

# This Place, This Trace: On Uehara Sayaka: Even If All the Ruins Were Swept Away without a Trace

**Sato Naoko**  
Curator, Yokohama Civic Art Gallery Azamino

## Foreword

This is a solo exhibition of the work of photographer Uehara Sayaka, who was born in Okinawa and is currently based there. It brings together four photographic series: Sleeping Trees, Green Rooms, and Green Days, which have been shown previously, and the new series The Shore Before. For Uehara, the exhibition offers an opportunity to comprehensively present her work thus far. The photographs on view were selected with care so as to shape a narrative, and the artist herself determined the sequence, in which they move from Okinawa to Taiwan and from color photography to black and white. Uehara has consistently turned her lens toward the surfaces of things shaped by intricately intersecting layers of historical time in Okinawa and Taiwan, as well as toward traces of memory that appear and disappear from view. With a soft touch, these photographs lead viewers into moments of time held in place by photography.

## Returning Okinawa's Gaze from Within

During her student years in Tokyo, where she studied photography, Uehara deepened her understanding of photographic history and encountered many images of Okinawa through photobooks and exhibitions. Over time, her desire to work in Okinawa herself grew stronger, and her university graduation project was shot on Okinawa Island (the prefecture's largest island), focusing on her hometown and surroundings, including the small island of Senagajima<sup>1</sup> off the coast of Okinawa Island in Tomigusuku, with the photographs compiled as the series in the white season. In her first

photobook, *Sleeping Trees*, published in 2022, she described the series as "an attempt to capture everyday scenes of Okinawa as a place connected to someone's life, rather than relying on existing images shaped by a constructed reading of 'Okinawa' as signifying an object of consumption."<sup>3</sup> This description makes clear that Uehara approached photography by returning Okinawa's gaze from within, rather than depicting it as an object viewed unilaterally from the outside. This series can be called the starting point of her endeavor to look again, through photography, at the scenes of the place where she was born and raised, without being bound by preexisting images.

The title in the white season comes from a line in the poem *A Conversation* by Yamanokuchi Baku. The poem was first published in 1935 in the literary magazine *Bungei* (vol. 3, no. 11). In the poem, the narrator, "I," is asked, "Where are you from?" and answers with phrases such as "far away," "the south," "the subtropics," and "near the equator," yet the exchange ends without his homeland, Okinawa, ever being named.

Okinawa was once the Ryukyu Kingdom. In 1429, the kingdom unified the Amami, Okinawa, and Sakishima Islands and engaged actively in trade with Japan and Southeast Asia. Throughout the Edo period (1603–1868), the Ryukyu Kingdom existed under dual subordination to Japan's Satsuma Domain (present-day Kagoshima Prefecture), and to Qing dynasty (1644–1912) China. In 1872, the Meiji government established the Ryukyu Domain, and in 1879 it issued a nationwide proclamation of the abolition of the domain and the establishment of Okinawa Prefecture. For many years thereafter, as Yamanokuchi suggests in his poem, public prejudice and economic and social disparities persisted between Okinawa and "mainland" Japan. Yamanokuchi's own conflicted feelings toward his homeland, shaped by his experience as a person from Okinawa, emerge with striking clarity through the poem's silences and through what remains unspoken.

<sup>1</sup> Senagajima was used as a US Navy ammunition storage base and was returned to Japan in 1977. See the Tomigusuku City Hall website: <https://www.city.tomigusuku.lg.jp/soshiki/8/1035/gyomuannai/3/2/1/357.html>

<sup>2</sup> "Fukei no naka ni orikasenatta jikan to kioku o hikiyoseru" (Drawing Forth Time and Memory Layered Within the Landscape), *Bijutsu Techo*, January 2025, *Bijutsu Shuppansha*.

<sup>3</sup> Uehara Sayaka, *Sleeping Trees*, Akaaka Art Publishing, 2022.

## Gathering “Small Testimonies”

It is widely known that during the final stages of World War II in the Pacific, fierce ground fighting took place in Okinawa, and that among the fallen, ordinary residents outnumbered military personnel and military-affiliated civilians. After the war, Okinawa remained under US military administration for 27 years, and even after its reversion to Japan in 1972, approximately 70% of military facilities in Japan used exclusively by the US remain concentrated in Okinawa, despite the prefecture accounting for only 0.6% of the nation’s land area. Even now, 80 years after the war, many problematic issues remain unresolved. After graduating from university in 2016, Uehara returned to Okinawa and has continued her work there, but during her time in Tokyo she felt a sense of cognitive dissonance toward “representations of Okinawa seen on the mainland—photographs and information laden with excessive meaning, media coverage and images tied to tourism.”<sup>4</sup> For Uehara, Okinawa is the site of modest, everyday life, yet when she works there she finds herself unavoidably confronted with these imposed, overblown images.

Sleeping Trees, the first series Uehara undertook after returning home, brings together photographs taken between 2016 and 2022 on extensive walks across Okinawa Island.<sup>5</sup> The list at the end of the photobook of the same title records the locations and years for each of the 86 photographs included. Read from top to bottom, the names of cities, towns, and villages are Nago, Naha, Okinawa, Ginowan, Urasoe, Itoman, Chatan, Yonabaru, Tomigusuku, Kadena, Onna, Yomitan, Nakagusuku, Kin, Kunigami, and Higashi. Checking these locations on a map shows that over the course of six years Uehara walked Okinawa Island from north to south, from the village of Kunigami in the north to the city of Itoman in the south. Turning the pages of the photobook, one encounters the white popinac tree, the source of the title *Sleeping Trees* and the motif that forms the graceful pattern binding

together the book’s cover. Uehara has said that this plant, regarded as an invasive alien species that grows throughout residential areas in Okinawa, “closes its leaves at night and seemed to evoke the way pain and scars lie dormant yet persist.”<sup>6</sup> She notices and gathers the “small testimonies” offered by ordinary, nearby things. The photographs, which render the contours of the scene before her with exacting clarity, feature fresh, colorful compositions, yet the sense of the darkness of history within that brightness creates a contrast that brings on something like vertigo.

