

Akihiko Okamura

The Memories of Others



EDUCATION RESOURCE

From 1969 Northern Ireland had attracted photographers from abroad to cover the conflict. Some of them were personally touched by the subject. This was the case for the Japanese photographer Akihiko Okamura who arrived to live in Ireland at this pivotal moment in our history, pursuing his interest in post-colonial repression.

Born in Tokyo in 1929, Okamura achieved renown during the Vietnam War as one of the foremost Japanese war photographers of his generation. After an initial trip to Ireland in 1968 on the footsteps of JFK, he settled the following year south of Dublin, where he lived with his family for nearly twenty years, photographing both the North and the South. From 1969, Okamura continually photographed the conflict in the North until he suddenly passed away in 1985.

Okamura's photographs of Ireland, which have barely been seen before, demonstrate a unique artistic vision. This uniqueness is partly due to the fact that Okamura chose to live in Ireland. Of all the international photographers active during those years, he was in this sense a singular case of absolute commitment to Irish and Northern Irish history.

This distinctive relationship with his subject matter, both as an outsider and as an insider, led him to create images which were innovative both in terms of his own practice and of the photographic representation of the Troubles. His profound, personal connection with Ireland allowed him to develop a new method of documenting conflict, searching for poetic, peaceful and ethereal moments of everyday life in a time of war.

Okamura's photographs offer a unique perspective on the conflict in Ireland, often eschewing narrative to instead offer a metaphorical or reflective stillness. Unlike other representations of the North of Ireland at that time, Okamura's photographs are almost all in colour. His intriguing, luminescent Kodachrome images stand apart from the "iconic", primarily black-and-white photojournalistic images capturing the spectacle of violence for the international news media. Their gentle, muted palette operates in counterpoint to the violent situation in which they were produced.

In many ways, they are remarkably out of sync with the conventional, “heroic” photographic representations that have come to define this period. Okamura’s work reveals a more distant and patient perspective, beyond representations of riots, burning cars and bombed buildings. He chose to focus on quieter, intimate, quasi-surreal moments that revealed his deeply rooted concern for and closeness to the communities he photographed.

Ever elusive, Okamura seems to have moved invisibly among the communities he photographed. He rarely confronted his subjects directly – his gaze is often oblique; his perspective is subjective but judgement is withheld. Rather than focus on the centre point of the action during protests or on the aftermath of acts of violence, Okamura looks instead at moments of individual contemplation, small gestures and quieter scenes on the periphery.

This exhibition is the result of many years of research and international collaborations seeking to cast light on this extraordinary archive and elucidate the “Okamura mystery”: Why would a Japanese person choose to settle down and start a family in Ireland at the height of the conflict? Why was he so tied to a history that was not his own, and to the memories of others? While the mystery also contributes to the beauty of this archive, a few elements help us to better understand Okamura’s fate and the historical and contemporary scope of his work.

Though Okamura was one of the very few Japanese people living in Ireland throughout those years, and the only one to have photographed the conflict, nobody seems to remember him. The rediscovery of this archive constitutes a revelation both for the history of Japanese photography and Irish history. Like a spirit, invisible, Okamura only left a trace of himself through his photographs.

Room 1: **An Outsider's Eye**

Akihiko Okamura's evocative images of Ireland reveal a stranger's distant, but acutely observant, eye. Haunting and haunted, their enduring aura and quiet power are undiminished by the passing years. What was striking about Okamura's way of seeing was its complex merging of detachment and intimate observation, his outsider's eye illuminating the lingering everydayness of a place where normality had been abruptly fractured, and the ordinary upended.

On the surface, his seemingly mundane photograph of six milk bottles – two neat rows of three – standing on sunlit concrete beneath a pebble-dashed wall, appears to be a study of light, colour, shape and shadow. A striking motif in Okamura's body of work, this everyday object associated with childhood, could become a weapon: a Molotov cocktail. He was utterly aware of this latent potential.

