

## Interview with Uehara Sayaka

—First, could you tell us what the exhibition title, *Even If All the Ruins Were Swept Away without a Trace*, means to you?

As I was putting together work I've been making over the past 10 years and preparing to show it all at once, I wanted the title to say something about how I understand the possibilities of photography. I went back and reread things I'd written over the years and pulled out one line. Even when something becomes hard to see, the events that happened and the time that passed never really vanish. They settle into a place in complicated layers, like strata in the earth, and stay there like a kind of scar. Because a photograph holds time still, it can bring back into view things everyone can see but no one notices, things that have been forgotten, or small things that seem insignificant, all captured by pausing them outside the flow of everyday reality. I want to think of photography as a practice that pushes back against forgetting and keep imagining, by looking again at the faint traces that emerge in a landscape.

—To start, could you give us a brief sense of how the exhibition is laid out and what ideas shape it?

The exhibition is made up of four series I shot in Okinawa and Taiwan. It opens with *Sleeping Trees*, photographed on Okinawa Island, that is, Okinawa's largest island, then continues with *The Shore Before*, which I worked on while traveling through the Kerama Islands, and from there jumps, almost like moving from island to island, to *Green Rooms* and *Green Days*, both shot in Taiwan. The show starts with color, moves into the light and shadow world of black and white, then returns to color again. I arranged the left and right sides of the space to suggest moving from one place to another, and the front and back to suggest moving through time. I wanted those two paths to intersect when someone walks through the entire space. The

rooms are also loosely divided with white, veil-like fabric. I thought of it as a membrane between time and place, something that works as both a connection and a boundary, almost like slightly brushing shoulders when you pass someone.

—To get into the works on view, I'd like to ask about the series you shot on Okinawa Island that forms the first half of the exhibition. First, could you tell me about *Sleeping Trees*?

When I left Okinawa, where I was born and raised, to go to university, it was the first time I felt a sense of distance and dissonance between the image of Okinawa marketed to tourists and the life I had actually lived. Around the same time, as I spent more time looking at photographs, I slowly relearned the history connected to the landscapes in my memory. Before long, I wanted to re-examine Okinawa as a place where everyday life unfolds by photographing it myself. I had already done this for my graduation project, but I started shooting again in 2016, when I moved back to Okinawa.

For *Sleeping Trees*, I did not start with subjects decided in advance. Instead, as I went about my everyday life, I spent time simply walking through communities and photographing whatever caught my eye. Later, when I took the time to slowly read through the images' content, I noticed small things I would usually pass by without a second thought. Working this way, I wanted to understand how time has taken shape in this place, starting from the recorded traces of things right in front of me. What I found were lived spaces, but also various images that act as signifiers of tropical islands, the presence of military bases, the intense sunlight, and layers of time folding over one another like geological strata. To me, these feel as if they are being presented as fragments of a complex history.

I named the series after the white popinac trees that grow all over Okinawa, which are called ginnemu in the local language. They sprout almost like weeds, and you see them everywhere—along national highways, in residential neighborhoods, by the shore. Their

leaves fold up at night as if they were sleeping, and in Okinawan dialect they are called nibuigi, which literally means “sleeping tree.” When I read Matayoshi Eiki’s novel *Ginnemu Yashiki*, there was an opening note on the page right inside the cover: “After the war, to camouflage the destruction, the US military scattered the seeds of this tree (white popinac) across all of Okinawa.” That idea stayed with me: that no matter how a landscape changes, the place itself stays put, holding pain or scars that remain there, almost asleep. Even small things that look as if they are simply part of the scenery have their own backgrounds and stories behind them, and I think photographs can offer small testimonies that speak to those stories. Not everything ties neatly into meaning, and the longer I continue interpreting the images, the more it feels as if the spaces between things keep widening.

There are very few people in my images because I want to leave room for imagining what cannot be seen. I try to look and listen not only for people who are here now, but also for those who were here in the past. It is a way for me to contemplate events and memories far beyond anything I could experience myself, and also a way of simply listening to the silence of things I cannot even imagine.

—What can you say about your newest work, *The Shore Before*, which you shot on June 23, which is Okinawa Memorial Day, in 2025?

*The Shore Before* grew out of a short trip I took over three days around Okinawa Memorial Day. The series begins in my room, moves through Tokashiki Island and Aka Island in the Kerama Islands, continues along several beaches, and then returns to my room.

