone!

*Comment by Jordache — July 25, 2007 @ 3:22 pm*

14. If it's bunnies in a circle you want, you need to start here:

<http://www.chrischapmanphotography.com/hares/>

*Comment by Vinegar Tom — July 25, 2007 @ 3:26 pm*

15. The California Museum of Photography showed Rinko's AILA work a few years ago. You can see images and a essay about the show here:

<http://138.23.124.165/exhibitions/kawauchi/essay.htm>

I think this quote sums it up nicely:

"...animals and humans are shown being born and giving birth; hives of insects and matrices of fish eggs, dewdrops, waterfalls, rainbows, and tree canopies staccato through the image sequence. How can a photographer take such a vast, overworked, potentially saccharine subject as "the miracle of life" and do it such justice? But this is precisely what Kawauchi does, and with a confidence and subtlety that marks her as a new and important voice in contemporary photography." (Cotton, Charlotte, "Rinko Kawauchi," Aperture, Winter 2004, page 6.)

*Comment by Lester P — July 25, 2007 @ 3:34 pm*

16. Perfect Tom! Thanks.

*Comment by Alec Soth — July 25, 2007 @ 3:44 pm*

17. dear Alec

Delighted that your blog has finally got round to things Japanese, and where better to start than Rinko.

Her work is infuriatingly simple and yet so complex and dream like at the same time. Japanese photographers are prolific book makers and continue to push what is possible in terms of narrative, design and complexity.

We would all be richer if this remarkable secret of contemporary practise was better known and understood in the (rather conservative) West.

As Ferdinand correctly points out there is little market for selling contemporary prints in Japan, so the book become THE format.

This to me is a very healthy state of affairs, as Tokyo is the best photo book buying market in the world.

*Comment by Martin Parr — July 25, 2007 @ 3:54 pm*

18. How are photo books priced in Japan? In the US they are quite expensive compared to fiction books.

*Comment by Alec Soth — July 25, 2007 @ 4:01 pm*

19. i really enjoy the soft colors and light in these pictures.

*Comment by j zorn — July 25, 2007 @ 4:15 pm*

20. None of Rinko's books cost more than \$35 when bought in Japan, and a few of them are less than \$20. I found those prices to be typical for photo books published in Japan. Tokyo has an unbelievable number of photo book stores, probably more than any other city in the world. And many of them have not only all the Japanese photo books we might never see anywhere else, but also a thorough selection of international books as well.

*Comment by Ed Panar — July 25, 2007 @ 4:52 pm*

21. As a previous poster mentioned, photography books are the most used medium for getting photographers work sold. Therefore the pricing is relatively less expensive than in other countries, the selection is much broader and the quality of printing quite high.

There is also an amazing selection of monthly photographay magazines and mooks (half book/half magazines). Some of these magazine are incredibly selective about their intended audience (i.e. one magazine is devoted to retired people just starting out in digital photography).

The three main monthly magazines (Asahi, Nippon and Japan Photo Contest) come in at around \$7.50 for nearly 200 pages of excellent photographs from names both past and current (Mr. Parr features in this months Asahi Camera as a tie in with his current exhibition at the Tokyo Photography Museum), to up and coming to the general public. Though some of the newsprint is set aside for the technical aspects (i.e. detailed diagrams of the insides of new cameras) much



more is actually set aside to the creation side of photography. Even if you cannot read the language the photographs (and this is what it's all about right?) alone are well worth the admission price on a monthly basis. They provide a very vibrant and up-to-date view of current photographic trends over here in Japan.

*Comment by akikana — July 25, 2007 @ 6:09 pm*

22. For anyone wanting to buy Japanese books, CDs, magazines or whatever, an often overlooked resource is amazon.co.jp. Unfortunately they recently decided to only ship overseas using express mail, so shipping can be expensive, but if you are buying a few books you will probably still save some \$\$, plus you get your order in a couple of days. To do a search for Rinko Kawauchi's books just copy and paste her name:

????

Her newest book is available already.

There is an option to view the website navigation in English, and the way the site works is just like the U.S. Amazon website.

*Comment by N — July 25, 2007 @ 6:20 pm*

23. Is the Japanese photo book really such a big deal? I have tried to "emulate" one (<http://www.unicircuits.com/?p=451> – you decide how well I did, I am not Japanese after all) and found a lot of it seems a little too arbitrary ("experimental"/"playful").

*Comment by Dirk — July 25, 2007 @ 11:38 pm*

24. As with all territories you have to search to find the gems. Many books in Japan are "generic" as indeed you find in the West. The prices for new books in Japan right now is quite cheap. There is also a bookshop that ships to the West and is in English that features on Ferdinand's blog that was mentioned 10 comments up.

