

Photography Review: Kenro Izu's *Bhutan: The Sacred Within*

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What a treat to hear [Kenro Izu](#) talk with [Owen Flanagan](#) at the [Rubin Museum of Art](#) in conjunction with the opening of his exhibition of photographs, "Bhutan: The Sacred Within." Kenro Izu's been exploring and photographing sacred sites both natural and manmade for decades. To look at his landscapes of sacred places around the world is to enter them; you can almost smell and taste the air inside the image. In "The Sacred Within," he turns his lens to the essential element that makes a place sacred: the people that revere it and hold it in their hearts.

Out of all the places he has photographed, Bhutan has especially captivated him, drawing him back six times over six years. Izu writes in the introduction to his accompanying book, *Bhutan*, "Traveling many years, I have not yet seen a place as peaceful as Bhutan, or a place affecting such a peacefulness within myself. If there is a place indeed named Utopia, this place may come the closest to it."

Bhutan, known as the "Land of the Thunder Dragon," is a small independent country of 700,000 people nestled in the Himalayan mountains between China, Tibet and India. What struck him on his first visit was how unique it was among Himalayan lands with its abundance of lush green trees and glacier-fed rivers. He was moved by how the high altitude air was unusually moist and dense. And he was struck by how rich the people seemed, which he noted might sound odd considering the average GNP per capita is under US \$1000, but he never saw anyone begging for money. Instead, people appeared well fed and well dressed, even happy.

Izu travels with a custom-built large-format camera with a 14" x 20" negative that captures the density of the air and the quality of light. His large format platinum palladium prints appear illuminated from within, offering a depth that transcends two dimensions. That also makes them an ideal medium for portraits. Why did it take Izu such a long time to shift from the sacred places to the people that make them so? "I am shy of people. Can't point the camera at them."

Spontaneity is another challenge with his turn-of-the-last-century technology. Every picture has to be staged, "like a diorama of a scene."

He described the process of making an image that looks like a candid of two schoolboys walking and looking back at him (Druk #537, Bumthang, Bhutan 2007). He had seen them walking to school near Tamshing Lhakhang in the morning and envisioned the shot, but they were in a rush to get to school, so he set up to meet them after school and take the photograph.

While the images may not be spontaneous, Izu pointed out how un-self-conscious, authentic and neutral his subjects seemed. This neutrality is something Izu aspires to himself, as he repeated in several ways the idea that "I always want to be myself, not bigger or smaller." To Izu, it seems the Bhutanese have found a middle way between the precious modesty of the Japanese and the super-sized egos of America.

Is this lack of self-consciousness due to inner peace, Buddhist ideas of the self, or freedom from the continuous stream of marketing images in America and Japan (where Izu, now a Brooklyn resident, was born)? Bhutan just launched television and Internet service in 1999, and the Bhutanese are consciously creating media that reflects their values and culture rather than relying on foreign imports. Even the movie theaters are filled with steady streams of [Bhutanese feature films](#). I had hoped we'd get more deeply into this in discussion with Flanagan, a professor of psychology, brain sciences and neurobiology at Duke University, as well as the author of *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World* and the paper 'The Bodhissattva's Brain: The Neuroscience of Wisdom, Virtue, and Happiness,' but I'll have to check those out along with his talks online from the [Mind and Reality Symposium](#) to learn more about his thoughts on these issues.



Kenro Izu's custom-built large format camera on display at Rubin Museum of Art, 2005. Photo by Emily Davidow, all rights reserved



Kenro Izu, Druk # 545 Jambay
Lhakhang, Bumthang, Bhutan, 2007,
Carbon pigment print, 52 x 36 in.

Izu introduced Bhutan's progress indicator of GNH (Gross National Happiness), declared more important than GDP (Gross Domestic Product) by King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck as early as 1986. According to the Bhutanese government's definition, Gross National Happiness depends upon four main pillars: economic self-reliance, environmental stewardship, cultural preservation and good governance.

Cultural preservation refers to the teachings and practice of Buddhism that infuse every aspect of life and value wisdom and compassion*. It also encompasses aesthetic values of beauty and harmony (in this sense, China is a PC, Bhutan is a Mac). Izu captures many of the Bhutanese traditions in his portraits: the indigenous ceremonial Tsechu masks and costumes, tulkus (reincarnated rinpoches), meditating monks, and families enjoying each other.

Flanagan brought up Aristotle's observation that if you ask people what is the greatest good, everyone will agree that it is happiness. But if you ask people to define happiness, everyone offers up a different answer. He also noted that while the people in Izu's portraits looked happy, they weren't exuding a feeling of "happy happy joy joy" so much as serenity and equanimity. He framed the discussion asking Izu whether it was a real happiness, and if so, what is that happiness?

Izu offered a more personal definition from his guide in Bhutan, along with a lively photo exemplifying it: "three generations under one roof, tea, rice and healthy, enjoying life." Both Izu and Flanagan seemed wistful about the depth and strength of these familial relationships in contrast to the dispersed nuclear families of contemporary Japan and America. Asked but not answered: Is that the price of modernity? And is what the Bhutanese have impossible in the modern world?

As I viewed Izu's exhibition, I couldn't help thinking about the portraits of [Edward S. Curtis](#), a photographer who used similar methods to document Native American people. Curtis set out to catalog their ceremonies, beliefs, daily life and landscapes in twenty volumes of "The North American Indian" before it was too late. Although the conditions of the Bhutanese people in 2007 are vastly different from those of the Native American people of 1907, there are striking visual parallels between the black and white images depicting the spiritual life of both cultures with their exquisite textiles, shamanistic masks, and ritual objects, taken by admiring outsiders. Will Bhutan lose its culture as it opens itself up to global communications and technology, foreign travelers and investment, and new forms of government, or can it hold on to its sacred within?

Of course, awareness of both impermanence and the interconnectedness of all things is central to their Buddhist teachings. The last image Izu presented illustrated that with an image of a young girl in a field of cosmos flowers (Druk #444, 2006). He saw this herbaceous perennial in pink, red and white dancing all over the foot of the Himalayan mountains and figured it must be the national flower of Bhutan. What a surprise to learn the species was introduced only 50 years ago by an Irish doctor who brought antibiotics to Bhutan along with a single bag of cosmos flower seeds to remind him of home. He couldn't have imagined these lovely blossoms would find such an ideal combination of soil and climate in the Himalayas.

Indeed, who can predict what will take root and flourish between the cross-pollination of cultures? May the seeds of GNH -- oh, let's go for GGH (Gross Global Happiness) -- take root and blossom in hospitable growing media as people encounter the concept. Izu's exhibition is a beautiful place to start.



Kenro Izu, "Druk #131", Taksang Monastery, Paro, Bhutan 2003

Kenro Izu: Bhutan, the Sacred Within

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[Rubin Museum of Art](#)

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* The finer points of how to manifest GNH are continually unfolding and will be explored at the [Third International Conference on Gross National Happiness](#) held in Bangkok, Thailand November 22-28, 2007. The ongoing discussion can be followed at the [Centre for Bhutan Studies](#).

Disclaimer: I'm currently producing a documentary of spiritual travels in Bhutan and Mongolia. Here is [some footage](#) from the journeys. While there, I took lots of color photos with a digital camera and am rarely shy about taking pictures of people (shoot first, and ask for forgiveness and/or a release form later. You'll never get the moment back.) A poster of Izu's shot of Mt Kailash hangs on the "inspiration door" in my office.