On Aka Island there is a place called Meenu Hama, the beach where the US military first landed and where the horrific Battle of Okinawa began. The name Meenu Hama literally means “the shore in front,” and I sensed something photographic in the way “in front” [mae in Japanese, meaning “before” both in time and in space] refers to both to a spatial relationship and to the past.

That’s why I titled the series *The Shore Before*.

Okinawa Memorial Day on June 23 marks the day organized combat ended when the Japanese military commander died by suicide, but in reality the fighting and massacres continued afterward. It is a public holiday in Okinawa Prefecture, and at noon sirens sound and people observe a moment of silence. Many gather at the site where the battle ended, where memorial services are held. I traveled toward the place where the battle began, as if tracing those events in reverse.

Since the US military first came ashore, Okinawa has borne an overwhelming burden from military bases, and the harm from crimes, accidents, noise and water pollution, and sexual violence has never stopped. Thinking about how new US military bases and Japanese Self-Defense Force bases continue to be built, with the sea filled in and mountains cut away, I felt that the Battle of Okinawa cannot be written off as something that ended 80 years ago. It is something that shifts shape but keeps unfolding. Even while grappling with the historical distance and the difficulty of imagining events I did not experience myself, I produced this series with the aim of considering, through a sequence of images, how that reality shapes my own life and the problems I see around me.

On islands I did not know well, I made my way from place to place using the monuments marked on the map as my landmarks. That’s why stone markers appear throughout the series like signposts. They show memorials for Korean people taken during the war as “comfort women” and military laborers, war monuments built on high ground, forests where forced mass suicides took place, towers engraved with the names of war dead, the site where the Flame of Peace was kindled, and the beaches where landings occurred during World War II. Along the way, there were villages where islanders live, beaches filled with tourists, and Kerama deer originally native to Satsuma ambling about. And whenever I leave home, I always pass the Naha Port Facility, so on my way back I stopped at the west coast of Urasoe, which lies along

the same Route 58 and is slated to be filled in for the facility's relocation, and watched the sun go down.

In this exhibition, I'm showing 200 photographs in a slideshow. I wrote a diary-like caption for each one. Taken together, they form a sizable body of text, like a running monologue murmured under one's breath. As I reflected on the testimonies passed down by those who survived the Battle of Okinawa and on the fact that even now digging into the soil can uncover the bones of the war dead or unexploded ordnance, I decided to include the text in the exhibition. I wanted to convey an ongoing sense of being here, in this place, grounded in the present moment.

—Next, I'd like to ask about the series **Green Rooms**, which you shot in Taiwan. **Green Rooms** is made up of **Peace Island, Haunted Gardens, American Village, and Old Woman Selling Flowers**. What can you tell us about this series?

I began shooting in Taiwan after I was given the chance to spend the summers there over a two-year period starting in 2023. I have kept returning and shooting ever since. Taiwan became a Japanese colony around the same time as the Ryukyu Islands, and I had been curious about it for a long time. When I finally visited and walked around the streets, I felt that the histories, cultures, and daily lives of people in Taiwan and Okinawa overlap in many ways, so I began photographing Taiwan as a neighboring island.

I felt I needed to give tangible form to the process itself: learning about Taiwan's history and various events I had never heard of, thinking about and engaging with the nature of my own connection and responsibility. That is what led me to shoot the black-and-white series **Green Rooms**.

I traveled throughout Taiwan, from the north down to the south and around the outlying islands, and everywhere I went I encountered scenes that moved me deeply. From among them, I decided to start by putting together small photographic groupings about

events and places that intersect with Okinawa, which I have been photographing for many years, focusing in particular on sites that left a strong impression on me.

The works I am showing here include photographs of old buildings surrounded by Ryukyu Island pine, clusters of US military housing from the Cold War era, Heping Island, where a Ryukyuan settlement existed before the war, and military warehouses that were also used as "comfort stations." As suggested by the word "rooms" in the title, I created small rooms for each group of works in the exhibition. This series is not simply a record of landscapes. I write text in response to the photographs, and I also bring back things I found there, such as small souvenirs, then photograph myself holding them again in my room, seeking to convey how they feel in my hands. I wanted the works to contain not only with the time I spent traveling but also the ongoing process of thinking and remembering within my everyday life.

