Painted Red: Hiroh Kikai's Asakusa Portraits

Kırmızı Boyanmış: Hiroh Kikai'nin Asakusa Portreleri

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ABSTRACT

The research article investigates the interplay between individuals and their surroundings in documentary photography, centering on Hiroh Kikai's "Asakusa Portraits" as its primary focus. It examines the dynamic relationship between subjects and their environments, demonstrating how Kikai's portraits encapsulate the essence of the Asakusa district over a span of three decades. A comparative analysis is conducted between Kikai's approach to portraiture and that of renowned photographers Diane Arbus and August Sander, with an emphasis on Kikai's deliberate selection of locales and his timeless depiction of subjects. Technical elements such as lighting and composition are scrutinized, particularly Kikai's utilization of temple walls as a backdrop. Ultimately, the thesis posits that sincerity, communicated through diligent observation, holds paramount importance in documentary photography, irrespective of the degree to which the locale is portrayed. The conclusion posits that urban landscapes and individuals serve as reflective mirrors, symbolizing the interconnected facets of a given locale.

Keywords: Documentary Photography, Portrait, Sensoji Temple, Tokyo, Hiroh Kikai.

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KIRMIZI BOYANMIŞ: HİROH KİKAİ'NİN ASAKUSA PORTRELERİ

ÖZ

Bu araştırmada Kikai'nin "Asakusa Portreleri" çalışması odak noktası olarak ele alınıp incelenmektedir. Bu çalışma, konular ile çevreleri arasındaki değişen odaklanmayı derinlemesine incelemekte ve Kikai'nin portrelerinin üç on yıl boyunca Asakusa semtinin özünü nasıl yansıttığını göstermektedir. Ayrıca, çalışma, Kikai'nin portre yaklaşımını Diane Arbus ve August Sander'ın yaklaşımlarıyla karşılaştırarak, Kikai'nin mekanın bilinçli seçimini ve konularını zamansız bir şekilde betimlemesini vurgular. Teknik unsurlar üzerinde dururken, özellikle aydınlatma ve kompozisyon gibi unsurları ele alırken, Kikai'nin tapınak duvarlarını arka plan olarak tercih etme kararını ön plana çıkarmaktadır. Son olarak, araştırma, özverili gözlem yoluyla iletilen samimiyetin, mekânın ne kadar detaylı bir şekilde betimlendiğine bakılmaksızın belgesel fotoğrafçılıkta üstün öneme sahip olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Ayrıca, şehir manzaralarının ve bireylerin birbirini yansıtarak bir yerin çeşitli yönlerini temsil ettiğini öne sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Belgesel Fotoğrafçılığı, Portre, Sensoji Tapınağı, Tokyo, Hiroh Kikai.

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INTRODUCTION

In documentary photography, individuals are often depicted in conjunction with the spaces they inhabit: their locations. When a documentary photographer focuses on a particular location, it becomes challenging to separate the people from the environment, as they both reflect each other. However, much like the shifting focus when looking into a mirror, attention oscillates between the reflected image and the background, between immediate vision and surrounding space. This dynamic is mirrored in location photography, where there is no singular approach to framing portraits within urban, natural, or interior settings. Consequently, when viewing documentary photographs, observers may alternately perceive them as portraits, disregarding the temporal and spatial context, or become engrossed in background details, losing sight of the human subjects. At times, both the portraits and the background come into focus simultaneously.

Asakusa Portraits

Hiroh Kikai's work, "Asakusa Portraits" exemplifies the former scenario. Over a span of 30 years, Kikai meticulously captured portraits against the backdrop of the walls of Senso-ji Temple, offering a unique blend of portraiture and street photography. His photographs serve as a testament to the symbiotic relationship between the faces of individuals and the urban landscape, transcending specific temporal and spatial constraints.

