

# Johsel Namkung

## *Korean American Photographer*

Johsel Namkung was born in Korea in 1919. Formally trained as an classical singer in Korea and Japan, he emigrated to the United States after WWII where he transformed himself into a visual artist – an artist who sees the beauty of the natural world as a manifestation of music.

Johsel has long been considered to be a member of the “Northwest School” of artists, in the company of Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Kenneth Callahan, and George Tsutakawa. Many of the most notable Northwest artists of the 50’s, 60’s, and 70’s were his close friends. Mark Tobey, perhaps the most famous Northwest artist from those years, was a frequent visitor to Johsel’s home, where Tobey played the piano while Johsel sang for guests at the frequent gatherings of these giant figures of Northwest Art.

I have had the pleasure of knowing Johsel for many years, introduced by mutual friends in 1970. We immediately hit it off, and began photographing together on occasional field trips. We became life-long friends, and recently we have become working partners in the publishing and exhibiting of his magnificent photographs.

For many years Johsel produced analogue prints in my darkroom. Although he still uses film, we now make his prints digitally. We start by digitizing his images from 4” x 5” and 8” x 10” color negatives. We then work together to color correct and fine tune each image to his satisfaction. The result is that we now have “digital master files” of all his important images, and we produce prints that are larger and superior in every way to the analog prints of yesterday.

I realized from the beginning of our relationship that Johsel had a vision of nature that was unique. Due to his training in music from an early age, coupled with his love of Nature, Johsel has the ability to see music in nature, music that most of us would simply not recognize. What might seem ordinary to us may become a visual symphony to him, and he has the ability to capture that visual symphony and play it back for us via his prints.

The following pages contain a list of exhibitions, a list of collections containing his work, and the introduction to his most recent book, “Ode To The Earth”, which I had the pleasure of publishing. I think you will find his life journey to be quite fascinating.

If you have questions about Johsel and the availability of his work please feel free to contact me.

Cheers,

Dick Busher, Publisher

# Johsel Namkung

## *Exhibition Chronology*

### **Solo Exhibitions**

- 2008 Gordon Woodside - John Braseth Gallery, Seattle, WA
- 2007 Museum of Photography, Seoul, Korea
- 2006 Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA
- 1986, 1980, 1978 Foster/White Gallery, Seattle, WA
- 1986 Shanghai Photographers Association, China
- 1986 Chongqing Photographers Association, China
- 1986 King County Arts Commission, Seattle, WA
- 1985 University of California at Santa Cruz, CA
- 1982 Les Musées du Château des Ducs de Bretagne à Nantes, France
- 1979 Gallery 76, Wenatchee Community College, Wenatchee, WA
- 1978 Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA
- 1973, 1972, 1966 Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, WA
- 1971, 1970, 1969 Seattle Pacific Science Center, Seattle, WA
- 1967 Reed College, Portland, OR
- 1967 Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR

### **Group Exhibitions**

- 2000 "Through Our Eyes: Twentieth Century Asian American Photography of the Pacific Northwest," Wing Luke Asian Museum, Seattle, WA
- 2000 "Tenth Annual Korean American Artists Association of Washington State Exhibition," Bank of America Gallery, Seattle, WA
- 1995 "With New Eyes: Toward an Asian Art History in the West," San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA
- 1994 "They Painted From Their Hearts, Pioneer Asian American Artists," Wing Luke Asian Museum, Seattle, WA
- 1989 "100 Years of Washington Photography," Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, WA
- 1982 "Pacific NW Artists and Japan," The National Museum of Art, Osaka, Japan
- 1982 "Washington State Photography Show," Olympia State Museum, Olympia, WA
- 1981 "Kobe Portopia," City of Kobe, Japan
- 1981 "The Washington Year," Henry Art Gallery, Univ. of Washington, Seattle, WA
- 1981, 1980, 1979, 1978 "New Acquisitions Show," Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA
- 1977 "Washington Open," Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA
- 1977 "Rainier Bank Acquisitions Show," Foster/White Gallery, Seattle, WA
- 1974 "City Purchases," Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, WA
- 1973 "Oriental Eye," Focus Gallery, San Francisco, CA

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## *Selected Art Collections*

### **Museums**

Seattle Art Museum  
Oakland Museum  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art  
Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle  
Museum of Photography, Seoul, Korea

