

## Art director gives new meaning to snap-happy

By TOMOMI YOKOMURA

Asahi Shimbun News Service

**W**orld attention may often be focused on war and tragedy nowadays, but art director Koji Mizutani has never lost sight of one simple fact: Many people have a lot to smile about.

In his ongoing "Merry" project, he goes out onto the streets, speaks briefly to people he chooses at random, photographs their smiling faces and gets them to write their definition of "merry." When the pictures are printed, Mizutani puts the subjects' handwritten messages at the bottom of their portraits.

Most recently, he took his project to New York, spending nine days last September photographing passersby in the city a year after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. His photographs of 400 people there will be displayed at Roppongi Hills Information Center/ Think Zone from Feb. 14 to 23 in an exhibition titled "Merry in New York," with the images projected onto the floor and walls.

Mizutani says he took the project to New York because he felt the future of the city lay with ordinary young people there. "New York is a city with a negative legacy, but I felt a strong sense of renewed happiness through people's colorful smiles, which seemed to appear after they had seen the worst," he says. "They don't want to talk about Sept. 11 anymore; they want to see new hope. That's what I wanted to tell others."

In addition to the short messages he collected from the people he photographed, Mizutani asked five 19-year-old women to write a few paragraphs on the theme of "merry." Their comments are included in a tabloid-sized color catalog that Mizutani created using portraits of 252 smiling New Yorkers—mostly young

women—to be handed out at the exhibition and in New York, London, Paris and other major cities.

One of the 19-year-olds, Elizabeth Wood, writes: "It makes me happy to know that I have watched Sept. 11th's tragedies before my eyes and I still have faith in all kinds of people. I watched people jump out of windows and buildings fall down and I still do not have anger toward Muslims, Osama bin Laden or even terrorists."

"It makes me happy to see other people wishing the best for those who hurt others. It makes me happy to realize that bad things happen, but this doesn't mean bad things must be done in return."

Another woman, Jeanne Parkhurst, writes: "I haven't forgotten that happiness comes from within and merriness is contagious. After Sept. 11th, negative, hurtful ideas were in the air but love and kindness took over with vast hope."

"Their thinking is very deep," says Mizutani. "I was moved. I don't think young Japanese women could write like they did. Even I couldn't."

When he's photographing for "Merry," he usually carries at least two cameras. "With only one, all the attention would go to that single camera, and the subject would become too conscious of it," he explains. "So I photograph the person's smiling face with one camera first, and I say, 'OK, we're done.' And when the subject relaxes, I capture the moment when his or her natural smile comes out with another camera."

Mizutani, who is also an award-winning graphic designer, started the "Merry" project after coming back from a trip to the United States in 1999 with 200 photographs of three young girls he met on a bus. Their smiles were so innocent and beautiful that he couldn't stop taking pictures of them, he says. Six months later came the publication of first book, titled "Merry," which featured 30 of his pictures. Later in 1999, he also held an exhibition at a Tokyo gallery.

"I started 'Merry' thinking that smiles may eventually disappear, so we have to take care of them," he says.

In the summer of 2001, Mizutani took "Merry" to Kobe, another city that, like New York, had known tragedy. "Merry" formed part of a citywide project aimed at expressing residents' gratitude to those who helped them in the aftermath of the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995. He captured the smiles of 500 female residents, from an 8-month-old baby to a 97-year-old woman, in a field of 300,000 sunflowers planted by volunteers at Kobe's Port Island as a gesture of thanks. Meter-wide pictures including messages written by the subjects were displayed at an exhibition titled "Merry in Kobe 2001."

Last year, he was asked by the construction company redeveloping Kobe's Shin-Nagata Minami district, one



PHOTOS BY KOJI MIZUTANI

of the areas devastated by the quake, to display his works on the temporary fence surrounding the construction site. Large posters of smiling Kobe residents he photographed for earlier projects will be on display until construction is completed in about December.

"It meant a lot to me to undertake the project at a place where thousands of people were killed by the earthquake," Mizutani says.

A Korean woman who owns a noodle shop next to the site thanked him for the display. "She told me her eyes fill with tears when she sees the pictures and that the smiling faces encourage her," he says. "When I heard that, I couldn't have been happier."

Mizutani believes true happiness becomes apparent when happiness and unhappiness are compared. "I saw genuine smiles on the faces of Kobe children who experienced the earthquake," he says. "Strong things are beautiful things. I felt that in New York, too. You encounter pure and beautiful smiles. I'm doing this project to witness such moments."

In New York, the project drew responses from people from all around the world, he says. "Although there are many different races, people's feelings are always the same. Everybody wants to be merry," he explains. "By giving something to someone, you become merry yourself, and I was the merriest there."

"I'm glad to have met merry people. It's made me realize that this world isn't so bad after all."

**"Merry in New York" runs from Feb. 14 to 23 at Tokyo's Roppongi Hills Information Center/ Think Zone, near Roppongi subway station. Call 03-5770-8777 or see <www.remus.dti.ne.jp/~mizutani>.**

