



Brief Encounters

Mikiko Hara's street photography, captured without the use of a viewfinder, is full of fragmented gestures and stolen glances



There's a story that Mikiko Hara tells in *Small Myths*, her book of previously unpublished photographs, about a friend who is parking a car. Hara is sitting in the passenger seat when the friend notices a kitten in the road. Instead of remarking, "Oh, a kitten!" or "How cute!" her friend seems paralysed: "What am I going to do?" she asks. Other possible reactions were skipped. Hara and her friend were jolted straight to an unavoidable, anxiety-inducing question.

Hara's photography exists in a similarly fraught space. Her images seem as though they've been plucked out of the ether before they have been allowed to fully form. They have been captured as photographs before the eye or the mind can attach any meaning to them.

Hara has no interest in recording the "decisive moment". Rather, she seems able to

capture the "in-between" - the moment before the moment. Holding her camera - a 1930s German-made Ikonta - at chest height, she never uses a viewfinder. It's as though she doesn't want her eye to be too involved. Or at least to not let it overpower the moment itself.

"A lot of my work relies on coincidence, and I feel like if I tried to look for something, it may become difficult for me to meet the encounters," says Hara, who has talked before about her wish to escape her own consciousness. Her work is an act of relinquishing control; of leaving things to chance and the mechanics of the camera. With the final image initially unknown to the maker, her photographs vibrate with a restless motion, full of stolen glances and fragmented gestures.

Born in 1967 in Toyama Prefecture, Japan, Hara focused mostly on cinema when she

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studied at Keio University in Tokyo. She also joined a small theatre troupe. She has likened the adrenaline rush of performing on stage in the theatre to stepping on to busy streets to make photographs.

Despite this, Hara initially had no desire to pursue an artistic career after graduating, spending two years working in sales for a video and music company in Nagoya. A return to image-making came later, at Tokyo College of Photography, where she studied under the tutelage of the renowned photographer Kiyoshi Suzuki. Here, she learnt the art of street photography and the craft of editing and sequencing.

The people Hara photographs on the street often seem distracted, or lost in their own worlds. They rarely notice her camera, their attention seemingly drawn to something outside the frame. In *Small Myths* such scenes are interspersed with images made inside Hara’s home. We see her children grow from

babies to boys. Cut tulips sit in a vase in a sink, food sizzles in a pan, light trickles in through partially opened curtains.

These are small things, the incidentals of everyday life. But really, they are everything. “I value things that are ... ambiguous, or undefined, rather than something that makes a strong statement,” Hara says. They are the fleeting images that occupy our thoughts as we move through the world, inside and out.

The book includes images made between 1996 and 2021, spanning her whole career to date. Hara says that her style has hardly changed in all that time. She isn’t trying to convey a message, or specific theme, she says. The camera is simply “a device for capturing something that cannot be well understood”. Something familiar but unexpected.

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