### **Corporations**

The Bank of California  
Bank of America  
Seattle Four Seasons Hotel & Residences  
Washington Mutual Savings Bank  
Telco Federal Credit Union  
Price Waterhouse & Co.  
Univar Corp.  
Safeco Insurance Co.  
Delco Development  
Graham Contracting, Ltd.  
Qwest  
Northwest Building Corporation  
Foster & Marshall, Inc.  
Alaska Airlines  
Microsoft Corporation  
Unico Properties, Inc.  
Mobil Oil Company  
Exxon Company

### **Institutions**

Paul G. Allen Center for Computer Science & Engineering  
Seattle City Light  
Seattle Arts Commission  
King County Arts Commission  
State of Washington Arts Commission  
U.S. Vice President's House, Washington, D.C.  
Port of Seattle  
Seattle - Tacoma International Airport  
Japanese Imperial Household, Tokyo, Japan  
Harborview Medical Center, Seattle  
Korean Consulate General, Seattle

# Johsel Namkung

## *Books & Periodicals*

### **Books**

*Johsel Namkung: Ode To The Earth*, Cosgrove Editions, 2006

*Johsel Namkung: a Short Autobiography*, Korean American Historical Society, 2006

*Iridescent Light: The Emergence of Northwest Art*, by Deloris Tarzan Ament and Mary Randlett. University of Washington Press, 2002

*Johsel Namkung: An Artist's View of Nature*, Seattle Art Museum, 1978

*The Olympic Rain Forest*, by Johsel Namkung and Ruth Kirk, University of Washington Press, 1967

### **Periodicals**

*Nature reframed: Photographer captures beauty in unexpected places*,  
by Sheila Farr, Seattle Times, May 2, 2006

*From temporary exhibit to permanent collection*,  
by Sheila Farr, Seattle Times, October 20, 2006

*New Exhibit: Northwest Photographer Johsel Namkung's 'Fifty Vignettes of King County Parks' at Courthouse*,

by Caitlin Sullivan, The Arts, January, 1986

*Johsel Namkung - The Perfectionist Photographer*,

by Yugyong Kim, The Korea Times, p.4, July 22, 1986

*Interview of Johsel Namkung, a US Nature Photographer*,

by Eiho Otani, Sotokoto, pp.10-13, August, 2001, Tokyo, Japan, 1982

*Namkung's Photos Technically Superb*,

by Deloris Tarzan, The Seattle Times, p.F-15, March 2, 1980

*Discovering the Essence*,

by James Burns, Northwest Photography, vol.3, no.5, June, 1980

*Namkung's Photography Thesis: Basically it's an Artistic Creation*,

by Herb Belanger, The Seattle Times, March 3, 1978

*Photography and Music*,

by Johsel Namkung, Northwest Arts, p.3, vol. IV, no.6, March 31, 1978

*Using Landscape as an Object of Art*,

by R. M. Campbell, The Seattle Post-Intelligencer, p.G-6, April 9, 1978

*Namkung Captures Spirit of Place*,

by Deloris Tarzan, The Seattle Times, p.B-7 April 9, 1978

*The Art of Johsel Namkung*,

by Herb Belanger, The Seattle Times, p.P-7, February, 1973

# Johsel Namkung

## *Personal Chronology*

- 1919 Born in Korea, April 24th, 1919
- 1936 - 1940 Studied music at Tokyo conservatory of Music
- 1939 First Prize in singing at Third All Korea Music Contest
- 1940 First Prize in singing at Ninth All Japan Music Concours
- 1941 - 1944 Taught music in Shanghai, and program editor for Shanghai Philharmonic Orchestra
- 1945 - 1947 Manager of Seoul Symphony Orchestra, and Production Advisor for Seoul National Radio
- 1947 Emigrated to the United States
- 1948 - 1950 Studied singing at the University of Washington, Seattle
- 1948 - 1951 Taught Japanese language in Far Eastern Department, University of Washington, Seattle
- 1952 - 1956 Language Specialist for Northwest Airlines
- 1957 Studied color photography with Chao-chen Yang, Seattle
- 1958 Studied black & white photography with Ansel Adams
- 1956 - 1961 Department chairman for Chroma, Inc., Seattle
- 1961 - 1986 Scientific Photographer, University of Washington, Seattle
- 1966 First One-Man Show, Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington
- 1986 - Retired from University of Washington to devote all of his energies to his personal photography
- 2007 Most recent One-Man Show, Museum of Photography, Seoul, Korea

# Johsel Namkung

## *Introduction from Ode To The Earth*

"Photography is the apprehension of a thing by realization of our own essential unity with it," Johsel Namkung has said. His photographs, sharp-focused studies of nature in which man's presence is nowhere evident, convey more than visual information. They carry a mood that communicates so directly their impact is palpable. To see one of his scenes is to be present with him at the moment of its capture, to share in the sense of place.

