

This Photographer Transformed Herself for 300 Self-Portraits

By Eva Recinos — Feb 27 2016



Images courtesy of ROSEGALLERY © Tomoko Sawada

Even in the most diverse cities in the country, stereotypes and clichés about ethnic groups leave little room for individuality. A person can be automatically judged by their perceived ethnic identity— even when that assumption is incorrect. Photographer Tomoko Sawada grapples with an especially complicated ethnic problem: the assignment of Asian identity based on physical features. What makes someone seem more Japanese or more Chinese? What factors make strangers decide on these attributes? These are the questions that Sawada tackles in her exhibition *Facial Signature*, currently on view at Santa Monica's Rose Gallery.

The project stems from Sawada's personal experiences. While living in New York, people often made incorrect guesses as to her ethnic identity. Sawada was born in Kobe, Japan but strangers rarely thought she looked Japanese. "Quite often, when I lived in New York City for six years, I was perceived as being of Chinese or Korean or Singaporean origin... only occasionally Japanese," Sawada tells The Creators Project. "This made me consider the intuitive process by which people achieve cognition of true or false archetypes. The experience led me to create this new project, transforming myself 300 times to look like a variety of East Asian Women."



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Sawada purposefully choose her makeup, hair and clothing in each photo to create subtle changes from one portrait to the next. The artist, however, does not reveal information about why she made these choices— instead the small differences between the photographs challenge viewers to confront the stereotypes they might have about Asian identities. Facial Signature is on display at ROSEGALLERY until April 9, 2016.



Art in America

The World's Premier Art Magazine

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Tomoko Sawada at Zabriskie

In her first exhibition at Zabriskie, in 2003, Tomoko Sawada extended her permutation of self-portraiture into the world of *omiai*, meetings arranged by professional matchmakers to facilitate suitable marriages in Japan. The practice involves commissioning studio portraits of prospective brides for presentation to potential spouses. A maker of photographs who arranges and indicates rather than points and shoots, Sawada, in these studio-made chromogenic photographs, disguises herself in traditional or modern dress suitable to the *Omiai*, demurely posing in artificial light against a neutral background. In the Warholian moments and many faces of her "ID-400" series, shot in a photo booth, she altered her appearance, chiefly by the artifices of hairstyle, make-up and affect, producing 400 black-and-white self-portraits suitable for identification purposes.

In her newest identity series, "Costume," Sawada appears in found or appropriated environments, costumed according to profession and status in 40-by-32-inch (or 32-by-40-inch) chromogenic prints produced in editions of eight. She has expanded the proportions of her portraits by introducing a medium-format camera, presumably fitted with a lens that will ensure a relatively shallow depth of field. Through the agency of her assistant, the camera's focus is entirely on her. Everything in the zones in front of or beyond her face and figure appears sharp and well defined at first glance, but is not. The effect replicates the way the mind processes and receives what the generous eye sees: the contextual information is out of focus before or beyond the locus of attention.

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In these prescribed zones of attention, Sawada appears in a variety of costumes. As a nun (2003) she is beatific, her head, in a wimple, tilted toward heaven, a prayer book clasped to her breast. The camera looks upward with her gaze. As a florist (2004) she appears in profile, wreathed by tiers of blooms, pretty but distracted. As a woman working in a nightclub she is glamorous, attentive to her date. As a tour guide she is ingratiating, and with the addition of glasses and a uniform, the embodiment of a self-important cop. Sawada has learned to manipulate such information. Without makeup, looking directly at the camera, her round face is a neutral mask.

Yasumasa Morimura, Cindy Sherman and Nikki S. Lee transform themselves before the camera. The late trickster Tseng Kwong Chi, dressed in his trademark Mao suit, appeared around the world, laughing at those who took him only for what he seemed. Sack-suited Zlakto Kopljar kneels before cultural landmarks, his back toward the camera that records his obeisance at the shrines of cultural tourism. In this genre, protean Tomoko Sawada mutates through her wardrobe, investing her art with the transformative inquiries of her masquerade in the uniforms of daily life.