The milk bottles appear in several of Okamura's pictures, "in a pure state", white, symbols of innocence, life, peace; then empty, or burnt, after their metamorphosis. His "portrait" of six milk bottles photographed in the northern white light is striking at first for its formal elegance, then for its symbolic power.



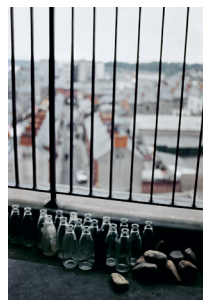
Clothesline, Ireland,
c. 1978



Milk churns
awaiting collection,
Northern Ireland,
1970s



Milk bottles on doorstep, Ireland, 1970s



Emptied milk bottles
and rocks ahead of
riots, Rossville Flats,
the Bogside area,
Derry city, Northern
Ireland, c. 1969

Room 2 - Wall 2 & 3: **Contested Histories**

Pursuing his interest in post-colonial repression, Okamura arrived in Ireland at this pivotal moment in Northern Ireland's contested history, when a series of peaceful civil rights marches by the nationalist minority had given way to a kind of scattered insurrection provoked by the increasingly violent response of the state towards the protesters.

Okamura was in Derry city for the loyalist Apprentice Boys March on 12 August 1969 when rioting erupted after the parade passed close to the Bogside. Three days of intense street battles between the police and youths from the Bogside and Creggan housing estates culminated in a small victory for the locals, who famously proclaimed the area "Free Derry". Known as 'The Battle of the Bogside', this outbreak of violent resistance marked the beginning of the "Troubles". Okamura's photographs offer us a unique perspective on this moment in history, eschewing narrative to offer instead a more open-ended, subjective account.



Preparations for the Twelfth of July celebrations in the Fountain area, Derry city, Northern Ireland, c. 1969



Children preparing an effigy of Lt Col Robert Lundy, Derry city, Northern Ireland, 1970s. Lundy was Governor of Derry reviled by Ulster loyalism as a traitor during the Siege of Derry in 1688. An effigy of Lundy is burnt at the end of the annual Apprentice Boys' Parade in August in Derry, c. 1969



Crowd watching members of the Orange Order marching in a Twelfth of July parade, Derry city, Northern Ireland, c. 1969



Woman at a street corner during an Orange Order march, Derry city, Northern Ireland, c. 1969



Young band member at a Twelfth of July parade, Derry city, Northern Ireland, c. 1969



Fountain Street, Derry city, Northern Ireland, c. 1969



British soldier, Belfast, ca. 1969.



British soldiers resting at a wall, Divis Street, West Belfast, Northern Ireland, c. 1969



Soldier at corner, Derry City, Northern Ireland, c. 1969

The Burning of Bombay Street

Okamura travelled to Belfast in time to witness the unfolding sectarian violence that erupted in parts of the city when Loyalist mobs, abetted by the police, attacked several Catholic neighbourhoods. Seven people were killed, hundreds wounded, and over 1,800 families were evacuated as entire streets were set on fire.



Women crossing through British Army barricade, Northern Ireland, 1969



British soldier carrying a door, Bombay Street, West Belfast, Northern Ireland, 1969



Local women standing near their burnt-out homes, Bombay Street, West Belfast, Northern Ireland, 1969

Unlike many representations of the North of Ireland at this time, Okamura's photographs are almost all in colour, remarkably out of sync with the conventional, black-and-white, 'heroic' representations that came to define this period in Irish history.



Household belongings on the street following the attack on Bombay Street, West Belfast, Northern Ireland, 1969



Local women standing beside their household belongings near their burnt-out homes, Bombay Street, West Belfast, Northern Ireland, 1969

Lecky Road

The poignant Lecky Road series was made in the Bogside area of Derry city, in the aftermath of the killing of Desmond Beattie (19 years old) and Seamus Cusack (28 years old) in July 1971. These men were the first people shot by the British Army in Derry. This pivotal moment opened a gulf between the British Army and the nationalist community that would never be bridged.



