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MAMI KIYOSHI

WADAKO
STORIES OF JAPANESE KITES

Curated by Michael Mehl

2021 SAFOTO Web Galleries Monograph

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WADAKO - *Stories Of Japanese Kites*

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Mami Kiyoshi graduated from Musashino University of Art, Tokyo. Since 2003, she has been working on a project called *New Reading Portraits*, which in the long run will show the plurality of humanity in the 21st century through a series of portraits playing on the individuality and diversity of people she meets around the world.

In 2010, she received a grant from the Japanese government to carry out a residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris. Since then, she has been living in France and continues to travel to meet new models. The French-Japanese collaborative project WADAKO – *Stories of Japanese Kites* is a sub-category of her personal universal project *New Reading Portraits*. This project was initiated by Cecile Laly, a researcher and specialist of Japanese culture who has been studying Japanese kites for many years. In 2018, Cecile and Mami traveled together to take portraits of the remaining Japanese kite makers.

She has received numerous awards including the ARTE/L'ART ET LA VILLE PRIZE, the Bourse du Talent and SFR Jeunes Talents. Her works are in the collections of the Kiyosato Museum of Photographic Art, the Musée de la Ville de St. Quentin en Yvelines and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Mami Kiyoshi | <https://www.kiyoshimami.com> | <https://www.instagram.com/kiyoshi.mami>

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Wadako (Japanese Kite)

Mami Kiyoshi's photographs focus on the latest professional makers, collectors and kite enthusiasts who strive to perpetuate the Japanese kite culture. In Japan, the history of kites date back to the 8th century –they were imported from the islands of Southeast Asia through China and Korea– but their golden age is more recent, it dates from the Edo period (1603-1868) until the first half of the 20th century.

A Bit Of Humour: In Japanese, there are several words to refer to kites. The most used today is “tako” which means octopus, and the second most used is “ika” which means squid. This ocean themed battle of semantics reflects the rivalry between the old capital (Kyoto) and the new one (Tokyo). Nevertheless, Tokyo and the octopus seemed to have gained the upper hand, and in the international kite-flying community, it is not uncommon to speak of “flying octopus” to refer to Japanese kites as a joke.

Childhood And Collective Memory: Talking about kites with the Japanese evokes strong childhood memories of time spent in pleasure and games. For the elderly, kites are particularly associated with the few days of holidays that follow the New Year and with May 5, which in Japan is dedicated to youths. For the younger generations, it recalls time spent playing with their families on weekends. Kites make it possible to gather people of all ages!

Between Arts And Crafts: Japanese traditional kites are crafted objects made of Japanese paper and bamboo. They are also objects deeply connected to the vernacular culture. There are several hundred kinds of kites in Japan, which differ in the shape of their bones, the paintings on them, and even their names. Their iconography is often linked to regional folk legends. As for their construction, it requires as much skill to work the bamboo, as it does to realize the painting of the decoration with its pictorial qualities. Sometimes, recognizing the high quality of these paintings, people buy only the sail (without the bones) in order to hang it on the wall, like a painting or a print.

A Modern Disappearance: Despite the strong presence of kites in the Japanese collective memory, since the second half of the twentieth century, kites do not really attract children as they did in the past. There are two reasons for this decline in popularity: on one hand, children no longer have enough flying space for kites in the streets of big cities, and, more importantly, children prefer manufactured and high-tech toys to compete with their peers in looking cool and up to date. As a consequence, in the second half of the twentieth century, the number of professional kite makers has decreased considerably. While at the beginning of the last century there were several hundred workshops throughout Japan, today there are only about fifteen workshops left. Moreover, at the present time, most makers are relatively old and have no apprentices to take their workshops over after their deaths. The vast majority of these last professional workshops (of which the oldest have existed for about two hundred years) are therefore condemned to disappear in the near future. We are happy to know that part of their stories, skills and knowledge will live through our project.