In comparison with other artists of the Northwest School, Johsel Namkung came late to the Northwest. He traces his family back more than thirty generations, to China in the time of Confucius. Many generations ago, the family moved from China to Korea.

His father, Hyuk Namkung, converted to Christianity after marrying a woman whose wealthy father donated buildings to Christian missionaries in Korea for meetings and schools. Hyuk Namkung agreed to convert in exchange for her agreement to stop using scented camellia oil on her hair. But his later focus on his new faith suggests something well beyond domestic compromise. He went on to graduate from the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Pyongyang. He earned a Master of Divinity degree from Princeton University in 1923, and a Doctor of Divinity in 1925 from the Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. He returned to Korea to teach theology, Greek and Hebrew, as the first Korean professor to hold a D.D. degree. His primary focus was a project to retranslate the Bible into Korean, this time not from the King James version, but from original biblical sources. He completed the task in 1938.

Johsel Namkung was born in 1919, in Gwangju, south Jeolla Province, at the southern tip of Korea. He was the sixth of nine children; the fourth son. Impressed by his eldest brother, John, a noted composer and poet who was gifted at whatever art he pursued, Johsel briefly flirted with the idea of becoming an artist, but decided instead to become a musician.

In 1936 he became a student at the Tokyo Conservatory of Music, where he studied voice and music theory under German tutelage. With the Japanese military presence in Korea growing more aggressive, demanding that all Korean Christians worship at Shinto shrines, Johsel's father moved the family to Shanghai, which foreign concessions rendered safer than the rest of China or Korea.

In 1938, in his music teacher's studio, Johsel met fellow student Mineko Suematsu, who was to become his wife.

Her father, Isamu Suematsu, a noted artist, disapproved of Johsel in part because he was Korean but, more important, because he was a musician, and therefore, in her father's eyes, would be a poor provider. He did not soften his stance, even when Namkung won the All-Japan Music Contest in 1940.

Namkung remained in Japan until 1940, when his father, alarmed at the news coming in on his shortwave radio of Japan's military movements, requested that he rejoin the family in Shanghai. Johsel and Mineko planned that she would follow him to Shanghai as soon as she was able.

# Johsel Namkung

*Introduction from Ode To The Earth, continued.*

In 1941 Mineko came to meet Namkung's family in Shanghai. Johsel and Mineko were married June 19, 1941. It was a match that pleased Namkung's family no better than hers. The Namkungs had no wish for the family to be joined to Japanese, since Namkung's maternal aunt had been severely tortured as a political prisoner of the Japanese. Their marriage overcame political biases and national stereotypes. Johsel and Mineko assisted in the organization of the Shanghai Philharmonic Orchestra. Namkung was the orchestra's program editor, and one of its bass soloists. Both of them were featured singers in a performance of Mozart's Requiem Mass. Namkung also gave several solo recitals of German lieder.

When news on the shortwave radio made it clear that Japan was losing the war in 1944, Namkung feared the Chinese might decide to take revenge on Mineko for Japanese atrocities in China. He fled with Mineko to Japan. When they learned that the city of Kobe was burned it was clear that all Japanese cities were in serious danger. They managed to get passage on a boat to Korea, landing there two months before the war ended. Hunger and strife were widespread in Korea, and Mineko's prospects of safety from Koreans bitter about the Japanese were scarcely better there than in Shanghai.

After the war's end, Johsel worked briefly for the Korean government broadcasting station, acting as an advisor for American Military Government programs. Later, he worked for the Seoul Symphony Orchestra.

In 1947, under the sponsorship of an American friend, Colonel Vic N. Miller from Seattle, Johsel and Mineko came to the United States. The president of Seoul National University, Harry B. Ansted, who had been a professor at Seattle Pacific College, provided scholarships for both of them. After an audition at the University of Washington School of Music, Johsel won a scholarship and a teaching assistantship.