The site where Seamus Cusack was killed, Derry City, 1971



Local people the site where Seamus Cusack was killed, Bogside, Derry city, Northern Ireland, 1971

Okamura's soft colours contrast with the violence of the situation in which they were created. The poetic quality of his work is not typically found in photojournalism, where the subject should be central and obvious. Here the violence shifts to the background. They suggest a sense of innocence lost and history hanging in the balance – a foreshadowing of the long dark years of violence and death yet to come.



Street memorial on Lecky Road, Derry city, marking the site where Desmond Beattie (19 years old) was shot and killed on 8 July 1971 by the British Army. Seamus Cusack (28 years old) was shot dead near this spot twelve hours later. These men were the first people shot dead by the British Army in Derry, Northern Ireland, 1971



Local people at the street memorial on Lecky Road, Bogside, Derry city, marking the site where Desmond Beattie was shot and killed by the British Army, Northern Ireland, 1971

Civil Rights - the lost moment

On 5 October 1968, a Civil Rights march was blocked by the mainly Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) police. The ensuing police violence was captured by a cameraman Gay O'Brien from RTÉ. Overnight, the civil rights cause in Northern Ireland became a global issue. Subsequent marches across the North were met by Loyalist counter-demonstrations, most notoriously at Burntollet Bridge, County Derry in January 1969.

Along with the Frenchman Gilles Caron and the Englishman Clive Limpkin, Okamura was among the foreign photojournalists who witnessed this violence in Derry. Although Caron's and Limpkin's pictures were widely circulated in the international press at the time, Okamura's remained virtually unpublished.



British soldiers in riot gear during a protest, Creggan Estate, Derry city, Northern Ireland, c. 1970



British soldier observing a crowd from Derry city walls, Northern Ireland, c. 1969



RUC police riot gear, Derry city, Northern Ireland, c. 1969



Crowd of people assembling in the Waterside area of Derry city, Northern Ireland, 1969



Burning building, Derry city, Northern Ireland, c. 1969

A Democratic Point of View

Okamura followed the main protagonists of the conflict in Ireland, alternately photographing British soldiers or members of the IRA on training exercises and the political leaders of that time, including the loyalist politician Ian Paisley and the civil rights activist Bernadette Devlin. He also photographs numerous loyalist and republican protests.

One photograph depicts a woman in mourning holding a portrait of Frank Stagg, a republican who died on 12 February 1976, after a sixty-one-day hunger strike at Wakefield prison in England, in protest of the British government's refusal to transfer him to a Northern Ireland prison.

Okamura kept a copy of the "Murdered by Brits" poster that appears in this picture. Though left-wing in his politics and sympathies, Okamura was remarkably democratic and even-handed in his approach.

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Civil rights activist and MP Bernadette McAliskey with fellow activists during the Battle of the Bogside, August 1969.



Woman carrying a poster of Frank Stagg at a Republican march, Northern Ireland, 1970s. Stagg was an IRA combatant from County Mayo who died in Wakefield prison, England, after sixty-two days on hunger strike in 1976.



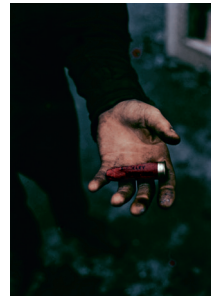
Rev Ian Paisley and supporters at a Unionist Protest, Stormont, Belfast, 1970.



Crowd at a Civil Rights Protest March, Derry, Northern Ireland, c. 1969



IRA training exercise, unknown location, Ireland, 1970s



Man holding a spent shotgun cartridge, Derry city, Northern Ireland, 1969

The Strange Passenger of the Belfast Express

As Okamura did not drive, his wife Kakuko would take him to Dublin to catch the train or the bus to the North. During those journeys, he made many portraits, including this photograph of a man holding a book in his hands, his foot in a cast resting on the seats opposite, with the Irish landscape passing by behind him.

