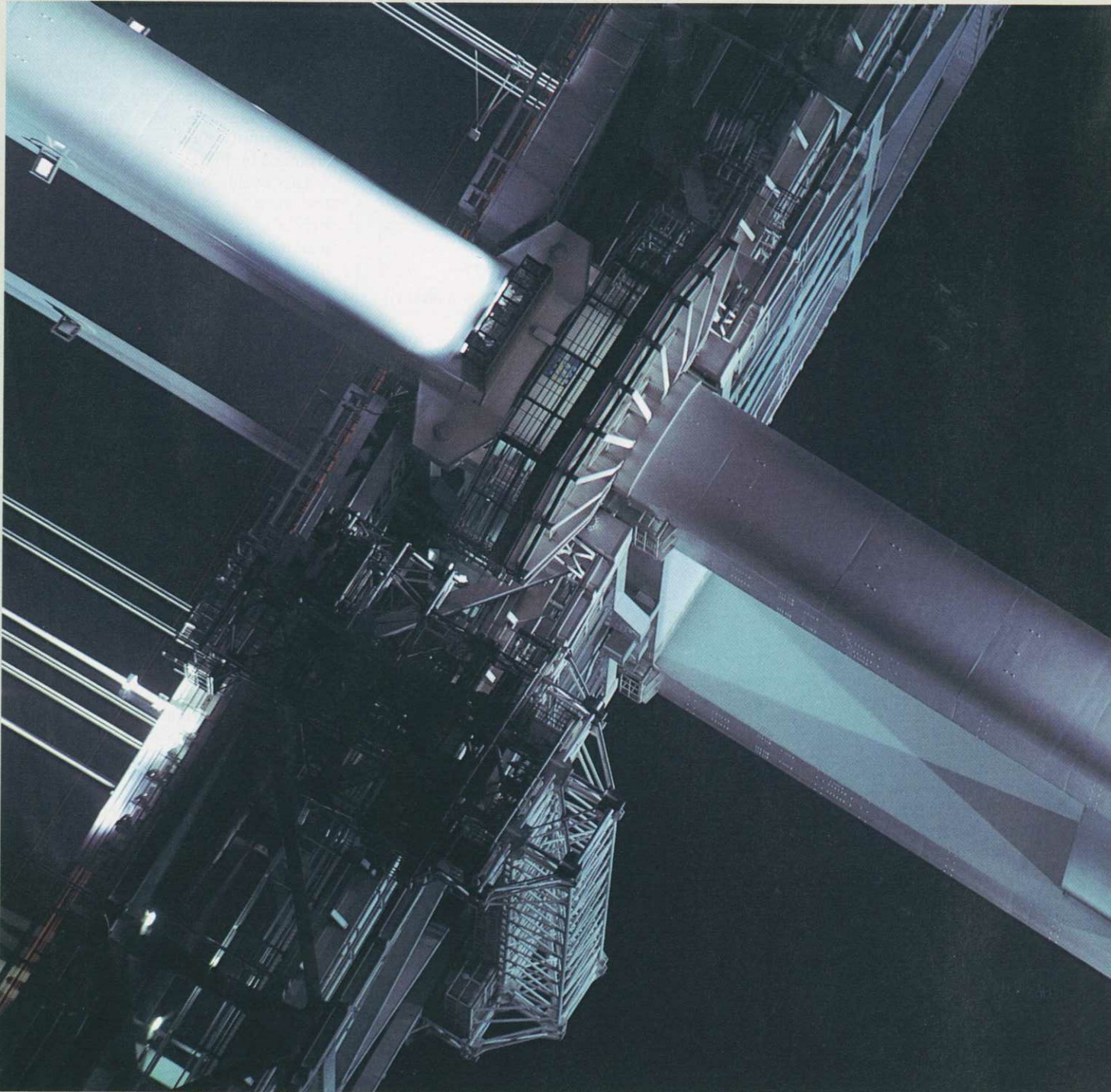


In the Dark

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley





I am surprised at how many people are here. A sign—which I have clearly defied—stated “No Entry” in magisterial black letters firmly blazoned on a bright yellow background. It is now 100 or so paces behind me, alone and ignored in the cone of coppery brightness cast down from the faintly hissing streetlight above it. Here, in the dark at the edge of the wharf, sit a dozen or so couples. Most are in tight and wordless embrace; a few laugh and talk softly. Before all of us, the rippling waters of Tokyo’s harbor reflect the lights of the city: dancing jewels on black silk.

Immediately across the channel is Tokyo’s brand-new Rainbow Bridge. It soars over the harbor, clean and white and angular. Although it has been long in its building, the bridge seems not of this city, a thing alien that has fallen entire from the dark sky only hours or minutes before. I sit on the dock’s edge and look at it for a while. When I first encountered this metropolis almost two decades ago, I could not have imagined that I would see such a skyline in my lifetime. The harbor was then a grey and dismal place; its murky green tides reeked of fuel and chemicals. In some corners these images yet hold true, but the boom of the ’80s touched this waterfront and left much of it new and shining and bright-hued.

Looking at the bridge, I become lost for a while in its details. Parts of its structure look to be lifted from a Hollywood spaceship. They stand stark and geometric against the infinite black of the night sky; I am floating above them, now beside them, now below. I am an untethered fellow traveler on an odyssey through the void.

“Ah, ... This is private property. You really shouldn’t be in here.”

My imagination comes crashing back to Earth. I turn. There is a small 60-ish uniformed man astride a dented black bicycle. His sleeves are too

short and his billed cap is a little large. The chromed circular bell on the bike’s handlebars reflects the light from the bridge. “All this wharfside is private property,” he gently continues.

Some of the couples have stood and are leaving. He has been spreading his message.

“What is it you’re doing?” The question has a friendly tone.

He eyes the camera on the tripod. “I get a lot of camera crazies in here every night. This is the best spot for a picture of the bridge. You’d think the company would set someplace aside. ...”

I apologize—as I should—and start to take my camera off the tripod. “Oh no, go ahead and finish. Just be careful not to fall in the water. I hope you get some good pictures. *De wa, Oyasuminasai!*”

With a ring of his bell, he pedals off into the dark. I finish the roll of film before shouldering the tripod and my gear bag. All the couples have left.

As I walk to my car, I reflect that had this scene been acted out in my birthplace of Los Angeles, the watchman would likely have pinned me in the glare of his patrol car’s searchlights while he called for backup. In some other countries, just having a camera in the harbor would be proof positive of espionage.

A tiny minivan pulls up behind my car and a family of four emerges and unfolds. Each has a camera, a bag full of gear and a tripod. All of them, papa and mama and two teenage sons, disappear past the black and yellow sign, heading for the wharf and its view of the bridge. I watch them until they vanish into the shadows. In the distance there is the faint sound of a bicycle bell.

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