## Holding Memory in Place

The new series *The Shore Before* was shot over a three-day period before and after June 23, 2025, Okinawa Memorial Day. It begins in Uehara’s own living space, follows her as she walks through the Kerama Islands, and ends with her return to her residence. It also records a brief journey in which she visited places associated with the outbreak of the Battle of Okinawa, including beaches where US forces landed, listening closely for “small testimonies.” I have not yet seen the details, but she says the exhibition will present 200 photographs in a slideshow format, each accompanied by a caption, and when these words are read in sequence they form a continuous, diary-like monologue.

In the section of the exhibition presenting *Green Rooms*, a series of black and white photographs taken in Taiwan, photographs and text once again resonate in multiple voices. After shooting, Uehara repeatedly returns to the photographs she has taken, spending more time looking at and interpreting the images than she did producing them. She discovers details she did not notice at the moment she clicked the shutter, imagines the histories of Okinawa and Taiwan and the voices of its residents, and brings these elements together through photographs and words. Because these photographs show places steeped in memories of wounds that have not healed, the words Uehara writes carry particular weight for viewers. Rather than

<sup>4</sup> “The Others: Okinawa, seikatsusha no shiten kara” (The Others: From the Perspective of Okinawa Residents). Quick Japan, no. 159, Ohta Shuppan, 2022, p. 72.

<sup>5</sup> See artist interview (on p.24 of this publication).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

supplementing the images, they bring to the surface events that unquestionably took place there and invite reflection on the existence of those no longer with us. What comes into view are personal stories rooted in lived experience. What shapes the narratives and words are the realities the photographs have captured.

In a book in which psychiatrist and researcher Miyaji Naoko examines the potential of speaking about trauma, and the problem of where the speaker stands in relation to that trauma, through what she calls the Trauma Island Model, she writes:

By nature, a trauma island does not take shape until a considerable amount of time has passed after a traumatic event. By the time survivors become aware of the source of their pain, finally grasp what happened, feel their anger mounting, and resolve to interrogate the perpetrator, the perpetrator is already long gone.<sup>7</sup>

Uehara's works show us that photography can draw together, as if compressing time, both the remembered pain of past people left behind in a place, as if bound to it, and the pain carried into the present by survivors. Even after the perpetrator is long gone, photography can hold delayed memories of pain in place and help counteract historical oblivion.

Art historian Ito Toshiharu writes that photographic time, which causes a "special sense of time" to emerge for the viewer, differs from the ordinary time we inhabit, in that it "halts the flow of time, creates distance between subject and object, and continuously reveals differences."<sup>8</sup> In photography, the familiar structure of past, present, and future is dismantled, and memories of trauma, frozen in time, remain on the image surface. Uehara's photographs, which at first glance depict calm, untroubled scenes of everyday life, also serve as a medium through which memories relentlessly inscribed on people and places by recurring waves of hegemonic aggression return,

giving viewers repeated occasions to notice and reflect on them anew.

### In Closing

Uehara says that she does not usually mount her camera on a tripod, but shoots while walking and in transit. This evokes the presence of a photographer who responds quickly to her subjects while, at the same time, approaching them as if striking up a conversation. As Yamanokuchi Baku allowed silence and unsayable words to remain embedded in his poetry, and as the Okinawan novelist Matayoshi Eiki, in *Ginnemu Yashiki* (House with White Leadtree), let women who were stripped of language and forced into silence cling like ghosts to the narration of a male protagonist shaped by imperialism, colonialism, and Cold War structures, allowing unheard voices to persist beneath the surface, Uehara keeps walking with her camera in hand, asking, "What is the trace that lingers in this place?"<sup>9</sup> She repeatedly looks back at the scenes she has captured, seeking to pass on to the future buried memories that are not visible to the eye, yet are undeniably present.

[Translated by Christopher Stevens]

#### Azamino Photo Annual 2026

#### Uehara Sayaka: Even If All the Ruins Were Swept Away without a Trace

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Venue: Exhibition Gallery 1, Yokohama Civic Art Gallery Azamino

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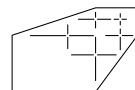
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1-17-3, Azamino-Minami, Aoba-ku, Yokohama

225-0012, Japan

<https://www.artazamino.jp/>



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<sup>7</sup> Miyaji Naoko, *Trauma Island: Listening to Silenced Voices*, Misuzu Shobo, 2018, p. 155.

<sup>8</sup> Ito Toshiharu, "Mujinto no kioku: Okinawa, shashin, jikan" (Memory of a Deserted Island: Okinawa, Photography, Time), *Shashin zero nen Okinawa* (Photography, Year Zero: Okinawa), photographer's gallery, 2007, p. 93.

<sup>9</sup> Anata no Okinawa: Ima iru basho kara Okinawa o kataru (Your Okinawa: Speaking about Okinawa from Where You Are), ZINE vol. 1, interview with photographer Uehara Sayaka, p. 9.