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Tuesday, Aug. 12, 2008

## Artist puts a happy face on Olympics

### Photographer's smiling children pics bring cheer

By **MINORU MATSUTANI**  
 Staff writer

Pictured on umbrellas paraded at the event, the happy faces of more than 1,000 children from around the world adorned Friday's opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympics at the Beijing National Stadium, otherwise known as the Bird's Nest.

Behind the photos was art director and photographer Koji Mizutani, who was excited to see how the photos he took had added felicity to the event.

The 57-year-old offered the pictures to Chinese movie director Zhang Yimou, the producer of the opening ceremony, sending him four batches in April and May.

"My motivation is that smiles cheer up people and bring peace to the world," Mizutani said. "Also, more importantly, it makes me merry."

Mizutani, who runs a design company in Tokyo, makes posters of smiling faces to cheer people. Dubbed the Merry Project, Mizutani exhibited similar posters in Kobe after the Great Hanshin Earthquake in January 1995 and in New York after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

When Mizutani learned last summer that the theme of the Beijing Olympics was "One World One Dream," he was convinced that the concept matched his Merry Project and wanted to be a part of Friday's event.

Although Mizutani did not personally know Zhang, that didn't stop him. He sent sample posters and letters explaining the project to Zhang last August.

"Surprisingly, Zhang replied to me (by e-mail) and said 'This is exactly what we want to do,'" Mizutani said.

In December, he was invited to Beijing to discuss details with Zhang, who in the end asked him for some 1,500 photos of smiling faces of mainly young children from around the world.

Despite the amount of work required, Mizutani was ready to volunteer. "I am simply happy my photos are used in such a big event to show what I do to the world," he said.

Mizutani's project won't end in Beijing this summer. Some 100 merry faces of Asian youths have been welcoming visitors to Metro Hat in the glitzy Roppongi Hills commercial area in Minato Ward, Tokyo, since Friday. The exhibit, which runs through this Sunday, is part of the "Asian Summer in Roppongi Hills" event taking place in the vicinity. Mori Building Co., which operates the area, offered partial sponsorship to Mizutani.

It is the second time Mizutani has exhibited smile photos at the venue since [summer 2003](#).

Under the theme "Merry in Tokyo," young smiling women photographed by Mizutani were displayed in various venues, including the Caretta Shiodome commercial complex and Hibiya Park. Mizutani said he wanted to cheer up Tokyoites following the downfall of the [dot-com bubble](#).

While Mizutani sounds full of philanthropic spirit, the photographer confessed he was deeply into materialism during the bubble economy period.

Setting up his business in 1982, Mizutani enjoyed success in the late 1980s and early 1990s during the economic boom, as big corporate clients spent an enormous amount of money on advertising. But one day, Mizutani realized he was turning into what he called a "corporate geisha," slavishly serving his clients. He felt that it was not right that he was getting paid a lot of money for work he was not satisfied with, both artistically and morally.

"My heart collapsed as the [bubble burst](#)," Mizutani said. Since 1991, he began gradually increasing projects that bear social significance.

The Merry Project doesn't make Mizutani merry in terms of profit, but he isn't particularly bothered by that.

"Making people happy is what designing should be about," he said. "My philosophy is that if you invest in society two or three times, you get one return."

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Let it be your umbrella: Art director and photographer Koji Mizutani is all smiles Friday under some 100 photos he took of grinning Asian youths, at Metro Hat in the Roppongi Hills complex in Minato Ward, Tokyo. Some 1,500 of his photos were displayed in the opening ceremony of the Olympics at the Beijing National Stadium. YOSHIAKI MIURA PHOTO

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