

Down on the Corner

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley





The details are all extinct. The minutiae of fashion evolve so fast that any style, any look that is over three months old is filed away with Trilobites and Triceratops bones. This photograph is a fossil in gelatin and silver and a pinch of dye.

Midnight is now memory and dawn is still hours away, but the streets near Tokyo's Shibuya Station are still alive with people, all of them young and with money to spend. They call themselves *Shibukaji*, a word conected from Shibuya and the Japanized pronunciation of the English word "casual." By the time this text passes before readers' eyes, the Shibukaji will likely be calling themselves something else. The pace of Tokyo's street vocabulary evolution is even closer to the speed of light than that of their clothes and accessories.

At first the flocks of young in their clunky footwear—boots are *de rigueur*, combat boots, work boots, motorcycle boots, anything is acceptable if it is heavy and cumbersome—clearly react to this large foreign thing in their midst. But after a while, most return to the pressing world of peer approval; grave social peril awaits those whose attention wanders. I slip into the background, a graying prop on a huge set with throngs of young hopefuls all playing their own starring roles. Hardly anyone notices when my camera comes up to eye level and the shutter clicks away.

I photograph groups of boys as they strut and pose and flirt with the groups of girls who promenade up and down the crowded streets. Some are looking for a willing partner for more private activities and others are selling tickets to parties. Each group has its own fashion theme. Some are in jeans and black leather jackets ornamented with chrome-plated chains; others have a "preppie" look; still others have denim jackets or wool overshirts with baggy pants whose hemlines got lost somewhere between shorts and trousers. Some groups are thicket of old blue jeans and athletic shoes, the prices of

which can easily surpass the monthly rent I pay for both my own apartment and my office. Fashion individualism meets the herd instinct head on. The collision makes for some interesting pictures.

Most of these youngsters, who are in their late teens, come from prosperous homes and attend Tokyo's more prestigious schools. Some are *ronin* (an old word for masterless samurai warriors), who have completed high school but for one reason or another have not completed or succeeded in the required university entrance examinations. Their parents' affluence keeps them in the expensive up-to-the-moment fashion that their lifestyle dictates, but in the daytime they are apparently on track to succeed in the high-pressure, tightly restraining culture that their elders have made for them. These nights in Shibuya are their own counter-creation that they know they must abandon when they enter university or the business world. The boys will become suited minions of corporations or the government bureaucracy; most of the girls will become wives and mothers in the affluent suburbs.

As the night draws to a close and the crowds begin to thin a little, I notice a young couple on a corner watching me with some amusement. We talk. He is 17 and set to enter a prestigious private university. He will study medicine. He talks with assurance and it is obvious he is no street punk, although piercing blue contact lenses add a jarring note to his well-cared-for visage. She is also 17 and will be attending a women's junior college in the coming spring. "Here we're alive on our terms," he tells me. "Now we're beautiful. The money's there; that's the easy part. Maybe it's gone tomorrow and we're all suddenly old and ugly."

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