





photographs by
YASUHIRO ISHIMOTO

Whenever a photographer "speaks" via his photographs, he may be likened, for the sake of writing Introductions, to a kind of visual linguist. By this analogy, then, Yasuhiro Ishimoto is a visual bilingualist: Japanese by heritage, his traditions of seeing are Oriental; Western by schooling at the Chicago Institute of Design (the contemporary center of the Bauhaus tradition), he speaks visual English with a German accent.

Observing slowly, we can catch glimpses of the Oriental influence. Such glimpses come to us as we realize his quiet freedom with the small. He loves, respects, delights, is at home with the little things—as if he thought, in company with his ancestors, that the microcosm reflects the macrocosm. He stems from a tradition convinced that when the cup runs over, the overflowing is the sole significance. How much the cup will hold is deemed of secondary importance . . . something for the materialists to hold in awe.

Regarding the small, Ishimoto has written (in the Introduction to a book of his photographs of the magnificent Katsura Palace in Japan) that the camera is better fitted to deal with the part and the section than to grasp the whole of the palace in particular and the visual world in general. He further states that because of this propensity of the camera, the book of photographs may barely echo, if even that, the physical presence of the palace. For myself, even while remembering the great landscape photographers of the Western United States, I am still a willing victim of Ishimoto's conviction that the camera reflects Heaven in the commonplace.

A certain nuance that is more felt than found emanates from the Ishimoto images. If I had the sense of an artist, I would leave my feelings at that. To isolate such a nuance, however, is an obsession, if not the duty, of the Writer of Introductions. (I give in to circumstances which put me in the position of a Writer of Introductions in spite of my preference for photography. And I bow to circum-

stance much in the same manner that Ishimoto apparently bows to the event of a photograph.)

One place to look for the sources of a nuance is in the characteristics of picture printing. Ishimoto prints in the way that many students of Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind have learned from the atmosphere around them. The pictures grow out of black. The light forms either float on blackness or remain, in some compelling way, attached to darkness. Hence some of the facts of the scene are obscured to sight. Seen in the declining light of dusk, or the inclining light of dawn . . . this is the intensity of light fitted to the physical eyes of man . . . not too bright nor too dark . . . and hence symbolically within the range of man's microcosm. The effect is remindful of forms emerging from a pond of very dark or turbid water.

Many of the photographers of the 1950's print in this manner; or, as the art historian would say, employ the stylistic device of forms in the act of emerging from darkness. And if the critic would earn a reputation for discernment, he must unearth the personal significance of this device for each photographer who uses it. In Ishimoto this device may be, as was mentioned, the German accent of the Bauhaus; it may be a mark of respect for his Masters. It may also indicate that this photographer is still under the influence of Westernisms, and that he has still to develop his own stature; or, that he uses the device to help him say that he has seen the bonds that allow individuals only a limited freedom; or he may use this device deliberately to relate isolated objects to their *unseen* origins.

Abandoning discernment, the Writer of the Introduction finds *all* of the above noted possibilities enlivening the Ishimoto images.

Looking further, the nuance mentioned above may be sought in the attitude of the photographer. The photographer's attitude is properly sought directly in the photographs; but any critic likes to augment his visual impressions by standing in the presence of the photographer because something more can be felt. So a brief encounter was arranged. Ishimoto proved to be visually verbose and verbally sparse—as if words were an unfamiliar exercise or a downright hindrance to "communication." Instead of conversing, then, I showed him a Sequence of my own. When asked to select one for himself, he pointed to the one that seemed to be made in the manner most like his . . . made thoughtlessly.

Lest anyone make a mistake by jumping to conclusions, the word "thoughtlessly" is praise. Contrary to our use of the word in respect to creative work, in the Orient "thoughtlessly" would be translated into an ancient sign long acknowledged valid in the discussions of creating art of any kind.

Ishimoto's attitude towards seeing in photography is, to say the most, "easygoing." I find, or think I find, that special kind of easygoing "absent-mindedness" which to the Oriental is an accurate and descriptive term for one aspect of the creative process: that aspect which is comparable to the growing of a plant.

Unfortunately the word "absent-mindedness" fails the Occidental as an accurate description of any part of an attitude towards seeing. All our words related to the "let-it-happen" phase of creativeness are merely accusations of laziness, or incompetence, or worse. The vocabulary-developing faction of Western thinkers, contrary to

the Western artists, have failed us. So we repeat: "absent-mindedness" in photographic seeing pertains to a way of photographing that has no concern with "looking for pictures," but prefers to let the picture hunt up the photographer. To the Occidental, such a statement sounds like a paradox; to the Oriental, it is more like a statement that he finds parallel to his everyday experience between man and nature.

Let's use fancier words to say the same thing. Ishimoto, the photographer, may be cognizant of the concept that the eye is a focal point between the ever widening angle of sight outward into the visual world and the ever widening angle of vision inwards into the inner realities. But he acts as if seeing were an angel, not an angle.

And now my job as Writer of the Introduction comes to a welcome close and you may return to the photographs; seek out the photographs, because they are the direct sources of experience. With words I can only point; but, if you wish, you may find for yourself the nuance that sets Ishimoto apart. Your clue is this: if witnessing Ishimoto's photographs makes you look at the world outside of the museum for echoes of Ishimoto's images, you may grasp for an instant or two this special "absent-mindedness" mentioned above. If you catch visual echoes of these photographs wherever you are during the next few days, you will experience this nuance that has been said to be felt but not found.

Minor White

The present exhibition has been planned to present a survey of the variety and versatility of the work of Yasuhiro Ishimoto, who has been living and working in Chicago for the last two years under the auspices of the Minolta Camera Company. Many of the photographs in the exhibition were made during this last residence in Chicago and have never been shown before.

Although born in the United States, Ishimoto spent his childhood in Japan. He returned to America to enter the School of Agriculture at the University of California, later transferring to the School of Architecture at Northwestern University. One more change brought him to the Institute of Design of The Illinois Institute of Technology (where Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind had begun to teach); there he studied functional design and photography, and was graduated in 1952.

An exhibition of his photographs was held at The Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1953. Ishimoto then went back to Japan to photograph ancient Japanese architecture. This work is handsomely represented in a volume of pictures of the Katsura Palace, with text by Walter Gropius, recently published in America by Yale University Press. An earlier volume, Someday Somewhere, is made up of photographs of the life around him in Tokyo and Chicago. Both of these books are available in the Art Institute's Museum Store.

The Art Institute of Chicago wishes to express appreciation to the Minolta Camera Company, Tokyo, for generous assistance with this exhibition.

design: Lynn Martin

October 21—December 4, 1960

The Art Institute of Chicago Gallery of Photography