Upon the viewer's initial encounter with Kikai's "Asakusa Portraits," it is possible to think that they might be studio photographs taken against a uniform, grey backdrop with controlled lighting. However, closer examination reveals that the backdrop consists of the red-painted walls of Sensoji Temple in Asakusa, Tokyo. Through approximately 210 portraits contained within his collection, Kikai adeptly evoked recognition of the distinctive vermilion walls of Sensoji Temple, thereby anchoring his subjects within the cultural milieu of Asakusa, Tokyo. The interpretation of Asakusa, whether as the temple, its surrounding streets, its inhabitants, or a synthesis of these elements, is left to the discretion of the viewer.

Historical and Cultural Context

Built in 645 to honor the Buddhist deity Bodhisattva Kannon, Sensoji Temple stands as Tokyo's oldest temple, attracting approximately 30 million visitors annually (senso-ji.jp). Japanese photographer Hiroh Kikai, born in Yamagata, Japan, in 1945, embarked on his photographic journey after encountering the work of Diane Arbus in 1969, following his graduation from university with a degree in philosophy in 1973. Kikai's exploration of the Asakusa district during the 1970s led to his

documentation of the individuals he encountered there. The denizens of Asakusa reminded him of those from his village and the factories where he had previously worked. Thus, in 1973, he commenced his "Asakusa Portraits" series, which would span three decades. This collection offers a glimpse into the multifaceted identity of Asakusa, once Tokyo's premier entertainment district, featuring a diverse array of subjects, including butoh dancers, Japanese dance instructors, youthful punks, pet owners, individuals embroiled in drunken altercations, and camera-toting tourists.

Photographic Approach

Kikai's approach to portraits changes over time and by 1984 he settles "on a specific photographic approach" (Kikai, Phillips, & Hosoma, 2008, p. 7) with a set of rules which will become the basis of his project Asakusa Portraits (Fig.1). And this set of rules leads to a photographic portrait project which is independent of time, with uniform lighting and background; and brings an approach which differentiates Kikai's street portraits from other photographers who work in the same territory as himself, including Diane Arbus who has been his first inspiration, as well as August Sander whom he inherits the use of captions to identify his portraits. And this difference is based on Kikai's very specific use of location.
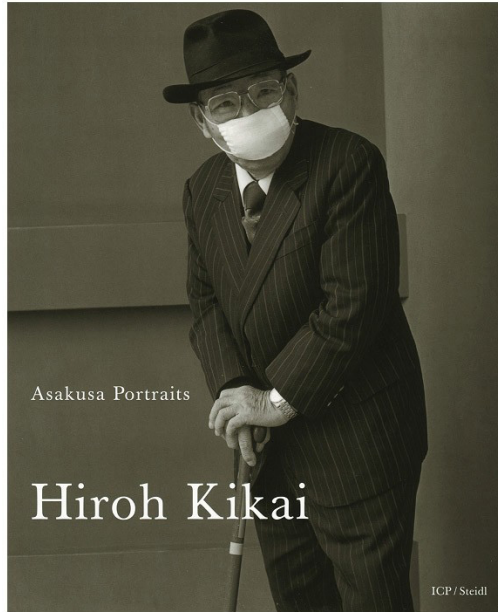

Figure 1. *Cover of Hiroh Kikai: Asakusa Portraits* by Hiroh Kikai, Chris Phillips, and Hiromi Hosoma (2008). International Center of Photography; Steidl.

One of the first rules Kikai follows is to avoid taking portraits of people who are dressed in contemporary fashion or any fashion which reflects the period in which they are living. And this certain approach that Kikai carries in choosing his subjects makes all his portraits timeless, although they are taken over a period of 30 years. Looking at Kikai's photograph *A Smiling Old Lady* (1986) (Fig.2), the viewer sees one of the faces of Akasuka, but they cannot tell where she is from, or when she was there.

Figure 2. *A Smiling Old Lady* 1986. by Hiroh Kikai, Chris Phillips, and Hiromi Hosoma (2008). International Center of Photography; Steidl.

