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pics | Courtesy of Mika Ninagawa and Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo

# Pistil Packing

Print Club

I've liked color since I was a baby, so I guess my style has evolved over time.



*Acid Bloom*, 2003  
C-print mounted on plexiglass  
© Mika Ninagawa

**M**ika Ninagawa is a one-woman phenomenon in Japan. The fashionista daughter of famous Shakespearean theater director, Yukio Ninagawa, it is almost impossible to navigate Tokyo without seeing some of her signature, color-saturated images. She has her own magazines, fills shelves of bookstores with best-selling mooks, runs TV ads and neon billboard signs everyone, and has famously photographed and hung out with a string of the most beautiful and famous Japanese actresses, including Anna Tsuchiya (*Kamikaze Girls*, *Sakuran*), Chiaki Kuriyama (*Battle Royale*, *Kill Bill*), Kyoko Fukada (*Kamikaze Girls*), and otaku magazine idol Shoko Nakagawa.

Last year during the three weeks of Christmas and New Year, the basement of the hyper cool, Tadao Ando-designed Omotesando Hills was transformed into a rose-strewn boudoir of light and color for her *Woman* show, a collection of 100 portraits of Japan's most famous females. Fans—nearly all women and girls—packed the gallery, blinking with awe at Ninagawa's extraordinary color visions of a new, confident, in-



*Acid Bloom*, 2003  
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*Anna*, 2004  
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dependent Japanese womanhood, with men and boys cut totally out of the picture. It was a good moment, too, for holiday gift ideas, with shoppers hungrily snapping up truck loads of Mika products, from books and cards to keitai pendants, T-shirts, and sweets. Meanwhile, across town at the elegant and refined Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Contemporary Art's *Space for Your Future* exhibition, a survey of some of the most cutting-edge global design and installation work pieced together by Japan's most important curator Yuko Hasegawa, an unmistakable Ninagawa fish and flowers "bedroom" installation stole the show. At 36, Mika is unique: a superstar heroine of high and pop culture.

Curiously enough, though, she has never really been seen in the United States, and her books are nearly impossible to find in American shops, which is bizarre given there really is no one in Japanese art or photography more famous than her today—not even Takashi Murakami or Yoshitomo Nara. Ninagawa's one thing that has made it to the States is her geisha film, *Sakuran* (starring one of her muses, Anna Tsuchiya), which was shown at the Berlin Film Festival and has garnered a small cult following among J-rock, art movie, and indie-flick fans.

Mika's photos were exhibited on the West Coast for the first time at UCLA in a small, one-day show in March called *Sweet and Bitter: Contemporary "Girl Photography" from Japan*.

**GR: Your photography is perhaps most famous for its color. Is your style something that evolved over time or was it something that you aimed at?**

MN: I've liked color since I was a baby, so I guess my style has evolved over time. But since I started photographing in color, it's been almost the same from the start.





Above and opposite:  
*Acid Bloom*, 2003  
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**GR: Your imagery and themes are always very feminine and full of life and energy. Does that reflect your everyday experiences, or is it something that you've constructed? Is there a message behind your work?**

MN: Basically it's my experiences—nothing that I've constructed. There's some message, but I don't want to tell too much.

**GR: With *Space for Your Future* and the big *Woman* show at Omotesando Hills, 2007 was a breakout year for your art and photography in Tokyo. How do you feel about your work being taken seriously by the world of "high art"?**

MN: It's funny how my work, which is just a photograph, can go from 100 yen to millions of yen and be "high" or "low."

**GR: Does having a larger, different audience affect how you view your work?**

MN: No, it doesn't, although it can be a little troublesome.

**GR: Is there a difference in how you handle commercial jobs and art projects? For example, do you use the same equipment and crews?**

MN: No difference, basically.

**GR: You've released several beautiful and successful photo books. What are your goals when you make one?**

MN: The goal is to satisfy myself, and for many people to see my books.

**GR: You have developed relationships with many iconic female stars in Tokyo: Chiaki, Shoko, Kyoko Fukada, and Anna Tsuchiya. What do they bring to your work? How do they inspire you?**

MN: I like the atmosphere of the times that stars carry on their shoulders. I am very interested in how they shine when the public watches them.

