

SUMO EAST AND WEST

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

FERNE PEARLSTEIN

“Sumo East and West” grew out of my experience as a documentary photographer in the late 80s, working for the New York bureaus of the Japanese newspapers the Tokyo/Chunichi Shimbun and the Chugoku Shimbun. The bureau chief, Tsutomu Tajima, arranged for me to go to Japan to live and work with the newspaper’s photo editor and his family in the summer of 1991, an experience recorded in a weekly photo series called “An American Woman in Japan,” published in the fall of 1992. The people of Japan treated me with a warmth and a hospitality that I had not encountered anywhere else in the world. But at the same time, there were the undeniable reminders that I was still an alien in a world that I could never fully understand. “Sumo East and West” expands on this theme of the outsider, and of community, culture, and belonging.

As a cinematographer, I was attracted to the visual possibilities of sumo, with its supernaturally huge naked bodies colliding with a surprising combination of violence and grace. For that reason, we elected to shoot in Super 16mm film. My partner Robert Edwards and I and our crew spent approximately six weeks filming in Japan in the summer of 2000, as well as shooting in LA, Atlantic City, and Hawaii. In Japan I was stunned by how pervasive foreign influence had become in the ten years since my last visit. Now I found teenaged Japanese girls with bleached blond hair, images of American pop culture plastered all over Tokyo, foreign tourists and expatriate residents at every turn, and the elder Japanese generation wringing its hands over the loss of longstanding traditions. We also had the opportunity to view our own culture through a different perspective as we followed sumo’s growing popularity in the West, and explored the history of sumo in the US beginning with the Japanese immigrants who brought sumo to American soil when they came to work on Hawaiian sugar plantations in the early 20th century.

As Westerners, we realized that it would be foolish to think we could make the definitive film history of sumo; indeed, it would be presumptuous even to imagine that an outsider could capture the essence of sumo on film. We did not attempt to do so. But it is precisely the perspective of outsiders—both the filmmakers and the foreign wrestlers—that is critical to the changes that the sport and Japan at large are undergoing. “Sumo East and West” is a study in cultural collision, a portrait of Japan through Western eyes, in which the quintessentially Japanese institution of sumo becomes a symbol for the profound and ongoing changes in how Japan and the West relate to one another.

Thank you.
Ferne Pearlstein