

Tsumari Story

RongRong & inri

Broadly speaking, the types of precipitation that have form and fall from the sky are rain, snow, hail, and sleet. Dew is a vapor in the earth that produces round beads of water; frost is the frozen form of this vapor, its shape depending on the coldness of the air. The earth's vapors rise up into the skies to become rain, snow, hail and sleet, but if they come into contact with warm air, they all revert to water. Water fills the entire earth and returns to the earth in this way. In the depths of the earth, there is inevitably a warm vapor. When it becomes warmer, the 'earth' exhales vapor into the heavens in the same way that human breathe. This continues ceaselessly, day and night. The 'heavens' also exhale a 'vapor' that descends to the 'earth'; this is what I call the breathing of heaven and earth. It is the same as the exhalation and inhalation of human breath. The breath of heaven and earth nourishes all things. If the breath of heaven and earth changes from its usual state, it causes disturbances in times of heat and cold. Storms, heavy rains and other convulsions of nature are caused by the sickness of the heaven and earth.

From: SUZUKI Bokushi, *Hokuetsu Seppu Vol. 1* [Snow stories of North Koshi Province] (1837)

Since ancient times, the area surrounding Echigo-Tsumari in Niigata Prefecture has been renowned as one of the snowiest districts of Japan and in winter snows blankets the landscape. *Hokuetsu Seppu* is a book, written during the nineteenth century that describes the numerous hardships that have confronted people living there throughout history as they struggle to live in such a harsh natural environment. On occasion of our participation in the *Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale 2012*, we felt it necessary to reexamine the relationship that exists between nature and humankind, leading to the commencement of the work that comprises this photographic series.

The breath of heaven and earth nourishes all things. People's lives and deaths have always remained closely related to heaven and earth. A life that did not conform to heaven and earth would result in a deep illness in later years. Like the plants that hold their breath under the weight of snow, our lives also originate and are nurtured by the same earth. The dignity of the forests, that incorporate the workings of all life, sends a shudder down the spine of those who enter them unprepared, forcing us to acknowledge that humans are not their equals. As we head towards the rural landscapes that people have gradually established within this vastness, we gradually recall the distant memories that have come down to us through our individual memories.

Produced over a period of approximately two years, from 2012 to 2014, this series of photographs underwent a fundamental change in direction due to the fact that during the course of working on it, inri and the children came to live in Japan. Three-and-a-half years after the 3.11 earthquake, people still have no clue how to solve the problems created by the enormous natural and manmade disasters it caused because the true nature of these problems has yet to be revealed and the whole country remains in chaos. Our initial intention for this series was to reflect a worldview based on the image created by the origin of the name of this area, 'Tsumari' and its local legends. We wandered through the snow-covered maze with no clear objective, imagining a story of a man and a woman who are seized by extreme emotions while living within Tsumari's harsh natural environment. However, as the series progressed, we began to question the necessity of burying ourselves at this time in a worldview comprising of hackneyed aesthetics with no sense of the future. Despite our loss of direction we continued to photograph and just as we were about to give up all hope of completion, we returned to the basis of creativity, namely we asked

ourselves 'what do we need to aspire to in order to demonstrate our present attitude towards life.' We were saved by the crystalline waters of the melted snow from Mt. Hakkaisan and when this flow became one with the 'cycle of life' that had formed the basis of our prior work, the roar of the surging waters seemed to flow through my entire body, purifying me.

I would like to dedicate this story to my late father who fitted into the scenery of the terraced rice fields better than anyone else, staying at Myokayama primary school with us while we searched the mountains for wild edible plants. Finally, we would also like to offer our sincere gratitude to everybody who assisted us in the creation of this story.