Tomoko SAWADA

"self-portraiture is fundamentally about disguise"

Noriko Fuku: The first time I saw your work was in the *New Cosmos of Photography*¹ catalogue in 2000. Your work *ID400* (1999) won the Special Prize. At the time, I had a hunch that you were from the Kansai region. Your work has a particularly Kansai sense of vitality and humor. Can you tell me a bit about that work and how you came to make it?

Tomoko Sawada: I first came across self-portraiture as a student in junior college. After transferring to a university, I began to focus on photography. I studied the history of photography, as well as the work of contemporary photographers from around the world, while learning the newest techniques on a daily basis. There was so much to absorb, and I learned a lot about artists that had been unknown to me. Soon I had absolutely no idea what kind of work I wanted to make, but I kept returning to self-portraiture as the mode of expression that fit me best. One day, as I was coming home from school, the idea of *ID400* appeared right before my eyes. I love fashion, but when you make even a slight change in your style of clothes, the reaction from those around you can be dramatic. That was a mystery to me. I began to wonder how people would respond if I changed the way I look. I also wondered whether an external change, such as in one's hairstyle or clothing, could cause an internal change. Now, ID photos are supposed to identify or verify a person's identity, right? And, of course, photographs are supposed to reproduce

the truth.² So I used the format of the ID photo to take several hundred pictures of myself with different faces and costumes, as if to say, "Can these pictures prove that I am who I am?" The answer is that not one of these pictures can do that. The peculiar nature of photography is that it copies reality but also can't copy reality. With the ID series, my initial goal was to take 1,000 pictures. I went to places that had ID photo booths and took pictures of myself. By the time the count reached 300, I had already developed ideas for my next series. Moreover, I realized that simply increasing the number of portraits would not enhance the meaning of the work, so I stopped at 400 pictures. When I looked at the entire series, I realized that what I wanted to say didn't differ at all from what I had been doing in junior college.

NF: And what was that?

TS: It was about the relationship between the outward appearance and the interior self. *ID400* was the first series I made that addressed that binarism.

NF: You said that, before making *ID400*, when you were casting about for the right mode of expression, you kept *returning* to self-portraiture. Can you talk a bit about the works you made before *ID400*?

TS: During my freshman year in junior college, I took a course in which one of the assignments was making a self-portrait. We watched a documentary about

Cindy Sherman, which convinced me that self-portraiture was not only acceptable but fundamentally about disguise. I made a series called *Early Days* (1997), in which I shot the photographs myself. I thought there was a rule that if you didn't take the photographs yourself, the work wasn't your own. While I was studying various things, however, I realized that wasn't necessarily the case. So in *ID400*, I had a machine take my pictures for me, and in *OMIAI*♥, I had a middle-aged male photographer from a photography studio in my neighborhood take my pictures for me. In all of my works since then, my artist friends have taken photographs for me.

NF: In *ID400*, you donned 400 different disguises and took pictures in an ID photo booth which spits out four images each time you use it, for a total of 1,600 pictures. That's a lot of "yourself." By the way, where is this photo booth?

TS: Inside the parking garage of a supermarket located four subway stops from my house. I changed clothes and makeup in a bathroom nearby. Then I'd rush into the booth—on a busy day, I would change twenty times.

NF: The people who saw a completely different you come out of the bathroom must have been surprised. [Laughs]

TS: The parking lot attendant asked me what I was doing. So did a middle-aged woman who frequently walked through the area. I told her, "I'm an art stu-

dent and I'm making a work of art." She must have thought that I was doing a college assignment because when I saw her again, she asked if my homework was going along smoothly. [Laughs] I wasn't spotted very often. But once, a little kid came into the bathroom with his mother and she whispered to him, "Don't look at her." [Laughs]

NF: The thing that made me think your works were made by someone from the Kansai region was that there was a certain masochistic bent to them as you push the body to its furthest limits and make art out of it. You also utilize, and even poke fun at, your own complexes, much like comedians from the Kansai region. I imagine that your work is often compared with that of artists like Yasumasa Morimura and Miwa Yanagi, both of whom are from Kansai. I'd like to know what this Kansai tendency is all about.