In one of the few publications of his Irish work, a featured article in *Playboy* (Japan) in May 1976 – Brief Report from Ireland – Okamura devoted a double-page spread of his article to the photograph of this man, titling it *The Strange Passenger of the Belfast Express*. In this article, Okamura pointed out that the man is reading Frederick Forsyth's *The Dogs of War*. For him, this novel epitomised the 'Troubles' and the roots of the evil that had ravaged Ireland, namely the British Empire.

The many photographs Okamura took on the train or at train stations also speak to his own identity as an emigrant: of exile and in-betweenness.



Series of portraits taken on the intercity train between Belfast and Dublin (know as the Enterprise), January, 1976

Unassuming Moments

What sets Okamura apart is the way in which he responded to the outbreak of sudden social upheaval, not as a photojournalist as he had been in Vietnam during the preceding years, but as a detached and democratic observer alert to the myriad human dramas that resulted.

His pictures are the reflection of this calm and patient presence in the world and a deliberate slowness. A feeling of paradoxical peacefulness emanates from his portraits of British soldiers or Northern Ireland policemen, who seem static, appeased.

These photographs resemble what Raymond Depardon described as “unassuming moments”: pictures in retreat, far from the ‘decisive moment’ or the spectacular.



Man on railway platform,
Antrim train station, Northern
Ireland, 1970s



Railway overbridge, Antrim
train station, Northern
Ireland, 1970s



Railway signal box, Antrim
train station, Northern
Ireland, 1970s



Railway overbridge, Antrim
train station, Northern
Ireland, 1970s

The Interrupted Everyday

Okamura was a quiet observer of the everyday. For those who have experienced the Troubles, his images are revelatory, bringing back a sense of the peculiar texture of that time living in the north of Ireland.

The early, unpredictable momentum of the Troubles brought a surreal disruption to the everyday.

Suddenly and unsettlingly, normality was ruptured, the ordinary upended and the unspoken rules one lived by made redundant.



Family in Heuston train station, Dublin, Ireland, c. 1969



Refugees arriving in Heuston Station, Dublin, Ireland, 1969



Young girl in Heuston train station, Dublin, Ireland, c.1969



Aftermath of a bomb explosion, Belfast, Northern Ireland, c.1970



Craigavon Bridge over the River Foyle, viewed from a bus, Derry city, Northern Ireland, c. 1969



British Soldier inspecting a bus, Northern Ireland, c 1970s



Ring of Steel checkpoint,
Belfast city centre,
Northern Ireland, 1970s



Bombed-out building,
Belfast city centre, North-
ern Ireland, 1970s



British soldier on duty on
Royal Avenue, Belfast,
Northern Ireland, c. 1970



Family pass British Army
barricade, Derry City,
Northern Ireland, 1969



Woman at a British Army
barricade, King Street,
Belfast, Northern Ireland,
c. 1970

Akihiko Okamura

Akihiko Okamura was born in 1929 in Tokyo. He began training in medicine but withdrew from his studies to join the editorial team at *New Weekly* in 1961. Assigned to a story in Bangkok, he turned to photography, going on to record international conflicts.

He distinguished himself as a very important war photographer in Vietnam in the 1960s. There, he photographed, among others, the prisoners of war held by the Vietcong after he himself was held by them for 53 days.

His work appeared in *Life* and other major publications at the time. Constantly striving to tell the story of conflicts and of human rights violations, Okamura's photojournalism took him to conflict zones from Ethiopia to Biafra, and Northern Ireland. He cited his own "dark memory" of childhood terror in Tokyo under Second World War bombing attacks as the source of his urge to tell the story of conflicts through pictures. Akihiko Okamura settled in Ireland with his family in 1969 and lived there until he passed away in 1985.

