"Brush Up On My Fieldwork":
The Photographic Projects of Masumi Hayashi

by A. D. Coleman

"Somewhere inside me
are the caves of Iwo Jima
and the sands of Arizona —
gonna get my fingers dirty,
brush up on my field work . . . "
— Ryuichi Sakamoto and Thomas Dolby, "Field Work"[1]

It's usually speculative at best to assert that a given artist was "born to do" a particular piece of work. In the case of the Japanese-American photographer Masumi Hayashi this proves literally true. The project for which she has become best known, widely considered the central achievement of her entire oeuvre, began when she set out in 1990 to photograph her birthplace, the Gila River Relocation Camp in Arizona, where her family found itself forcibly interned during World War II. There Hayashi emerged into life on September 3, 1945, less than a month after the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Hayashi herself had no memory of her infancy during her family's remaining time in what she dubbed the "American concentration camp" environment. In part, then, her first visit to Gila River, made soon after her father's death, had an autobiographical premise, sparked by family history and the initial circumstance of her own life. Yet her engagement with the Gila River

[1] Ryuichi Sakamoto, *Illustrated Musical Encyclopedia* (Dix CD 34, 1986).

site swiftly moved from the personal to the collective, expanding into an investigation of the entire U.S. network of ten relocation camps for citizens of Japanese ancestry, ultimately including the two equivalent camps north of the U.S. border that Canada created for its own citizens of Japanese origin or descent.[2] In effect, she undertook what researchers in some disciplines call "field work," in her case an idiosyncratic mix of sociology, archaeology, and history.

At the time she inaugurated this "American concentration camp" series, Hayashi had already evolved a methodology for generating what she called "panoramic photo collages," which she applied concurrently to a number of ongoing projects. Using a 35-mm. SLR camera mounted on a tripod, moving the camera incrementally at a fixed level in a full circle, she would create a sequence of exposures on color film that described a 360-degree panoramic band, a horizontal slice of the view. She would then repeat the process several times, systematically raising or lowering the camera to encode images of the vistas above and below that first band.[3]

Hayashi - who termed her method a form of "mapping" -- reconstituted these cumulative scans of the scenes she addressed in the physical form of 4x6" borderless color prints, tiled or arranged in the sequence of their exposure to form panoramic strips, and stacked between four to six bands or layers high. These she mounted edge to edge, forming long rectangular collages that might incorporate as many as 150 separate prints and stretch as wide as 75 inches.[4] As she herself wrote, "They present the gestalt of looking at many fractured images and seeing a unified whole. These photographs confront the viewer with

[2] The images in this project, and its various components, appear online at several websites devoted to her work, including http://www.masumihayashi.com/ and http://www.masumimuseum.com/.

[3] It's worth noting that, for the purpose of making these landscapes, she oriented the rectangle of the 35-mm. frame not horizontally (referred to conventionally as "landscape" format) but vertically (which photographers commonly call "portrait" format).

[4] A few of her pieces are higher than they are long, but these are rare exceptions.

the beauty of the natural landscape and ironically with the history and memory of the land."[5]

Though she chose not to use computer systems in this process,[6] Hayashi's mosaics have something of the gridded look of digital images enlarged to the point where their pixelation becomes visible. They also manifest a cinematic quality; the rows of sequential exposures read like filmstrips, since each row's images move steadily through time, and a cloud or branch or bird that appears in one may reappear in subsequent exposures, slightly changed. Shifts in exposure (determined by the camera's light meter as each horizontal sequence progressed through its various framings) affect the coloration of the individual prints, causing a sometimes considerable unevenness of hue that interrupts the unity of the reconstituted vista.

All of this subverts the mind's effort to read these as unified spaces, by calling attention to any given work's separate components, emphasizing the physical materiality of each panorama's elements and the incremental process of its construction. In place of the single unified photographic observation that served as the premise for the classic documentary mode, Hayashi opted for a fundamentally cubist strategy: numerous glimpses, from disparate moments in time, visibly joined with each other to comprise a whole. (In this practice she typified a generation of photographers who, emerging in the 1970s and 1980s, applied often innovative creative-photography strategies to subject matter previously considered the exclusive purview of those working in the traditional

[5] From the 1997 "Artist's Statement" for this project, posted online at http://www.masumihayashi.com/html/statement.html.

[6] Certainly she could have. Though she didn't utilize it in the production of her panoramic collages, Hayashi was an early adapter of the computer. She took courses in computer graphics in 1985 and thereafter, taught that as part of her work as a visual-arts educator, and employed the computer for some projects. I recall visiting her at her Cleveland studio in 1990, shortly after I'd begun using the computer myself. Masumi had several computers running, including an Amiga. On the phone, some weeks before I came, she'd described the Amiga's text-to-speech "Talker" program. She showed me how it worked; I popped in a diskette containing an ASCII file of a short story of mine from 1965, and some hours later had my first computer-generated audio piece recorded on a tape cassette.

forms of documentary photography and photojournalism.)

