

# Tokyo Story (after Hiroshige)

Emily Allchurch

Emily Allchurch creates complex photographic images that closely reference old master paintings and prints. Each of her images is composed from numerous photographs, carefully blended using digital software, to produce a seamless re-creation of the original, set in a contemporary idiom. *Tokyo Story* is the culmination of Allchurch's long-standing interest in Japanese wood-block prints in the *ukiyo-e* tradition ("pictures of the floating world" produced between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), and pays homage to the master printmaker Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858) and his last great work the '*One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*' (*Meisho Edo hyakkei*) (1856-58) - the largest single-sheet landscape album in the history of *ukiyo-e* and considered Hiroshige's masterwork.

Hiroshige was active at a very interesting period in Japanese history, just before the end of the Shoguns' rule in 1868, when Japan was opened up to the West. His series of views of Edo (former name of Tokyo) captures his native city at this important threshold between a traditional Japan and the huge upheaval induced by both the threat and opportunity of Western imperialism. The prints indirectly reflect upon this moment of rapid change and the subsequent pressure on the environment and cultural heritage. It was a time when travel throughout Japan was opening up to the masses. Tourists could buy these mass-produced prints as a single sheet souvenir (for the cost of a double helping of noodles) or collect the full album over a period of time, as each new print was released. It was the picture postcard/photography of its day.

The '*One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*' is celebrated for its striking compositions; with a dramatically enlarged and often sharply cropped foreground object, set against a distant view and for its mastery of *bokashi*; luminous cross-fading effects created through the graduated wiping of the ink on the printing blocks. Allchurch was captivated by the vibrancy of these works and wanted to follow in the footsteps of Hiroshige to see if she could update the series, from a modern-day perspective, using contemporary photographic tools and her use of back-lit imagery. Her challenge was to transpose the flat colours

and brevity of line inherent in the woodblock print into the medium of photography, to create images that would resonate to an audience today.

In 2009 Allchurch travelled to Tokyo and journeyed around the city to many of the locations in Hiroshige's album. She took many hundreds of photographs along the way to form an image library from which to complete her digital composites on her return to London. She was amazed that, whilst much of the skyline has changed beyond recognition in the subsequent 150 years, so much tradition has been preserved, particularly around the temple and shrine culture. She found an attention to detail and pride in appearance that permeates the whole society and wanted her homage to respectfully reflect this.

Each of Allchurch's ten 'portraits' of Tokyo present a different story, revealing a gentle social narrative for the city today. Nothing has been left to chance. Each element in the work: landscape, architecture, street furniture and people, has been carefully selected by the artist to show an aspect of Japanese culture; from the protective wrapping of the tree trunk in *Tokyo Story 6: Shrine* to the 'coupling' of figures and objects in *Tokyo Story 9: Bankside*. Enlarged lotus flowers are set against a present day Tokyo skyline, complete with advertising hoardings, in *Tokyo Story 1: Lotus Garden*. The mid-ground reveals a female figure captured in the leisurely pursuit of flower photography. *Tokyo Story 5: Cherry Blossom* poignantly balances the delicate beauty and hope of spring blossom with the harsh reality of modern life, illustrated in the sad figure of the homeless man. In contrast, *Tokyo Story 8: Temple* juxtaposes the religious heritage of the temple grounds, with the light entertainment of souvenir shops and fairground rides sometimes found within them. Throughout the series the deliberate positioning of signage and motifs offers a contemporary vision of underlying control and compliance.

Just as Hiroshige's '*One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*' has come to mark a decisive moment in Japanese history, so Allchurch's re-staging in *Tokyo Story* might prove to form a lasting portrait, capturing an essence of the city for the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.