



Taka Ishii

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# The goddesses are protecting Araki

Nobuyoshi Araki celebrates his 70th birthday with Lady Gaga, his cat and some dinosaurs

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STAFF WRITER

“Is my shirt OK?” asks Nobuyoshi Araki as he straightens it to give me a good view. “I looked through my things, but this was the most newspaper-appropriate one I could find.” The print on his T-shirt is of a prostrate naked woman, tied up in red rope, with a lizard facing her crotch. “It only shows breasts, you can barely see the bottom half . . . right?” Araki insists with a laugh. It’s 8 p.m. and Araki, one Japan’s most infamous photographers, is at his favorite bar in Shinjuku’s Golden-gai, flipping through the new photo book of his current exhibition at the Taka Ishii Gallery in Tokyo, “Koki no Shashin: Photographs of A Seventy Year Old.” Being interviewed at the bar is his idea. I had planned on talking to him at the gallery while taking in his exhibition, but with a celebrity of his stature, it’s difficult to even consider disagreeing.

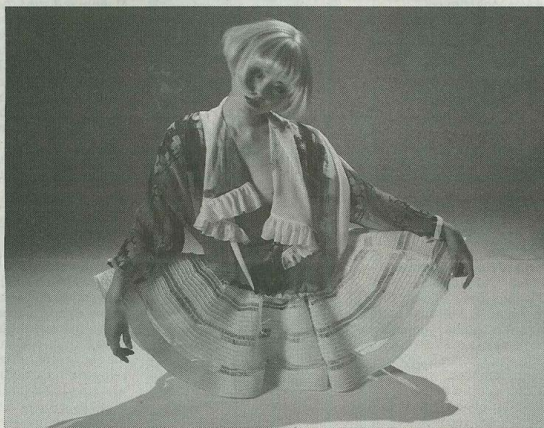
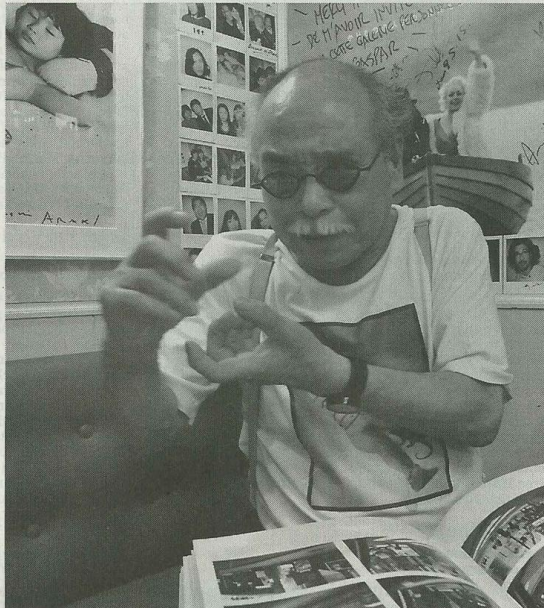
As it turns out, the bar is the perfect setting to interview Araki. It’s an intimate space and the walls are covered with his Polaroids of friends, which makes it impossible to be further than a nose length away from the photographer or his work. The bar’s vibe and slightly seedy location suit his ego and upbeat personality, which comes as a bit of a surprise, given that he’s most famous for unusual and at times slightly disturbing imagery.

This year, Araki reaches 70 years of age and his current exhibition is a celebration of his *koki* — a Japanese term for celebrating a 70th birthday — and what he sees as the beginning of his career as a professional photographer. Similar to the bar, the white walls of Taka Ishii Gallery are filled from top to bottom with photos, with each wall dedicated to different subjects: There are images of the sky, women in kimono, flowers, female nudes and even the toy dinosaurs that Araki has been known to call his “alter egos.” There are also some new images being shown to the public for the first time, which include a documentation of the death of Araki’s beloved cat, Chiro, and some of singer Lady Gaga.

As Araki flips through his book, he stops at Lady Gaga. “Look at this. If people found out that Lady Gaga made a trip to Japan to get her pictures taken by me, wouldn’t they be surprised?”

**So how was that photo-shoot with Lady Gaga? Was it fun?**  
I wouldn’t describe it as “fun.” That’s not quite the right word. It was really intense. Lady Gaga got so into it. She requested ropes and said “Tie me! Tie me!” Isn’t that incredible? But look at these pictures (he flips pages), these pictures of naked women in their 20s and even in their 40s. I feel a deeper connection to these images. I also think they represent contemporary photography better.

