

HOUR OF THE HORSE

*Photographs by
Charlotte Dumas*

The islands of Japan are home to eight breeds of small native horse, none of which stand more than four feet tall at the shoulders. It isn't clear when or how they came across the sea from mainland Asia, but the oldest of the breeds, the Kiso pony, is recorded as early as the sixth century. Because the animals were reliable workers, short-legged and sturdy, people employed them in various ways—for carrying cargo through the mountains of Ehime, for processing sugarcane in the Tokara Islands, for hauling timber around Tsushima. Some ran feral. At the turn of the twentieth century, a long period of difficulty began for the horses. In 1906, in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War, Emperor Meiji established the Equine Management Bureau, to help build a better cavalry. The breeding of small horses was banned; all Kiso stallions were ordered castrated. After World War II, urbanization and mechanization further diminished the horses' place in Japanese life. Today, all but one of the eight breeds—the Hokkaido horse, also known as Dosanko—are critically endangered.

Charlotte Dumas traveled to the Okinawa prefecture this spring to document the native horses of Yonaguni Island and Miyako Island, as part of an ongoing project to photograph the eight breeds. On Miyako Island, there are fewer than fifty of the horses left. Farther southwest, on Yonaguni Island, where the Japanese government is building a radar station to help protect its territorial claims against China, only about 120 native horses remain.

*Charlotte Dumas is a photographer based in Amsterdam. Her exhibition *Work Horse* includes medium- and large-format photographs, Polaroids, and a film of the native horses of Japan, as well as a film of logging horses in Sweden. The exhibition is currently on view at the De Pont Museum of Contemporary Art, in Tilburg, the Netherlands, and is accompanied by a monograph, *Work Horse*, published by Dumas and *The Ice Plant*, Los Angeles. Ten of Dumas's animal portraits were issued as postage stamps in the Netherlands in September.*

This spread: Yonaguni Island, 2015
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