She is documented purely as an individual. She is wearing a collarless jacket and a waist level apron. It wouldn't be surprising to see another old lady in the same clothes these days walking around Main Street, or a photograph of another old lady sitting at the benches of Central Park in New York 100 years ago. It is possible to say that she is an old Japanese lady. The portrait of the smiling old lady differs from most Kikai's portraits, in that with her eyes closed she is far from being bohemian: timeless and spaceless, she belongs to the walls only. The most important aspect of Kikai's portraits is the way they are all photographed in front of the walls of Sensoji Temple.

The Role of Location

Kikai uses only the walls of Sensoji Temple which is a minimal, but historical representation of Akasuka. And thus he forces the viewer to see the portraits only, while the walls of this ancient temple foreshadow the changes happening over the city-scape of Asakusa district of Tokyo during 30 years. The portraits of Kikai's muses Diane Arbus and August Sander, on the other hand, do reflect a certain period of time. The way they are dressed and the environment in which they are posed, attach Sander's and Arbus's subjects to a certain period of time. Sander's "Citizens of The Twentieth Century" are inseparable from the urban and rural landscapes where Sander visited looking for his citizens; these are the photographs of a certain period and place. Sander's photograph *Three Young Farmers In Sunday Dress* (1914) (Fig.3) is a depiction of this earthly attachment.

Figure 3. Sander, August. *Three Young Farmers in Sunday Dress* 1914. In U. Keller, *August Sander: Citizens of the Twentieth Century: Portrait Photographs 1892-1952* (Ed. G. Sander, p. xx). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986.

Three young men dressed in suits are framed in a muddy road in front of a vast field and unaltered horizon. The costumes of these young men reflect not only a certain fashion, but also a certain period when farmers used to wear suits for special occasions. Kikai's *Asakusa Portraits* created in over 30 years and August Sander's *Citizens of The Twentieth Century* spanning from 1910's to 1950's are closer in framing multiple decades through documentary photography. But Kikai's deliberate choice of plain background and his efforts to avoid fashion of the period break the common understanding of documentary photography and, at the same, time help us to question the components of the documentary tradition.

Aesthetic Choices and Their Implications

In Kikai's black and white photographs, the vermillion red walls of Sensoji Temple, although they look like plain dark grey walls, are a representation of Asakusa district as well as Tokyo. Kikai's *A lady in An Expensive Fur Coat* (2003) (Fig.4) is a portrait of an older lady with long black hair, pearl earrings and shaded eye glasses.

Figure 4. *A lady in an expensive fur coat,* 2003 by Hiroh Kikai, Chris Phillips, and Hiromi Hosoma (2008). International Center of Photography; Steidl.

Kikai's lady wears a fur over a chic light colored suit. She makes the viewer want to look back at Diane Arbus's *Woman With A Veil on 5th Avenue NYC* (1968) (Fig. 5).

Figure 5. Arbus, D. (1968). *Woman with a veil on 5th Avenue NYC*. The
Metropolitan Museum of Art. Retrieved from
https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/288917

Looking at the head shot of an overweight western woman with a square chin,
the next thing the viewer recognize is that they are looking at a biological male
body performing as a woman. One of Arbus's favorite subjects were female im-
personators in Manhattan during the 50's and 60's when gender binaries were still
considered radical in New York. But another thing that it can be recognized is the
pearl earrings, like the ones Kikai's *Lady With An Expensive Fur Coat* is wearing.
Arbus's woman with a veil also carries a fur that is hard to tell if it is just a collar or
a coat. But besides these little resemblances there is an important distinction that
both photographs carry, and this is the skyscraper at the background of Arbus's
photograph. Although the skyscraper is in the background, frames Arbus portrait
and "The Woman with Veil" becomes the veil of 5th Avenue, New York: a veil which
covers the face but we can still see through.

