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MASAO YAMAMOTO: TORI AT YANCEY RICHARDSON GALLERY

By Ratik Asokan



Masao Yamamoto, *Untitled #1673*, 2016.
Courtesy Yancey Richardson Gallery

“Delicacy in art,” John Berger once wrote, “is not necessarily the opposite of strength.” Indeed, some of art history’s most powerful works – Watteau’s sketches, Rajput miniatures, Sesshu Toyo’s ink wash paintings – were made in the smallest scale and spoke their truths in a minor register. To this list, one could add the photographs of Masao Yamamoto.

For two decades, Yamamoto has taken quiet, meditative, black-and-white photographs of easily overlooked scenes from nature, what he calls “small things in silence.” But far from feeling wispy or eccentric, these images – of birds, stones, streams, flowers in bloom – convey an overwhelming spiritual longing. In fact, one might say that Yamamoto’s abiding theme is transcendence: through physical creatures and substances, he searches for the divine. This dichotomy was present throughout *Tori*, at [Yancey Richardson Gallery](#).

Birds have always fascinated Yamamoto, and *Tori* – the Japanese word for “bird” – collects his various ornithological photographs. By and large, they are shot in very small format – the critic Jacobo Siruela compares looking at Yamamoto’s work to “putting our eye to a

keyhole” – in a range of dusky greys and blacks, against which white plumes seem to glow like spirits. Yamamoto washes his gelatin prints in coffee and tea, wearing out their

YANCEY RICHARDSON GALLERY

edges, sometimes painting over them, and the net effect is that of a found photograph; it's like we've chanced upon nature's forgotten family album.

The family members, consequently, have the eerie presence of living ghosts. *Untitled #712*, for example, is a dark landscape inhabited by a single white peacock. The land and water that cover most of the photograph are mere shadow and outline. Amidst this darkness, at the center of the frame, is the crane, looking away in apparent contemplation, bathed in a silvery light. Yamamoto is turning the natural into the supernatural – which, of course, is what it was all along.

<http://photographmag.com/reviews/masao-yamamoto-tori-at-yancey-richardson-gallery/>



Masao Yamamoto, *Untitled #712*, 1991. Courtesy Yancey Richardson Gallery

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