

# Away from the Crowds

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley





Summer is but a memory. The days have slid by nearly unnoticed; now the sun rises late and sets early. The unwarm wind rustles across the flat rural landscape of Ibaraki Prefecture, driving lonely battered leaves and stray bits of paper before it. Soon another year will be tacked up on the wall, and thoughts will turn to spring and the summer to follow. In the meantime, however, there is work to be done.

We are seated in a cluttered, cramped hut built of concrete blocks. Its sliding doors are open to the wind, which today is luckily little more than occasional fingers of sharp chill breeze. The space is unheated. A radio bleats out faint metallic squeaks and squawks that are certainly intended to be music; these are from time to time interrupted by bursts of distant staccato syllables. Mr. Watanabe makes not a sound as he works. He does not speak. He pays no heed to the radio. In contrast to the majority of the male Japanese population, he does not smoke while he works. He ignores my presence. His concentration is absolute as he fills thick paper hemispheres with layer after layer of black granules and what look to be pellets of charcoal of varying sizes. He separates the layers with thin ivory-colored paper and secures these with strips of tape. When two hemispheres have been completed, he joins them into a single sphere and sets each sphere in a box behind him.

I attach my strobe to my camera and connect its brick-like battery. Mr. Watanabe watches this out of the corner of his eye, carefully taking note of my every move. He turns to me.

"Try not to get too close to that bowl of pellets. Static electricity from your clothes might set it off. The humidity's real low today."

I look down at the container of peanut-sized pellets about 20 centimeters below my arm. The pellets

look huge, dark, threatening. They seem to grow as I look at them.

"Even though it's mixed with things to give color, it's still just black powder, really. A single spark'll set off the whole bowl, and if the bowl goes, the hut goes, including us. Just like those guys down in Nagoya a couple of years ago: boom! That's why there's no heater of any kind in here. Too risky. And that's one reason all these huts are about 15 meters apart, and why we're out here in the middle of nowhere, away from anything that even looks like a town. If somebody like me makes a mistake, he and his hut'll go off, but the others'll be safe. S'posed to be like that, anyway."

Each summer, the skies all over Japan come alive with *hanabi* (literally flower fire), the fireworks without which summer in this archipelago is not complete. The *hanabi* specialists, many of whom have kept the artistic and technical traditions within their families since the Edo period, travel throughout the country at a frantic pace until fall tints the leaves and calls an end to the season. From that time until late spring, *hanabi* craftsmen sit in their huts like this one, turning out the fireworks by hand at a pace that has not changed in two centuries. Mr. Watanabe is one of those craftsmen, as was his father, and his before him.

"You should come back in late winter when we do our experiments down in the riverbed. That's when we try out the new variations. *Hanabi* look a little different when they're that close up ..."

I'm still looking at the bowl beneath my arm, and thinking that next summer's fireworks will engender a considerable respect from this individual. ■

*Michael E. Stanley, born in California in 1947, studied cultural anthropology and archaeology, and is a photographer based in Japan since 1979.*