Also always look out at schaden.com and Dashwood books in New York as Markus Schaden and David Strettell have the knack of locating exciting new books from here, there and everywhere. You will pay more than in Japan but I guess it's cheaper than flying out there. This, by the way, is the ultimate thing to do as anyone interested in books will have over 30 stores to visit, selling both new and vintage books.

*Comment by Martin Parr — July 26, 2007 @ 1:59 am*

25. After reading one of the interviews with Rinko Kawauchi, I looked for some of the Japanese photographers that she mentions. One in particular, Takuma Nakahira, has had a rather strange thing happen to him that affected his work. I had not heard of this photographer, and thought this bit from Dashwood Books that accompanies his "Degree Zero" book was really interesting:

Takuma Nakahira was a founding member of the hugely influential Provoke movement which also included Daido Moriyama, Nobuyoshi Araki and Shomei Tomatsu. This retrospective of his work shows two seemingly completely different styles due to the fact the Nakahira was struck suddenly with amnesia. During recovery, he moved to Yokohama and it was there he recalled his passion for photography and started a second life as a photographer. Although there is a discontinuity between the photos taken before and after his memory loss, Nakahira's straightforward candor with his subject is consistent. "I believe that photography is neither creation nor memory, but documents. The act of shooting a photograph is not something abstract. It is always concrete. No manipulation to make simple things complicated through conceptualization. Only the real I encountered through the medium of the camera is here in my photographs.

*Comment by chuck shacochis — July 26, 2007 @ 8:40 am*



26. You and your shapes Alec. I've been looking at Niagra and only just got the reoccurring heart motif that you mentioned before. And now I see it – I can see it in nearly all the pictures. Very clever! So as you're so keen in breaking down pictures to their elemental forms would you call yourself a photographic structuralist?

*Comment by Sophie Wright — July 29, 2007 @ 5:00 pm*

27. While we're on the topic of Japanese photographers, some of you might be interested in:

Shin Suzuki

Tokyo Polaroid Plus

Yamasakii Koji

(just click on each image to go through the pictures)

And if you make it to Japan, here are some photography bookstores to check out:

TOKYO

Shelf

Flying Books

Logos Shibuya

Genkido (my favorite; good deals)

Rathole Gallery

KYOTO

Keibunsha Ichijoji

OSAKA

Colombo

Berlin Books

Shinsaibashi Athens

Junkudo Shoten

*Comment by John Sypal — July 29, 2007 @ 6:26 pm*

28. [...] I discovered the wonderful blog Japan-Photo.info recently in a post about Rinko Kawauchi on Alec Soth's blog. Soth has been part of the fine art photographer's editorial photography debate mentioned above. [...]

*Pingback by Joe Reifer - Words » Blog Archive » Editorial work, Japan, Epson, Bergman, Lost Frog — July 31, 2007 @ 9:06 am*

29. The Winter 2004 issue of Aperture had an article about Kawauchi, and in it the writer (Charlotte Cotton) made an interesting point about her work, and Japanese photography books in general:

"Japanese photographic books are by and large typified by a lack of preciousness about single images or reproduction quality, and are concerned more with dynamic sequencing and a sense of the wondrous immediacy of the medium."

Alec, the other day I tried to post a comment here some links to websites of Photograpy-Book stores here in Japan, but got denied via the spam hunter software. Let me know if you'd like them sometime, in case you (or anyone else) comes to Japan.

*Comment by John Sypal — July 31, 2007 @ 11:06 pm*

30. To make it easier, I just put the list up on my blog. Click on my name above to see it-

*Comment by John Sypal — July 31, 2007 @ 11:27 pm*

31. Thanks so much John. Great info.

*Comment by Alec Soth — July 31, 2007 @ 11:33 pm*

32. More Circles in Squares..

Erwin Olaf's "Blacks" series.

<http://www.erwinolaf.com/Pages/Blacks.htm>

*Comment by Justin Solitrin — August 18, 2007 @ 11:28 am*

33. [...] <http://alecsoth.com/blog/2007/07/25/baby-eyes/> [...]

*Pingback by Discussion on Rinko Kawauchi « post bubble photography — August 19, 2007 @ 11:30 am*

34. How nice to see Rinko mentioned on your blog! Her books tremendously influenced my senior thesis last year—she's such a different square photographer. Now I wonder if my square photos have circles in them.

*Comment by Georgina — September 4, 2007 @ 8:31 pm*

35. Hope I didn't totally miss the bunny boat. I got to thinking about Markus Raetz' bunny sculptures—when you turn them around they transform into something other than a bunny. All about perception and point-of-view. Here's a link: <http://www.tecepe.com.br/bienal/MarkusRaetzSwiss.jpg>

*Comment by Gilbert Subrosa — September 27, 2007 @ 12:35 pm*