Johsel organized the Asian material in the Music Department's archives, and later taught Japanese language at the university's Far Eastern Department. The teaching job entitled him to a permanent resident's visa, which enabled the couple to bring their two young daughters, Irene and Poki, to the United States in 1949.

In 1951, having completed his music studies, Namkung took a position with Northwest Orient Airlines. To encourage international travel between Asia and the United States, the airline hired him as a language specialist, to greet and offer assistance to important Asian politicians and businessmen arriving in Seattle. With fluency in Japanese, Chinese, and Korean and a cultural polish superior to most of the arrivals, he was a perfect choice for the job.

"I had hoped I could continue my music career," he recalls. "But meeting flights which routinely might be delayed for six or seven hours meant that I couldn't devote the necessary time to practice." After he had rejected opportunities as an opera singer and a popular entertainer, he thought he might still pursue advanced studies in ethnomusicology.

# Johsel Namkung

*Introduction from Ode To The Earth, continued.*

He picked up photography as a means of creative expression and found himself intrigued with it. In 1956 he quit work with Northwest Orient to apprentice with Chao-Chen Yang, a former teacher at the Burnley School of Art who was revered by Northwest photographers for his expertise in color. Following Asian tradition, Namkung worked for him for nine months without salary in Yang's downtown commercial studio, where food, fashion, and architecture were the usual subjects.

During that time, Mineko opened an art gallery, Hanga, on the east side of Broadway near John Street, on Seattle's Capitol Hill. It joined the Zoë Dusanne Gallery and the Otto Seligman Gallery as the only commercial galleries in the city at the time. At Hanga, she introduced Seattle collectors to contemporary Japanese woodblock prints. Americans were beginning to recover from the animosity to things Japanese engrained in them during World War II. The time was ripe for a fresh appreciation of Japanese art.

When the gallery closed five years later Mineko began to exhibit and sell her own watercolors and prints through shows at the Kiku Gallery. Johsel, by then, had the first exhibition of his photographs at the Henry Art Gallery.

In 1957, when Kodak introduced Type C prints, Namkung worked with the negative-positive process. This process requires meticulous persistence and absolute color vision. He prefers to work with color negative film because of his ability to manipulate it in the printing process through filtration of primary colors.

Johsel's training included a week long workshop with Ansel Adams in 1958 in Carmel, California, where he worked in black and white, as Adams customarily did. There are major differences, both technically and aesthetically, between black-and-white and color photography. Black-and-white photographs translate color into a gray scale. Namkung thinks of black-and-white photography as an abstract medium, noting that successful black-and-white images invoke stronger impressions than do color shots.

After his apprenticeship, Namkung took a position with a commercial photo laboratory, Chroma Inc., where for five years he was in charge of professional-quality enlargements. Simultaneously with that professional work, he was finding photography to be an increasingly expressive medium for looking at nature.

Hidezo Fujimura, a Japanese businessman with whom Namkung had become friendly during his days with the airline, gave him a needed break. Fujimura owned a knitting company that sold angora sweaters to major American department stores. His business was prospering. In 1957 he gave Johsel \$500 to buy the best possible camera equipment, and go into business. With this gift, Johsel obtained a Sinar 4x5-inch view camera and several lenses, which he used for his subsequent nature photography. Through his artist friends Paul Horiuchi and George Tsutakawa he met Mark Tobey, Kenneth Callahan, and Guy Anderson.



# Johsel Namkung

*Introduction from Ode To The Earth, continued.*

Horiuchi, Tsutakawa, and the Namkungs hosted soirees for the artists, at which, after a sumptuous repast, they would sit around sketching each other, or inventing imaginary scenes from nature. The Namkungs' most frequent visitor was Tobey, who loved to play the piano to accompany Namkung as he sang Brahms and Schubert songs. Namkung recalls that in the late 1950's Tobey used to take the sheet music for the songs with him to his music teacher, Berthe Ponce Jacobson, to be coached in playing it as accompaniment during his next visit.

Namkung's experiences during World War II had left him with the desire to contribute somehow to the welfare of humanity. He and his family had survived perilous times by being helped by people of enormous kindness.

He took a portfolio of his photographs to the U.W. Medical School. He was initially told they had no work for a photographer, then someone recalled that the Pathology Department had an opening in electron microscopy. Namkung was hired as a medical photographer, a position he occupied for the next twenty-five years. The job gave him ample time and opportunity to pursue his own photography, shooting nature from the sand dunes along the Oregon coast to the wilderness beaches of the Olympic Peninsula. Sometimes he carried the heavy camera up mountains, shooting no more than one or two exposures in a day, to bring home a prized shot of lichen or a rock.