TS: When I make my work, I don't think about making the viewer laugh, but since I was a child, a part of my life was all about trying to get a laugh by using myself as comedic material. By definition, I think that people from Kansai are really strong. My works came to life naturally thanks to that. By the way, I don't think that my work is masochistic at all. I have a lot of fun with what I do. I used to think that contemporary art was difficult—as a student, I didn't understand it. I want to make works that even people who don't understand contemporary art can have fun with—this has always been an aspect of my work. My high school art teacher was the contem-

porary artist Noboru Tsubaki, and he once said to the class, "Transform difficult things, sad things, and painful things into Pop!" That approach really meshes with my personality.

NF: When you look at the work of Morimura or Yanagi, what do you think the similarities and differences are between your own work and theirs?

TS: My work is often compared with Morimura's, although not with Yanagi's. The first artist I knew about who was making self-portraits was Cindy Sherman, and Morimura was the second. Since he was a famous person out of a textbook to me, being in the same exhibition with him was like being in the same company as Andy Warhol or Man Ray. But as artists, the only thing Morimura and I have in common is a methodology; otherwise, our themes are completely different.

NF: You are probably compared with Nikki S. Lee as well, right?

TS: I'm also mistaken for Nikki Lee. [Laughs] Morimura and Cindy Sherman "become someone" in their works, which, moreover, refer to actual models. I don't "become someone," nor do my pictures have a referent outside of myself. If I were to imitate someone, it would be a complete flop. As for Nikki Lee's work—she places herself in a tableau, which allows you to read the photograph. In my work, such as the *Costume* series (2003), I have placed myself in situations, but beyond this, I don't

locate myself. I just disguise myself in the midst of society as I see it. The word *performing* does not accurately describe what I do. No matter how different I look in each picture, my own identity—me, Tomoko Sawada—differentiates me from other artists.

NF: Why is it that you had to disguise yourself even though you have a resolute image of your own identity?

TS: I'm interested in people's reactions to changes in external appearances. A disguise doesn't alter one's self, not fundamentally at least.

NF: That's connected to your next series, *OMIAI* (2001), isn't it? In that work, you shot thirty versions of yourself. Since they are photos to be given to a prospective husband for an arranged marriage (*omiaiai*), the expression on your face is very meek in many of them. And you can really picture the face of the man who has just been told that he has to choose one of them to be his wife. [Laughs]

TS: The 400 ID photos and the large portrait that I took of myself as a skinhead go together as a set in *ID400*, but even if I had sat in the middle of a gallery with my head shaved, 70 percent of the people there wouldn't have identified me as the person in all those pictures on the wall. This really jolted me. When one's outer appearance changes even a little, people react as if they were looking at a totally different person. While working on *ID400*, I wondered

which was more important, the outer appearance or the inner self. In the exhibitions, I discovered that appearance signifies much more than I had believed. I wanted to explore this idea further, and the result was *OMIAI*♥.

NF: In the exhibitions where you've shown the *OMIAI*♥ series, viewers are invited to place a heart-shaped sticker on the border of the picture of their favorite woman. Have you found regional differences in their likes and dislikes?

TS: There are regional tendencies. The works in the highest ranks generally resemble each other, but the picture with the most hearts is always different depending on the location of the exhibition. I've shown the series in Tokyo, Aichi, Ehime, Shiga, Kyoto, Shimane, and twice in Osaka.

NF: Did you discover anything about local tastes?