The results of Hayashi's efforts, though organized and orderly, appear anything but seamless. A multiplicity of subjective views lies self-evidently embedded in each of these large-scale pieces. This correlates with Hayashi's choices of subject for the work she produced. The sites that drew her were the ruins, remnants, and locales of abandoned social environments. Superficially they have no direct connection to each other. But she consistently sought out a specific subcategory of such physical contexts, ones haunted by violence in various forms — ecological (Superfund toxic-waste cleanup sites), economic ("post-industrial" Rust Belt industrial structures), military (fighter-jet graveyards, Nazi death camps), political (the internment camps), and criminal (penal institutions).

Hayashi often spoke of the powerful sense of human presence she experienced in such charged environments. These physical spaces, whether outdoors or indoors, and the structures and objects within them, contained and absorbed the energies of the thousands who occupied them, of course, but also affected the lives of many, many more who experienced the ramifications thereof. It seems only appropriate that, in their very form, works made in response to those hanuted locales should represent a wide diversity of viewpoints.

With the "American concentration camp" series, Hayashi amplified that multifaceted aspect of her own works by adding components that turned it actively polyvocal. She sought out former inmates of the camps, recording and editing interviews with them in which she evoked their memories of and responses to those experiences. She also persuaded them to let her copy photographs they possessed (some of them made, illegally, within the camps themselves by the incarcerated) as contributions to a "family album" that would bring to life that widespread experience of imprisonment. In effect, she

made herself into the linchpin of a communal history of the camps, creating at the same time the components of what one can see as a potential multimedia project: an installation, a DVD, an outdoor nighttime projection . . .

Hayashi did not live to to explore as fully as she might have the display potential of the work she created and the material she gathered.[7] Though she resolved, completed, and exhibited numerous works from each of her several main projects, there's no evidence that she considered any of those projects truly finished. Indeed, she structured them open-endedly; it seems likely that, as time went on, she would have added more of her own visual works to them or augmented them with other materials.

Her interest in the new digital technologies would almost certainly have led Hayashi to explore the possibilities they offered not only for the internment-camp project but for all her various yet interconnected areas of concern. The extensive websites she created demonstrate her embrace of the internet as a distribution system. Because chance or fate cut her efforts short, we are left primarily with the photographic works she resolved during her lifetime. They are sufficient in themselves to confirm her as a significant contributor to the issue-oriented photography and photo-based art of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Despite the violence that lurks beneath the surface or lies embedded in the histories of these vestigial sites she sought out, Hayashi's works themselves are consistently tranquil and often stunningly beautiful. She herself spoke of that as an ironic aspect of the work, but I see in it also an element of Buddhism (a belief system that had great resonance for Hayashi), a concept known to its practitioners as "turning poison into medicine."

From the making of the original negatives through the completed facture

[7] Some of this material appears online at http://www.csuohio.edu/art_photos/gallery.html and http://www.csuohio.edu/art_photos/famalbum/famalbum.html, and was included in exhibitions during her lifetime.

of the finished panoramic collages, Hayashi's creative activity involved slow, rigorous, painstaking effort. It demanded precise previsualization of the final outcome (though not in the sense that Edward Weston or Ansel Adams used the term), along with an openness to chance elements of various kinds.[8] That bespeaks a patience, calm, deliberation, and attention to detail that all who knew her saw as fundamental to Hayashi's character.

The creation of each of these works required a contemplative frame of mind, and they evoke that state from the viewer in turn. In no way do they sentimentalize or romanticize their subjects. Nor do they distract the viewer from the complex human problems whose seeming intractability they represent. The meditation they encourage is not an escape from human failure and violence and suffering, but instead a centered engagement with those forces. They ask the viewer to consider at length what brought these troubled and troubling social spaces into existence, which leads inevitably to exploring the changes that would make their future iterations unnecessary.

Perhaps to counterbalance the disturbing subtexts of many of her works, in 1996 Hayashi had also begun to apply her panoramic photocollage method to ancient sacral sites and spaces in Asia: India, Japan, Nepal, Thailand, Cambodia. This came as no surprise; she was by nature deeply spiritual, and an altogether gentle soul. In all the years I knew her, I never heard her raise her voice in anger or speak harshly of anyone, not even those who had held her and her family in captivity.

Speaking personally, I found in Masumi a staunch friend, a supportive colleague, a committed teaching artist, and a human being as much at peace

[8] For example, in a taped interview first shown on March 25, 2004 by West Virginia Public Broadcasting in conjunction with an exhibition at Fairmount State College of Art, Hayashi spoke of arriving at the Topaz camp in Utah to find a 30-mph sandstorm in progress. At first she considered waiting till it blew over. But then — at the cost of permanent damage to her equipment — she decided to make the images under those conditions, because the internees of the camps had experienced them as well. (This two-part interview can be found at http://www.wvpubcast.org/tv/videos/default.asp.)

with herself as anyone I've ever met. This makes her passing all the more difficult to accept, and the manner of her death all but incomprehensible.[9] I have not yet learned for myself how to turn that particular poison into medicine. But I know that part of the solution to that challenge lies encoded in Masumi Hayashi's work.

[9] Hayashi was shot and killed in her Cleveland, Ohio apartment on August 17, 2006, allegedly by a deranged neighbor.