In 1966 he had his first solo exhibition, at the Henry Art Gallery, in conjunction with the publication of the book *The Olympic Rain Forest* by Ruth Kirk, which featured his photographs. In 1973, he was given another exhibition at the Henry Art Gallery, this time a retrospective that included both black-and-white and color work. The Seattle Art Museum mounted a major exhibition of his nature photography in 1978. On the cover of the show's catalog, a coral sky finds perfect reflection in the unruffled water of Lake Wenatchee, ringed with the charcoal silhouette of mountains. It is one of those images whose symmetry and spare beauty can cause viewers to breathe differently when they behold it.

The poetic sensibility Namkung brought to his subjects is visible in his capture of waterfalls, wildflowers in high mountain meadows, tree branches encased in glittering ice, and the lichen-crusting bark of ancient trees. In conversation with Charles Cowles, then curator of modern art, Namkung said: "My photography is very strongly based on music. I think photography is the reflection of things which already exist in their own right, but they need an artist so that they may be fully seen and understood by man. These worldly things may be in physical form, as the setting moon, or in the form of sound, as ocean breakers pounding on the shore and rain tinkling down on the gravel. In my work I would like to impart that impression of sound, music, emotion or philosophy, whatever you will, of that moment when you are on the top of the mountain standing all by yourself with your camera, that moment's loneliness and exultation. I would like to impart not just visual sensations but the third dimension of the visual world."

# Johsel Namkung

*Introduction from Ode To The Earth, continued.*

From his musical background, he perceives a photograph as a visual fugue with an overall theme and contrapuntal texture, and details that provide a progressive form. Nearly all of his major photographs can be seen in that light. To satisfy him, his work must contain all the information of the original scene, plus the pictorial elements of other forms of art. Photography can hold its own with painting, he says, yet differ from painting in its utmost clarity.

Namkung's life changed dramatically on February 26, 1999, when Mineko died of cancer. He scattered her ashes on ShiShi Beach, near Neah Bay, Washington, a place that had been special to them for decades. Rededicating himself to photography has helped him find renewed meaning in life.

*Deloris Tarzan Ament*

Reprinted with permission from *Iridescent Light* by Deloris Tarzan Ament (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002).

# Johsel Namkung

## *Epilogue from Ode To The Earth*

At times, life without Mineko seemed to be such a burden. I had hoped that I would revitalize my life and go straight back into the creative world of photography, but it was easier to make the resolution than to carry out the action.

Seeking some consolation in music, I went to a Seattle Symphony concert at Benaroya Hall on March 27, 1999. The program included Hector Berlioz' song cycle, "Les nuits d'été". It was one of Mineko's most favorite pieces of music and she loved to sing the fourth song of the cycle, "Absence." On this night, it was performed by Frederika von Stade, and I couldn't help but cry during the performance. After the intermission was over, the lady sitting next to me came back to her seat. I told her the reason why I wept so much, and she said she could sympathize with me because she had lost her husband thirteen years previously. We had sat next to each other throughout the concert season but had never spoken to each other until then. I thought that I would like to get to know her better, but we didn't get to see each other until the next musical season. Today, we are happily married and rejoice at our good fortune. I thought it was an extra natural force that had arranged our meeting. As a devout Christian, she firmly believes that it was preordained by God. As my first marriage was made through music, my second also was made through music. Monica is an enthusiastic chorister, singing with the Seattle Symphony Chorale.

As a photographer Monica used to be an ordinary snap shooter. Since our marriage she has become a surprisingly refined photographer. Her vision has become so sophisticated that I often wonder how she picked it up so fast. In April, 2002 we went to Paris and looked for Berlioz' tomb. We found it in Cimetière Monmartre which was not far from the hotel where we stayed. It was natural that we offered our homage to him. After all, he allowed us to meet.

When I first revealed to her my desire to have another exhibition at the Seattle Art Museum, Monica was most enthusiastic. All along the way, she devoted days and hours to give me encouragement and timely advice. Whenever I was in depression due to a lack of progress she was there to console me and find a reason to cheer up. Without her assistance the 2006 exhibition would not have been materialized.

*Johsel Namkung*