TS: Definitely. In Tokyo, a picture of a woman who resembles Norinomiya, the daughter of the Imperial family, wearing a kimono with her hair down and seemingly docile, took first place. In Nagoya, a work that generated no interest at the other venues came in first, I think because the kimono was really gorgeous with an all-over pattern that made it look quite expensive. Kyoto's choice was rather orthodox. In Osaka, the first and second times I showed the work were completely different, but the first time a picture of a slightly scary woman with the air of a *yakuza* [Japanese mafia] wife—who looked a little bit like the actress Shima Iwashita in the movie *Gokudo no*

Onnatachi [The Wives of the Underworld]—won top prize. This could happen only in Osaka. [Laughs] People really went overboard there, but that's a good thing. In Shiga, a proper lady wearing a hat was first. Ehime's selection was pretty conservative, too—a picture of a woman in pink clothes that had the feeling of a typical *omiaï* photograph.

NF: After *OMIAI*♥, you created *cover* (2001) and *Costume* (2003), and then, in 2004, you won the 29th Kimura Ihei Award.³ You won Japan's most prestigious photography prize just four years after introducing your first work. Aren't you the first person to win that award who doesn't take her own photographs?

TS: Ten years before I received the award, Yasumasa Morimura was selected as a finalist, but he didn't win. Commenting on my prize, one of the judges, the photographer Kishin Shinoyama, said, "A decade ago, you wouldn't have won." It seems that one of the reasons that Morimura didn't win was because he didn't take his pictures himself.

NF: Let's return to *ID400*. When you made that work, were you aware that Andy Warhol had also used ID photos in his work?

TS: Only after I showed the work and people commented on that fact.

NF: Your next series, *cover*, took up themes like *ganguro* and *kogyaru* that are peculiar to Japan's youth culture.⁴

TS: When I was showing *OMIAI*♡, the *kogyaru* phenomenon was booming. As a social phenomenon, it garnered a lot of negative attention. It was denigrated as the fashion of brainless party girls. I disagreed. By the time I made *cover*, the *kogyaru* vogue was basically over, and I knew the work would be dismissed as dated. But I felt compelled to make it regardless.

NF: Let's talk about *School Days* (2004), the work being shown in *Heavy Light*. It raises interesting questions about the role of group photos in Japanese culture. In Japan, it can probably be said that an event is not really an event unless a group photo is snapped. When I was a student, group photos were often taken at sports festivals or during school trips. If someone was absent from school that day, a head shot would be stuck in a box in the upper righthand corner of the group photo. Even on a vacation, photos of the entire group are systematically taken. We take them at weddings and funerals, too.

TS: The year after I won the Kimura Ihei Award, I was featured in about a hundred magazine articles, TV shows, and radio programs. There aren't many art magazines in Japan, so most of the interviews were conducted by reporters who had no experience with art. The upshot was that I had to start from scratch in explaining the work to them. I was constantly asked, "Why do you take so many pictures of yourself?" I had never been asked this question before, and had never thought about it.

NF: It's a rather interesting question, though, isn't it?

TS: Yes, and considering an answer to it led me to *School Days*. When I began to think about why I continue to take pictures of myself, I recalled what I was like in junior high and high school. I attended a private all-girls school and it was a slightly flamboyant place. It's generally regarded as a school for demure young women, but in reality, there were very few demure young women there, and a lot of the girls were really outgoing and fun. There were about 300 students in each graduating class, and we were together constantly for six years. Since the junior high and high school buildings were on the same grounds, the first-year students saw the older students as full-on adults. The environment was pretty different from other social systems, and there was a certain prestige to going to that school. There were unspoken rules about how to behave and what to wear. I didn't jump on the bandwagon and tried to find my own path, but nevertheless, having spent six years in that environment, it made a profound impression on me. *School Days* allowed me to recapture those days on film. I was picked on in school, so I did not want to belong to a group and hated things like group photos. I would rather have been photographed with close friends.

NF: It's pretty much customary in Japan that in group pictures at school enrollment or graduation ceremonies, everyone is positioned in rows on a stairway, with the teacher sitting either dead center in the first row or off to the side.