The context framing of the portrait carries a certain importance in documen-
tary portrait photography, bringing together the questioning of objectivity / sub-
jectivity of the photographer. Kikai inherits Sander's and Arbus's direct confron-
tation, and his subjects are willingly posed as a result of mutual accord between
the photographer and the people they portray. Sander, Arbus and Kikai look at
the nature of the human condition, trying to bring personality and essentialness
of their characters. And they all work on an anthropological study, consciously or

unconsciously. One can believe that Sander's portraits are more consciously and objectively chosen and depicted than Kikai and Arbus. Arbus's portraits are on the edge of being subjective and emotional. Kikai's portraits are too studied to be either objective or subjective, as if he were forcing himself to be neither Sander nor Arbus. An early portrait of Kikai *A Boy Dressed as a Masked Wrestler* (1974) (Fig.6) is a deliberate choice to portray Asakusa as a bohemian district. The boy that Kikai portrays represents the history of Asakusa as an entertainment district while beyond the mask hiding his childish expression, he reveals the body of a boy with his skinny legs showing under short pants. Arbus's *Child with a toy hand grenade in Central Park, N.Y.C.* (1962) (Fig.7) reflects the gaze of an adult, with a child taken out of its imaginary world who now belongs to the subjective depiction of tension created by the expression of the boy holding a war toy. Sander's *Middle Class Child* (1925) (Fig.8) on the other hand is left where he is meant to be, and his gaze goes beyond the lens of the camera. He will stay as a child of the early twentieth century riding his swinging horse, although soon his friends and maybe he himself will die as a child during the holocaust. The objective depiction of his physiognomy will remain in Sander's photograph as a child of the early twentieth century Weimar Germany. While Kikai's boy in a mask will stay as another depiction of Asakusa district and Arbus's child will remain as an expression of subversion. Both Kikai, Sander and Arbus study physiognomy, body language, expression, but the way they let their people pose, the location they choose and their gaze brings forth these photographers' objectivity and subjectivity upon their subjects.

Figure 6. *A Boy Dressed as a Masked Wrestler,* 1974 by Hiroh Kikai, Chris Phillips, and Hiromi Hosoma (2008). International Center of Photography; Steidl.

Figure 7. Arbus, D. (1962). *Child with a toy hand grenade in Central Park, N.Y.C.* The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Retrieved from https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/288917

Figure 8. Sander, August. *Middle Class Child*, 1925. In U. Keller, *August Sander: Citizens of the Twentieth Century: Portrait Photographs 1892-1952* (Ed. G. Sander, p. xx). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986.

Arbus carries influences from Sander whereas Kikai is influenced by from both Sander and Arbus since their subjects intersect. All three photographers work with people on the fringes of the society and the time they spend with the people they photograph or studying them changes the way they look at them. While Kikai's project *Asakusa Portraits* is a collection of portraits he works on for 30 years, "Kikai says he rarely spends more than ten minutes with any of his subjects" (Kikai, Phillips, & Hosoma, 2008, p. 7). Sander's "Citizens of The Twentieth Century" is the result of a study and ambition that he runs after for almost half of a century. Arbus's work, on the other hand, is the product of 10 years from the 50's to 60's. Her portraits reflect her short life, but at the same time a life worth of work. Arbus portrays people contradicting the period, including transvestites, homosexuals, and dwarfs. As a photographer who is in search of intimacy, Arbus wants to get closer to her subjects, and at the end she starts spending her days with her subjects. As a result, she brings in her photographs a blending of street documentary photography and portraiture through psychological queries.

But no matter how much time documentary photographers spend and how deeply they study their subjects, it is important to emphasize that Kikai in his project *Asakusa Portraits* has set his rules beforehand. Kikai limits his location to the walls of Sensoji Temple, therefore all he can do is to wait for his subjects. His study is similar to an editing process. As a result while both Sander and Arbus portray the travelling performers - circus people (Fig 9-10), where Kikai portrays a butoh dancer- performer of Japanese post-modern dance (Fig. 11).

