

How Photographer Kohei Yoshiyuki's "The Park" Became a Cult Phenomenon

Alexxa Gotthardt April 2, 2019

Photographer Kohei Yoshiyuki wasn't expecting to find the subjects of his most provocative series while on a nighttime stroll through Tokyo's Chuo Park. But there they were: a throng of Peeping Toms, stalking through the



bushes to watch young couples canoodle (and more). The scene was mesmerizing—and unnerving—so he came back with his camera to capture it.

Over the course of the 1970s, Yoshiyuki spent many evenings alongside the nocturnal voyeurs. He became friendly with them, joining their ranks. But when he took pictures, his focus wasn't the lovers who came to fool around, but the Peeping Toms themselves. Yoshiyuki was stalking the stalkers.

"My intention was to capture what happened in the parks, so I was not a real 'voyeur' like them," he

told the *New York Times* in 2007. "But I think, in a way, the act of taking photographs itself is voyeuristic somehow. So I may be a voyeur, because I am a photographer."

Yoshiyuki's series "The Park" certainly exposes the visceral, naughty thrill of voyeurism. It also addresses sexual freedom and fetish; privacy and surveillance; and the dark, uncomfortable spaces where they all mingle. In some images, groups of fully dressed men stare at clutching couples—both hetero- and homosexual—who are blissfully unaware of their audience. In others, the peepers more actively participate, unbuttoning their pants or inching so close to the lovers that they can (and occasionally do) touch them.

The issues that radiate from Yoshiyuki's cult body of work are as potent now as they were in the '70s. Next month, the series will come together in a much-anticipated monograph published by Radius Books and Yossi Milo Gallery.

Yoshiyuki first unveiled the series in a 1972 issue of *Shukan Shincho*, a popular Japanese magazine that freely dug into themes considered taboo in the country. At the time, premarital sex and homosexuality were widely criticized in Japan, and young couples often lived with their parents until marriage. Parks offered a clandestine venue for couples to act on their desires. The publication of Yoshiyuki's images exposed both practices, affronting traditional Japanese propriety and quickly attracting a cult following in Tokyo.

Images like these were rare, exciting—even unlawful. As legal scholar Katherine Biber pointed out in her 2015 essay "Peeping: Open Justice and Law's Voyeurs," it was "illegal in [1970s] Japan to engage in public indecency.... It was illegal to have sex in the park, it was illegal to watch couples having sex in the park, it was illegal to photograph them, and it was also illegal to display or distribute those photographs."

The series' illicit nature only added to its mystique and power. By 1979, Yoshiyuki presented "The Park" in Tokyo's Komai Gallery under his pseudonym (we still don't know the artist's real name). The gallery was darkened so that viewers had to explore the images—which were printed so large that the subjects appeared life-size—with flashlights. "I wanted people to look at the bodies in the photographs an inch at a time," he told fellow photographer Nobuyoshi Araki in a 1980 interview. Yoshiyuki turned the public themselves into Peeping Toms.

Tokyo's artistic circles went crazy for Yoshiyuki's images, but the international photo community barely recognized them until more than two decades later, when famed British photographer Martin Parr included "The Park" in his watershed photo compendium *The Photobook: A History, Volume III* in 2006. Parr described it effusively as a "brilliant piece of social documentation, capturing perfectly the loneliness, sadness, and desperation that so often accompany sexual or human relationships in a big, hard metropolis like Tokyo."

By 2007, Yossi Milo had brought the works to his New York gallery for their international unveiling, and a flood of press and museum shows followed. The series was included in "Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera" at Tate Modern in 2010; "Night Vision: Photography After Dark" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2011; and had a prominent position in the Venice Biennale's main exhibition, "The Encyclopedic Palace," in 2013.

Curators and critics situated "The Park" within a gamut of art-historical lineages. Peeping has long been a human practice (especially in highly regulated, propriety societies), and therefore longtime fodder for artists, too. In Japan, voyeurism features in countless 18th-century ukiyo-e prints, like Suzuki Harunobu's *Young Lovers with a Clock* (1767–68), where couples caress as a third party peeks in from behind a screen. Yoshiyuki's images also hint at Japan's wider fetish culture, a facet of which was captured in another controversial 1970s photo series: Araki's "Kinbaku" (1979), showing the BDSM practice of rope bondage.

Comparisons have also been drawn to pioneering photographers like Weegee and Brassai, who also documented surreptitious sexual behavior at night (in Weegee's case, couples making out in movie theaters; in Brassai's,



prostitution across 1930s Paris). He also joins artists like Sophie Calle, who have spun surveillance into performance and artistic medium.

More recently, in an era marked by our #MeToo reckoning, Yoshiyuki's images also highlight the unease of unwanted touch, as the embracing lovers are patted and grabbed in the dark by the men who watch them. The triple surveillance captured by the images—peepers watching lovers, Yoshiyuki observing peepers, and viewers gazing at it all—also cuts deep in an era when the internet has made personal privacy a hot-button topic.

What's certain is that Yoshiyuki's photos harness timeless human urges, vulnerabilities, and perversions. They ask uncomfortable but necessary questions: What constitutes freedom, and what crosses the line? In the photographer's 1980 interview with Araki, Araki stated that "Only lechers take good photos." Then he asked Yoshiyuki: "So are you one, too?"

Yoshiyuki's answer toes the perennially blurry line between normalcy and indecency captured in his images: "I think I'm completely ordinary, but I think there's a little lecher in everyone."