TS: At my school, it was customary to wear winter uniforms for the opening ceremony in April, and then change to summer uniforms on June 1 for another photo. So I used both the winter and summer uniforms in the *School Days* series.

NF: What was it like to relive your school days when you took pictures for that series?

TS: It confirmed that the years spent at that school had influenced me. We were well-versed in fashion and makeup. We all acted like grown-ups. I didn't wear makeup myself at the time, but many of my friends were experts. All of those experiences live inside my work.

NF: Why do you think you were bullied?

TS: My former classmates say that I really stood out. It's not that I was flamboyant, but I caught people's eye or attracted their attention in some way. I didn't wear trendy clothes, but I did dress differently from everyone else and was always skirting the school's dress code regulations. Maybe that's why I was bullied. In Japan, nonconformists are harassed. Also, a lot of students couldn't stomach the fact that I dared to speak to other kids who were bullied.

NF: *School Days* was originally produced as a series of small photographs, like the kind of group photos that are passed out at school and saved in photo albums.

TS: Yes, I appropriated the size because it felt genuine. Other schools usually include this kind of photo in their graduation albums, but at my school, everybody would get a small print.

NF: In the *Heavy Light* exhibition, you're displaying large versions of the pictures.

TS: Adjusting the size highlights details that differentiate the faces. You can even see a small mole on my face in one of the photos, so by enlarging them, the thing that most excites me is—me! [Laughs]

NF: What kind of work are you making now?

TS: I'm in the middle of three different projects.

NF: You must have to diet in order to create all of those various looks.

TS: For *OMIAI♡*, I gained five kilograms, and after that lost twenty. I'm dieting right now for my next work.

NF: How do you imagine yourself in ten years?

TS: I'm thirty this year and look forward to what kind of person I become ten years from now. Who knows, I may still be taking pictures of myself at forty. I made *ID400* when I was twenty. Since then, in order to understand the work myself, I've experimented with a variety of forms and made other works. I will be happy if I can sustain that experimentation and create works centered on that nucleus of change a decade from now.

NF: How do you feel about marriage?

TS: I know that many female artists in Japan have not been able to maintain careers after marriage and children. Women are pressured to sacrifice their work by husbands, in-laws, and society in general. "You're married and still doing that art thing?" Last year, when I was living in New York, I met a number of female artists whose husbands take care of the kids, and couples who participated in artist-in-residency programs at the same time. It's much different than the Japanese situation. So even if I marry and have children, I'll continue to make works of art. I'm persuaded that it's possible after being in New York.

NF: I read a survey in a Japanese magazine that was aimed at "successful women in the workplace." Most of the women included in the survey were in their forties, and more than half were single. Some 15 percent were married and had children, usually one. For women in Japan, it's still the case that work and family are incompatible, or so it seems.

TS: Japan might be an especially tough place for women artists to make a living. On the other hand, I believe I've been able to make the kind of works that I do because of my experiences as a Japanese woman. There are many things that I like about Japan.

Translated by Eric C. Shiner

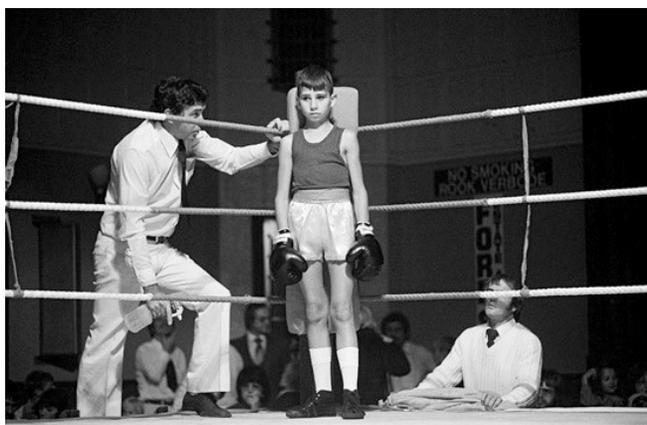
¹ Annual competition for young photographers sponsored by Canon.