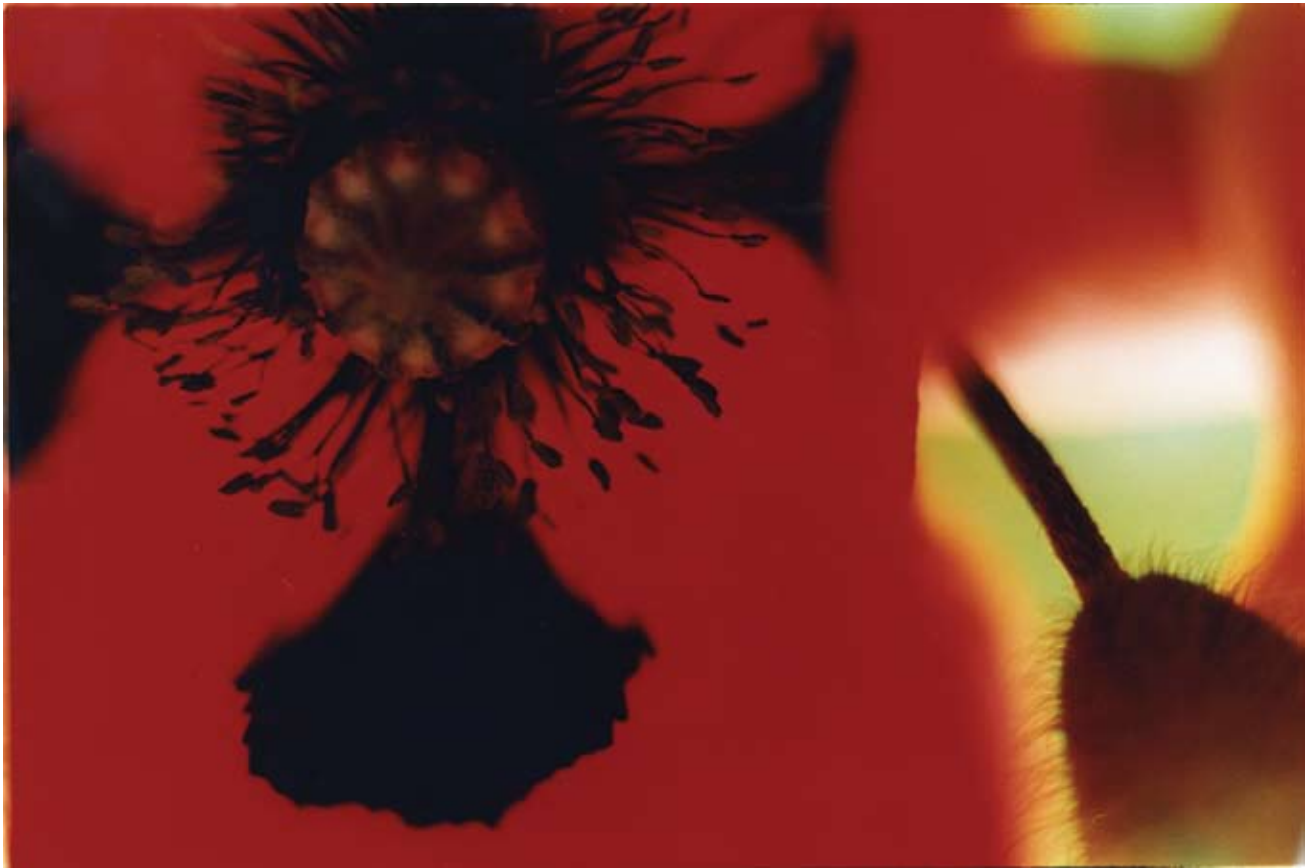
**GR: Have you ever declined a project when approached by a pop star?**

MN: I've never declined, except for schedule problems. I'll take photos of anyone. If they want me to shoot them, of course I'll do it.

**GR: At the *Woman* show, it was obvious that your audience is predominantly girls and women—of all ages. What is it about your work that appeals to females?**

*Mika*, 2004  
 C-print mounted on plexiglass  
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MN: What it is that appeals so much to females? I have no idea.

**GR: Are there elements of your work that are specifically Japanese? Are there aspects that international audiences may not understand?**

MN: I think there are. I think the stream of ukiyoe (pictures of everyday life in Edo era), shunga (erotic ones), and yakushae (popular Kabuki actors) is inherited. And my style is more of Tokyo than Japanese!

**GR: It's said that Araki was important in recognizing your work. Do you feel any connection with him or his work?**

MN: He was? What was the connection? I don't particularly feel or see it, although it might be said that all Japanese photographers have been somehow influenced by him.

**GR: Was it a natural transition from photographer to filmmaker? Was it different to shoot Anna Tsuchiya in a movie rather than for photos?**

MN: It was sort of natural and it was fun, since a movie is totally different than photos.

**GR: At the end of 2007, you had a baby boy. It was quite a public event, with media coverage and a stunning portrait of you at the *Woman* show. Do you think being a mother will change your work and lifestyle?**

MN: Taking pictures is separate from my daily life. It's still a daily thing, but now I feel like I'm in another dimension when I take them. So I don't think my work is gonna change. But the rest of my lifestyle has changed so much!

*Portrait, 2007*  
C-print mounted on plexiglass  
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