

Reviving the Primal: Eikoh Hosoe's Focus on the Body
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Only two decades after the end of World War II, Japan continued to convulse with change on all fronts – particularly in the political and sociocultural realms. Since the Meiji Restoration in 1867, modernization in Japan had generally entailed an embrace of Western cultural values and aesthetic theories. Analysis of Japanese visual art was no different; up to the 1950s, appreciation of what was classified as ‘Japanese’ art—and ‘good’ Japanese art, at that—was heavily influenced by Western perceptions. Indeed, the Japanese arguably had come to understand, and promulgate, their own culture in a distorted feedback loop based on these Westernized expectations. However, the 1960s brought about an oppositional voice that rejected Western interpretations, and celebrated an indigenous essence believed to have existed prior to the imposition of such Western ideals.

In the political arena, popular protests against the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty (1960 and 1970) and student protests (1968-c.1970) highlight the *zeitgeist* of dissent against imposed authority and yearning for reform. On the sociocultural front, this resistance resulted in a revived interest in Japan’s cultural past, with the art of the times reflecting a focus on the body. This was not the chiseled and sculpted body of Western imagination. Infused with domestic sentiment, artists became interested in the body as a fragile and distinctive entity; dancers such as Hijikata Tatsumi, the founder of *Ankoku Butoh*, looked to pre-modern—and therefore, somehow intrinsic—cultures and forms for inspiration.

Eikoh Hosoe, embedded in this milieu, became interested in the unique subjectivity of the human body. Having been a seminal member of the photography

collective VIVO (1959-1961), which included Tōmatsu Shōmei and others, Hosoe's visual language is mythical, theatrical and suggestive. Hosoe draws attention to body parts in surprising ways; on first glance, it may be difficult to identify the body part being photographed. *Man and Woman* (1959-1960) is inspired by, and takes as its subject, Hijikata and his dancers. Having taken almost all of the photographs in the series at the VIVO studios, these images focus on the muscular flesh of the dancers' figures in contrast to the dark, inky background. In an even more stylized manner, *Embrace* (1969-1970) captures the intimacy of body parts. By abstracting the body into elegiac and architectural forms, the bodies are suspended and captured in time, pulsating with a silent energy.

Looking back on his early career, Hosoe himself mentioned that the sociocultural context of the 1960s was not a matter of politics but of "the times themselves." Knowing that there was unrest around him—indeed, hearing the *sprechchor* battle cries of the protests taking place just outside his darkroom—Hosoe claims to have questioned his role as a photographer of mere pretty images, driving himself to produce ever stronger pictures. His photography series show the results of his existential conflict, innovative spirit and primordial vision.