² In Japanese, the word for photograph, *shashin*, is comprised of *sha*, meaning "reproduce," and *shin*, "truth."

³ An award given to a new photographer in Japan sponsored by the Asahi Newspaper Corporation. Since 1975, it has been presented to one or two photographers a year.

⁴ *Ganguro* is a type of girls' fashion in which adherents tan their faces at tanning salons until they become very dark, and use dark foundation upon which they apply thick coats of makeup. *Kogyaru* refers to high school girls who dressed in this girlie fashion in the 1990s.

About Face, Contemporary Photography, at the Pilara Foundation (Photos)



Before the fight: amateur boxing at the Town Hall, Boksburg (David Goldblatt)



Micaela Van Zwoell
SF Contemporary Art Examiner

Pilara Foundation photography collection

Rating:

February 28, 2013

Pilara Foundation

Unquestionably, San Francisco is a photography collector's dream. The **Pilara Foundation's** collection of 20th and 21st century American photography is an emphatic testament to that.

Pier 24, on the San Francisco Embarcadero, houses the permanent photographic collection of the **Pilara**

Foundation - over 2400 photographic images that include significant works by Richard Avedon, Dorothea Lange, and Diane Arbus, as well as important works by Hendrik Kerstens, August Sander, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Daido Moriyama, and Zwelethu Mithethwa. Inspired by *Revelations* - the Diane Arbus retrospective at the **San Francisco Museum of Modern Art** initiated the Foundation's first acquisition, a photographic portrait from Arbus' challenging and emotive *Untitled* series. The emotional intensity characterizing this photograph subsequently informed later acquisitions for the collection.

The current exhibition, *About Face*, addresses traditions of portrait-based photography, with nearly one thousand photographs drawn mostly from the Foundation's permanent collection. Displaying wide-ranging approaches to portraiture from the mid-nineteenth century to present-day, *About Face*, presents works by August Sander (*Face of Our Time*), Richard Avedon (*The Family*), Jim Goldberg (*Rich and Poor*), Larry Sultan (*SF Society*), as well as selected works by Cindy Sherman, Hiroshi Sugimoto's series of Henry VIII and his

six wives, Gillian Wearing, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Richard Learoyd, Yasumasa Morimura, Tomoko Sawada, and a beautifully installed selection of hand-painted family portraits from Brazil known as *Retratos Pintados*.

About Face is an intensely moving and emotive exhibition. Beginning with the *Retratos Pintados*, I was reminded of childhood portrait studios in Spain and the Philippines. To my left was a room with the only complete collection of Hiroshi Sugimoto's dramatic silver gelatin portraits of Henry VIII and his six wives. Haunting and beautiful, viewers commented on the portraits in hushed whispering tones. Wandering through every room of the exhibition, each well installed and lit, my favorite room paid sensuous homage to the wide range of photography within the collection - Hendrik Kerstens' *Hairnet* (2000), Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936) - an homage to American migrant workers, a close up of Andy Warhol's gunshot wounds, and saturated color images of somber Africans. Before my visit, I was casually appreciative of photography as an artistic medium of expression, and now am a devoted convert to the powerful beauty of the lens and image.

Without wall text or descriptive labels, the **Foundation** purportedly wishes to allow viewers full experience of the photography without distraction, according to curator Chris McCall. Personally, I appreciate wall text. It provides insight and information, and to a newly appreciated convert, it's valuable. The **Foundation's** presentation of intimate and personal viewing, and peaceful contemplation, of the exhibition reminds me of the idiosyncracies of private collections in Europe such as the **Peggy Guggenheim** (Venice), the **Borghese** (Rome), and **Rosenblum** (Paris) collections. And I am reminded again, that the **Pilara Foundation** Collection is, after all, a private collection.

Visits are by appointment only, timed for 2 hours, and limited to 20 visitors.

About Face is on exhibition at Pier 24 from May 15, 2012 through April 30, 2013.

Pier 24 The Embarcadero, San Francisco, California 94105

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