Books

- Akihiko Okamura, *all about life and death*, Bijutsu Shuppan-Sha, LTD, 2014
- Akihiko Okamura (Author), George P. Hunt (Introduction), *This is War in Vietnam*, Mainichi Shinbunsha, 1965
- Akihiko Okamura, '*Kaku Jidai ni Heiwa wo Monomete: Airurand no Utagoe*' [For Peace in the Nuclear Age: Voices from Ireland], Kyōiku Hyōron [Essays in Education], March 1963

Archival press publications

- Akihiko Okamura, *Airourando kara no chiisana hookoku* [Little report from Ireland], Playboy, May 1976
- Life Magazine*, June 1971
- Akihiko Okamura interview by Takeji Muno, 1968: Ayumidasu Tame ni Sozai [1968: Getting Established], Tokyo 1968

Exhibitions

- Akihiko Okamura, All about Life and Death*, TOP Museum, Tokyo, 19 July - 23 September 2014
- Strange and Familiar : Britain Revealed by International Photographers*, Barbican, London, 16 March – 19 June 2016
- Akihiko Okamura, The Memories of Others*, Photo Museum Ireland, Dublin, 11 April - 06 July 2024

Reviews

- Pauline Vermare, *The Rediscovered Irish Archive of Japanese Photographer Akihiko Okamura*, Études irlandaises [Online], 48-2 |, 2023
- [The Observer](#) 'The surreal dislocation of the everyday': how Japanese photographer Akihiko Okamura captured the Troubles as never before', - Article by Sean O'Hagan, 7 April, 2024
- [RTÉ Arena Arts Show](#) Radio interview, April 2024
- [The Irish Times](#) - Culture Section, April 2024
- [British Journal of Photography](#), *Derry via Tokyo: How an outsider captured the Troubles in colour* - Article by Mark Durden, May 2024
- [The Eye of Photography](#) French Photo platform, April 2024

Worksheet

Describe the photographs:

What are the images of? Can you describe what you see?

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Where and when were the photographs made?

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What if anything do you know about this subject?

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Is the image taken inside or outside?

How does this affect your reading of the image?

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Is there anything you think that is not shown? Why?

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Composition – where are things placed within the image?

Can you describe what you see? What is the photographer’s eye drawn to?

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Can you describe the light in the image? Is it natural or artificial?
Describe the colour in the photograph. Is it light or dark? What kind of
feeling, atmosphere or mood does it create?

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Think about the position of the photographer the framing of the
photograph. Are they formal or informal?

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Describe the size of the work. How is the work presented? Is it framed,
hung on the wall? Does this affect what you think of the work? What if
it was bigger or smaller?

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What is the artist trying to say? Is the work titled? Does the title affect
the meaning of the work? Are they addressing a subject or issue?
Have they succeeded in communicating their idea?

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What do you think about the artists' idea for this work? What does it
make you think about, how does it make you feel?

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Do you like the work? Why? Do you dislike the work? Why?

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Terms

Photography

Photography refers to the process or practice of creating a photograph – an image produced by the action of light on a light-sensitive material

Documentary Photography

Documentary photography is a style of photography that provides a straightforward story or representation of people, places, objects and events.

Photojournalism

Photojournalism is a form of photography that captures images of real-life events, people, and places to tell a news story.

Straight Photography

Straight photography is concerned with the inherent qualities of photography and rejects any form of manipulation or distortion of the image for painterly effects as associated with pictorialism.

Social documentary

Social documentary refers to photography by artists who use the camera as a tool for social change, using it to shed light on injustice, inequality and the sidelined aspects of society.

Subjective Documentary

Subjective photography is a creative or artistic process. that aims is to make a personal interpretation of a particular subject. It often invokes or describes a mood or conveys a particular atmosphere or emotions.

**This exhibition is kindly supported
by the Japan Foundation**



Photo Museum Ireland is supported by the Arts Council
and Dublin City Council

