

In Search of Stillness – a deep dive into Japan's bathing culture

Scottish fine art photographer, Soo Burnell, has turned her focus to Japanese culture for a new exhibition, building on her acclaimed poolside collections – which included historic Edinburgh swimming pools.

At the Onsen, A Journey Into Stillness, takes place at Edinburgh's Saorsa Gallery from 3-11 May, and is an opportunity to see 40 new pieces by an artist who is highly praised for her "striking images" (Stephanie Wade, Editor, IGNANT).

Soo has long had a fascination with the atmosphere and beauty of the places we create for bathing as well as the rituals and traditions they embody. Her photography has a sense of mystery, drawing viewers into mesmerising parallel worlds.

Soo said: "I've been desperate to visit Japan for as long as I can remember. I've been fascinated by Japanese culture and the beautiful architecture, shrines and gardens.

"After shooting so many Victorian baths in Scotland, the rest of the UK and Europe, I was fascinated to dive deeper into the Japanese tradition of bathing and the importance of these warm healing waters."

Last September's trip to Japan aimed to explore the country's onsens, bathhouses fed by natural hot springs, often volcanic, and which much-loved places for leisure and relaxation.

These are places for healing the body and the mind (a therapeutic practice called toji). Hot spring towns (akin to spa towns in Europe) flourished in the Edo period 1603-1868.

Soo also visited sentos, traditional bathhouses, which are communal but with separate areas for men and women.

The onsen and sento are architectural opposites: one white and calm with arched windows and natural light, the other of dark wood. They create very different moods yet both are calm and peaceful with the constant sound of running water.

The trip took a year of planning and research with Soo eventually selecting seven locations that she wanted to visit.

The photography itself required time, and care, with Soo collaborating closely with her models so they were perfectly posed and presented to catch the calm and stillness of the bathhouses.

While the new collection stands in contrast to her poolside collections, there are common threads and themes.

Soo said: "I loved the pastel colour palette of the sentos, and the stories told through the murals, which were incredibly detailed.

"Also, they feel central to the communities they serve, reminding me of the historic swimming pools from my poolside collections – spaces that encouraged gathering, whether as families going to swim together or with people from the wider community."

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