**When I saw your exhibition, I was blown away by its intensity. Were you involved in the curation?**  
Actually, I just wanted the photos to be right in the public eye. The order in which the photos are displayed or the curation doesn’t matter so much to me. If you ask me why I’m doing this exhibition, or why I publish books or even take photos, I’d have to say it’s all for my own sake and satisfaction.



**Birth day boy:** Photographer Nobuyoshi Araki (top) talks animatedly about photography, women and how his fear of death helps fuel his work. Above: One of Araki’s “goddesses” from “Koki No Shashin: Photographs of A Seventy Year Old” (2010). YOSHIAKI MURA / COURTESY OF TAKA ISHII GALLERY, TOKYO

**Is that why you’ve included pictures of your cat, Chiro, after her death, and captured her absence in number of spots in your own house?**  
Chiro and I had been together ever since my wife, Yoko, passed away. Chiro used to come into my bedroom every morning to wake me up here (points at a photo of his bedroom door), and she used to drink water here while I was in the bath (points at a photo of the bathroom), but that’s all gone now. I wouldn’t call this exhibition a

requiem for me or my work, but for Chiro, it might be. Perhaps it’s a requiem for Chiro and for analog photography.

**A requiem for analog photography? Does that mean that you’re not interested in the recent popularity of digital or toy-camera photography?**  
I have no plans to start taking pictures with a digital camera. I feel that the process of processing films and working in the dark room adds another layer to an

image’s subject and to reality. I find that sexy. Even with a woman, I find that when she hides a bit of herself, it’s more revealing. It’s just slightly more attractive than being butt naked.

**But your series of nude portraits have been highly controversial. When you held a solo exhibition in Seoul, there was even an anti-Araki movement led by Korean feminist groups. How do you react to such protests from feminists?**  
I’ve had rocks thrown at me on many occasions. It was scary. But I think my works have been misunderstood by protesters. They don’t get what I’m trying to convey.

**You have a strong fan base in Europe and have had countless exhibitions there, but even though someone as famous as Lady Gaga is interested in your work, you have held few exhibitions in the United States. Why is that?**

American culture, I think, is sculpted by the cultural diversity of its immigrants. But compared to Europe, America has a much shorter art history. I think that could be why Europeans are able to better understand photography and my work.

**A lot of your work is quite erotic, are you living Sigmund Freud’s theories of Eros and Thanatos?**  
(Laughs) Freud? That’s deep! No, I’ve never read Freud. My photos have been driven by my own desire for sex. Though that’s different now. After I was diagnosed with prostate cancer, my sex drive stopped fueling my work. Life itself is the inspiration now. I know my death is approaching.

**But you still take pictures of nude women. Now I see women as female gods who protect me from the God of Death. Look, (writes down the kanji for goddess and kanji for death) do you see how similar these two kanji are? All the women who surround me, all the women who stand in front of my camera — they are goddesses. You too.**

It is my past and the lust for life that is pushing me to take pictures now. In fact, I finally feel like I am at the cusp of being a professional photographer.

When Araki says he’s been misunderstood, it’s really not that surprising, especially when he makes offensive comments that even he censors himself (“You are not putting that in the paper, are you!”). The Japanese media call him “Tensai Araki” (“Genius Araki”), but Araki is also charming, even if in a slightly crass way. Face to face, there’s a waggish side to him that reminds you to take a lot of what he says with a giant grain of salt.

As we get ready to finish, I ask one last question: “So what are your plans for the future?”

Araki holds my hands and with a pervy grin, he says, “Well, that’s up to you.”

*“Koki No Shashin: Pictures of A Seventy Year Old” by Nobuyoshi Araki runs till June 5 at Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo, a 10-min walk from exit A3 of Kiyosumi Shirakawa Station (Oedo and Hanzomon lines); free admission; open 12:00 p.m. - 7:00 p.m., closed Sun. and Mon. For more information, call (03) 5646 6050 or visit www.takaishiigallery.com*

Jae Lee, ‘The goddesses are protecting Araki’, *The Japan Times*, The Japan Times Ltd., May 28, 2010, Art review p.19

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