Figure 9. Sander, August. *Circus People 1930*. In U. Keller, *August Sander: Citizens of the Twentieth Century: Portrait Photographs 1892-1952* (Ed. G. Sander, p. xx). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986.
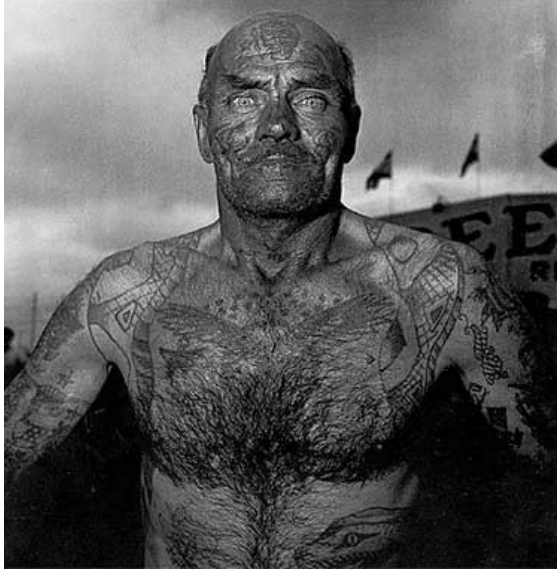
Figure 10. Arbus, D. (1970). *Tattooed Man at a Carnival, Md..* The Museum of Contemporary Art. Retrieved from https://www.moca.org/collection/work/tattooed-man-at-a-carnival-md
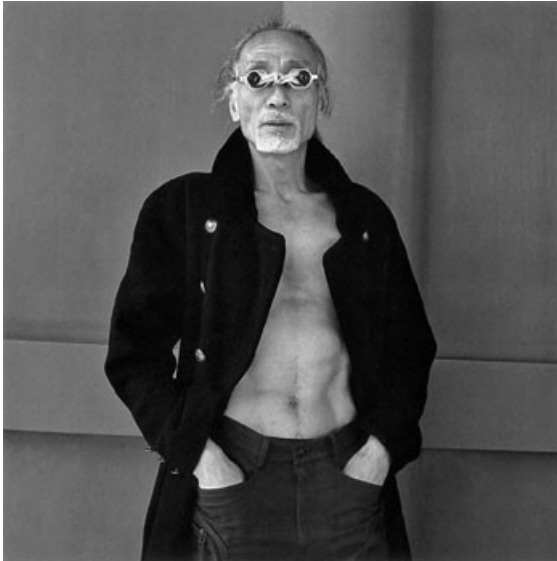

Figure 11. *A Performer of Butoh Dance, 2001* by Hiroh Kikai, Chris Phillips, and Hiromi Hosoma (2008). International Center of Photography; Steidl.

Lighting and Technical Process

The technical process is also one of the most important aspects of location photography, and lighting is of a crucial importance for Kikai's portraits. Photographed over 30 years Kikai's photographs carry an amazing uniformity, not only because they are shot in front of the same walls but because of his approach to lighting. Kikai explains how he achieves this uniformity by using five to six walls of the temple "based on the lighting conditions of that particular day" (Kikai, Phillips, & Hosoma, 2008, p. 13). While both Kikai and Sander work with natural lighting, Arbus uses flash even in daylight. This technical decision helps Arbus to attain the same look over her photographs as she photographs not only during daylight but also during night, not only outdoors but also indoors. This particular choice also brings a certain artistic approach to Arbus's portraits. While nothing escapes the harsh light of a flash, her subjects represent the nakedness of truth. Sander working with an 8x10 large format camera mounted on a tripod captures his subjects as they remain motionless with the same attentive expression looking at the camera. He represents a generation of documentary photographers before the snapshot camera. Arbus and Kikai work with handheld medium format cameras, but while Arbus's photographs carry a snapshot aesthetic, Kikaki's portraits are composed like studio portraits.

In the interview where he explains his choice of temple walls Kikaki argues that "Talking about portraiture, I think that a plain backdrop is essential, and that's why I use the vermilion- lacquered temple walls as my set" (Kikai, Phillips, & Hosoma, 2008, p. 13). Thus, it is possible to argue that Kikai works like a studio photographer, but at the same time his intention towards building a documentary of faces of Asakusa district and depicting the daily lives of his subjects makes the essence of his long lasting project. In his portrait of *A Man who said he'd just had a drunken quarrel* (Fig. 12) it is possible to see this spontaneity, with the mundane daily life of a man who would maybe another day stand up and pose like an officer in full dignity within his uniform.

