

'Gold Rush Alaska'

Gentaro Ishizuka

The History of Alaska's Gold Rush, Sculpted by Narrative



KOTARO NUKAGA, Tennoz is pleased to present 'Gold Rush Alaska,' an exhibition showcasing the works of Gentaro Ishizuka, from March 23 to May 18.

This exhibition is a tie-in with Ishizuka's art book *Gold Rush Alaska*, scheduled to be published by prestigious German publisher Steidl. His book was selected for publication as the winner of Steidl Book Award Japan in 2016, a dummy book award held in conjunction with the 8th TOKYO ART BOOK FAIR. Steidl is revered globally as one of the premier publishers of art books, trusted by eminent artists around the world for its uncompromising quality and attention to detail. Gerhard Steidl, its founder, personally selected Ishizuka's work for the Grand Prix from around 4,000 entries. Now, after undergoing many years of painstaking development, *Gold Rush Alaska* is finally going to print.

Ishizuka's practice is concerned with reinterpreting the spatiality of photographic expression. In the *Gold Rush* series, he sets out to "sculpt as history" the gold rush phenomenon that occurred in late 19th-century Alaska. This upcoming exhibition will showcase 14 photographic works that had been unpublished (three were included in a group exhibition at the Pola Museum of Art in 2019), along with three photographic sculpture pieces that bring the images into three-dimensional forms.

The gold rush in question took Alaska by storm at the end of the 19th century, following the discovery of the precious metal in various locations around the area. Suddenly, swarms of prospectors drawn by the promise of wealth arrived in this region, previously home only to indigenous hunter-gatherers living modestly in small settlements. Cultural anthropologist and critic Ryuta Imafuku, who is Professor Emeritus at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, opened his essay for Ishizuka's art book *Gold Rush Alaska* as follows [English by author]:

The Gold Rush is the ruin of history, the ruin of memory. The ruin of history decays, but the ruin of memory haunts us forever. It not only haunts, but procreates. Procreates something new, something unknown. Something extraordinary, astonishing microscopic slices of reality. We are surprised to realize that there is so much tenacity and passion in these ruins. A never-before-seen "history fetus" is about to appear in this world.

Meanwhile, Shozo Fujita—a Japanese political scientist and historian of ideas—remarks in *Photography and Society* on the Parisian sights that caught the eyes of French photographer Eugène Atget:

The movements implied by "what is left behind" is subtle. The very idea of "what is left behind" rests upon its being surrounded by that which has already vanished. It has not been artificially rid of its surroundings; rather, it is left behind precisely insofar as it yet retains those vanished surroundings. It is also this that

*throws into relief all the relationships it shared with what—and who—had once surrounded it. **

Ishizuka's work too tackles this very theme of "what was left behind," and the vanished surroundings that it retains: the phenomenon that was the gold rush, and humanity's fanatical lust for precious gold. This, surely, is what Ishizuka is conveying with a vivid reality, and the "history fetus" waiting to emerge.

Known for diving into the great wild with his large-format camera to capture the world in all its fine detail, with the *Gold Rush* series Ishizuka brings to the fore his singular gift as a storyteller. Mr. Steidl, who is known for his fastidious attention to the editing of narrative in art books, is said to have unreservedly approved of Ishizuka's editing and left it virtually untouched to the surprise of all, a testament to its narrative strength.

The series is composed of three broad categories of images: landscape photographs capturing abandoned buildings and equipment on the verge of being swallowed up by nature; tableaux comprising miscellaneous items, such as animal bones and postcards, that were left inside the derelict buildings; and reproductions of images from photographer Eric A. Hegg's documentation of Alaska's gold rush.

Generally speaking, stories are told through *depiction* and *narration*. Ishizuka's landscapes and tableaux *depict* the gold rush in different ways: the former illustrates the vastness of the environment, so inhospitable to human habitation, and of the temporal divide between the gold rush and our present day; the latter depicts the long-dissipated frenzy of those days, the disappearance of both the prospectors and the chroniclers of the gold rush, and the fact that here too, just like in the world beyond it, the past continues to weather away. The reproductions images, meanwhile, serve to *narrate* those events in the present day, bringing the story forward towards the present rather than leave it left behind in the distant past. Ishizuka skillfully arranges and edits the visual languages afforded by each of these types, engendering at their overlap something beyond mere documentation.

If time is to be understood as moving forward, and history as lying behind us, passed and gone, this is perhaps because history is recounted by people other than ourselves. Ishizuka points his large-format camera forward to take in "what is left behind"—but as something that lies up ahead, and in that sense, not yet consigned to history. What Ishizuka thus demonstrates in *Gold Rush Alaska* is the very act of historization through photography. That is to say, by depicting and narrating what was left behind, he is sculpting that fetus of history in order to present it to us. The photographic sculpture pieces that have been newly produced for this exhibition can be seen as an extension of this concept.

* Fujita, Shozo. *Fujita Shōzō chosakushū daikyūkan: Shashin to shakai shōshi* [Photography and Society: A Short History, The Collected Works of Shozo Fujita, Volume 9]. Tokyo: Misuzu Shobo, 2003, p. 14.



Gentaro Ishizuka Interview Video on Youtube