Taking past time as a point of reference also means continually questioning the time and place I'm in now, and holding on to the questions and premonitions that this awareness brings. For instance, when faced with denials of historical fact, how can we resist these denials? I stopped for a moment in the unbroken flow of daily life, looked closely at small things, and produced a record that might let someone else feel their way into fragments of history.

—Could you tell us, also, about the color series **Green Days**, which you likewise shot in Taiwan?

Because I was working on **Green Days** at the same time as **Green Rooms**, places and subjects recur, and the two series have come to function almost like the two halves of a hinge. As I wandered through different places without a plan, I documented whatever happened to catch my attention. When I looked back through the photographs later, I selected and arranged them in response to what the images elicited, while gradually researching each place and object in more concrete terms.

Taiwan and Okinawa are very close to each other geographically, yet each has gone through a different and complex history, and even now they are forced to live with mounting tension in the space between empires. In Okinawa today, a military buildup is taking place under the pretext of “a potential military crisis situation in Taiwan,” and as residents’ safety is threatened and anxiety rises, I wanted to examine what has happened and what continues to happen in Taiwan, from the standpoint of our connection as neighboring islands. Whether in Okinawa or Taiwan, when I think about the past and present of war, it feels as though they are connected at the root, or as though I am seeing different facets of violence repeatedly inflicted by the same structure. At the same time, the specific traumatic events that have affected these islands are unique, and whenever I confront these events I am struck silent.

For this exhibition, I arranged the series so that it moves in a kind of circulation with *Sleeping Trees*, which I shot on Okinawa Island. I wanted to see whether I could trace the ongoing histories set in motion by colonization. Because both series are in color and have the feel of snapshots, I think the intertwined scars of victimhood and perpetration are revealed under the bright sunlight.

This series is also a record of my own travels, so alongside photographs of historical sites, you will find a glass of iced tea I had in a café and the hotel room where I stayed. No matter how large an event may be, there are always individual bodies and small daily moments that cannot be reduced to numbers. Wanting to hold onto the fact that people lived through those moments in their own ways, I decided to include what I experienced directly, both what I saw and the time I spent there. I think that this back-and-forth between large histories and everyday life, between the public and the private, comes through in my other series as well.

—In both the Okinawa and Taiwan series, you

present black-and-white works in one and color works in the other. Could you talk about how you use black-and-white and color differently, and what each allows you to do?

For me, color photographs show the scene as I see it, and when the viewer later looks closely at what has been recorded, their awareness can drift across multiple moments in time. When I look at color snapshots, I sometimes feel two conflicting sensations, as if a dry brightness and a cool darkness coexist, and that tension is what I find most compelling when I revisit the images.

Black-and-white photographs, on the other hand, are stripped down to light and shadow, but they do not feel to me like simple abstractions. It is more like lifting a membrane from a place or an object. The effect is that I find myself immersing in more distant places, which feels like opening a window that is usually kept shut, and letting my thoughts wander as I recalibrate my sense of distance. For me, the process starts with past events, which I use as a way to reexamine the present moment I inhabit.

With both black and white and color I’m looking at the same surface layers, but the viewpoints are like mirrors facing one another. I switch between them from series to series depending on what each body of work calls for.

—Finally, many visitors may be encountering your photographs for the first time in this exhibition. Is there anything you would like to share with them?

I think of photography as something that starts from the “here and now” in front of the lens but opens doorways into multiple different times. Each photograph shows, in its own way, a cross-section of the layers of time in a particular place. I will be glad if viewers pause over the details in these landscapes and take a quiet moment to imagine what unfolds within them.

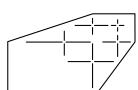
[Translated by Christopher Stevens]

\* This text is based on an interview recorded on November 2, 2025, with additions by Uehara Sayaka.  
(Interviewer: Sato Naoko [Yokohama Civic Art Gallery Azamino])

**Azamino Photo Annual 2026  
Uehara Sayaka: Even If All the Ruins Were  
Swept Away without a Trace**

**Dates:** January 24[Sat]-February 22[Sun], 2025  
**Venue:** Exhibition Gallery 1, Yokohama Civic Art  
Gallery Azamino  
**Organized by:** Yokohama Civic Art Gallery Azamino  
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