–Cecile Laly | <https://kyoto-seika.academia.edu/CecileLaly>



Modegi Masaaki, Director of the Tokyo Kite Museum, and
Ijichi Eishin, Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of the Japan Kite Association



Kimura Kaoru, a kite collector in Osaka



Gotō Hikaru and Fukushima Yukie, in their workshop, the Tako-hachi, in Shizuoka City



Ishikawa Noboru in front his kite garage in Yokosuka, Kakegawa



Itō-san-chi-no-tako-kōbō family workshop in the Tenjin-machi district of Hamamatsu City



Yanase Jūzaburō in his workshop in Yokosuka, Kakegawa



Takeuchi Yoshihiro and his daughter Azusa at the Magoji workshop in Tobata, Kita-Kyūshū



Koura Yūji in his workshop in Nagasaki city



Makiguchi Atsushi, a kite collector and a frequent participant
in the Giant Kite Battle of Shirone in Niigata city



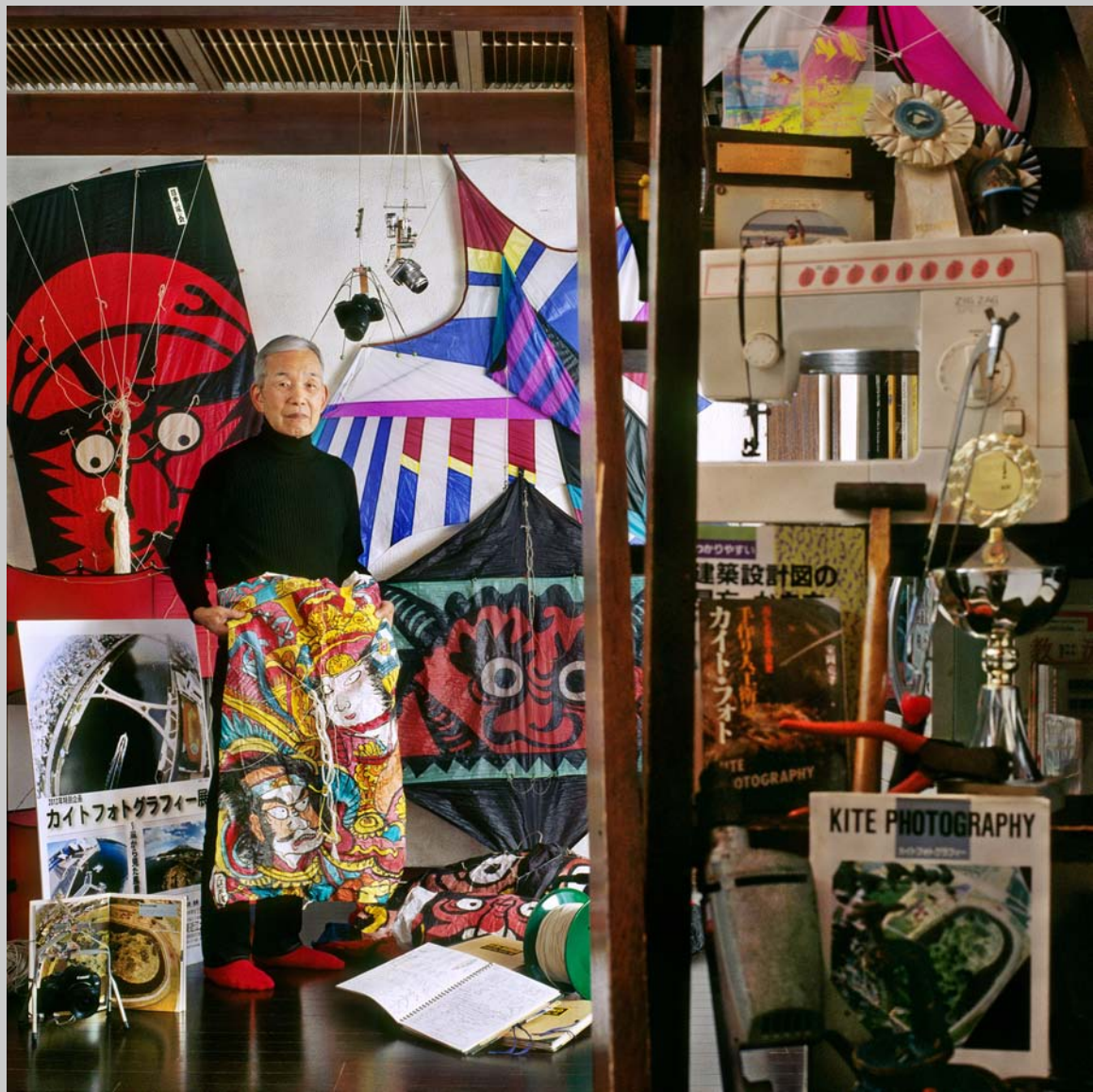
Endō Hiromi an amateur kite maker in Shirone, Niigata city



Sudō Ken.ichi in his workshop, the Sudō-ika-ya, in Sanjō, Niigata



Ono Takashi in his workshop, the Ono-shō-tako-ya, in Tokyo



Murooka Katsutaka, a kite photographer in Tokyo

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