Figure 12. *A Man who said he'd just had a drunken quarrel, 1985*
International Center of Photography; Steidl.

It is possible to argue that honesty is the most important component of documentary photography, and honesty can as well carry the subjectivity of the photographer; it can as well be depicted through long static and carefully composed photographs. Honesty is best shown with a true study of the subject. And perhaps it doesn't matter how much of a location is depicted in Kikai's portraits, even though portraits and places mirror each other, after looking at Kikai's portraits one can only look at one side of the mirror at a given time. And Kikai doesn't need to show the skyscrapers of Manhattan, or the countryside of Weimar Germany to convince his viewer that he is documenting "portraits of a place." (Kikai, Phillips, & Hosoma, 2008, p. 13) Under a well-conducted study, cityscapes and people can mirror each other, although they may also represent the "the flip sides of a coin." (Kikai, Phillips, & Hosoma, 2008, p. 13)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, documentary photography presents a unique interplay between individuals and the spaces they occupy. The exploration of location in documentary photography blurs the boundaries between the subjects and their environments, inviting viewers to oscillate between focusing on the human subjects and their surrounding context. Hiroh Kikai's *Asakusa Portraits* exemplifies this dynamic, offering a nuanced portrayal of individuals against the backdrop of Sensoji

Temple in Tokyo. Kikai's deliberate choice of location and his adherence to specific rules throughout his project result in timeless portraits that transcend temporal and spatial constraints, prompting viewers to contemplate the essence of Asakusa and its inhabitants.

Through his meticulous documentation over three decades, Kikai captures the multifaceted identity of Asakusa, showcasing a diverse array of subjects against the iconic vermilion walls of Sensoji Temple. Unlike traditional studio portraits, Kikai's portraits evoke a sense of timelessness, with subjects dressed in attire that eschews contemporary fashion, thereby blurring the boundaries between past and present. This approach challenges conventional notions of documentary photography and prompts viewers to question the components of the documentary tradition.

While Kikai's work differs from that of photographers like Diane Arbus and August Sander, who also explore the intersection of individuals and their environments, his project serves as a testament to the symbiotic relationship between people and place. Through his careful consideration of lighting and composition, Kikai creates portraits that are both intimate and reflective of the broader cultural landscape of Asakusa. Ultimately, Kikai's *Asakusa Portraits* invite viewers to reconsider the relationship between individuals and their surroundings, challenging us to see beyond the surface and delve deeper into the complexities of human experience. In doing so, Kikai demonstrates the power of documentary photography to capture the essence of a place and its people, while simultaneously inviting us to reflect on our own perceptions of the world around us.

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Images

Fig. 1. Kikai, H. (2008). *Asakusa Portraits Cover*. New York: International Center of Photography; Gottingen: Steidl.

Fig. 2. Kikai, H. (1986). *A Smiling Old Lady*. In *Hiroh Kikai: Asakusa portraits*. New York: International Center of Photography; Gottingen: Steidl.

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Fig. 7. Arbus, D. (1962). *Child with a toy hand grenade in Central Park, N.Y.C.* The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Retrieved from https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/284712

Fig. 8. Sander, A. (1925). *Middle Class Child*. In U. Keller, *August Sander: Citizens of the twentieth century: Portrait photographs 1892-1952* (G. Sander, Ed.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Fig. 9. Sander, A. (1930). *Circus People*. In U. Keller, *August Sander: Citizens of the twentieth century: Portrait photographs 1892-1952* (G. Sander, Ed.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

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Fig. 12. Kikai, H. (1985). *A Man who said he'd just had a drunken quarrel*. In *Hiroh Kikai: Asakusa portraits*. New York: International Center of Photography; Gottingen: Steidl.