

TOKYO

Nobuyoshi Araki

TAKA ISHII GALLERY

Two years ago Nobuyoshi Araki, then almost seventy and diagnosed with cancer, completed what he called his “posthumous” cycle: a series of black-and-white photographs onto which he brushed kanji characters meaning “2THESKY, my Ender”—his word-and-image presentiment of death. Araki’s most recent show, “Koki No Shashin: Photographs of a Seventy-Year-Old,” also evoked death, but taken together, the ten new series on view (all 2010) offered a more oblique and conflicted reflection.

“Chiro” documents the demise of Araki’s beloved cat, a necessarily impermanent *aide-mémoire* and a mental link of sorts to his wife, Yoko, who passed away from cancer in 1990. The heartrending images of Chiro’s final days capture the elderly animal sauntering unsteadily in mellow spring sunlight, resting (dying?) on a soft pad fitted with a pillow and a blanket, then lying lifeless, her emaciated body shown from above in a simulation of a standing profile. While the skeletal cat is just that for viewers, the image is replete with tenderness; Araki’s photographing of Chiro is an act of love interrupted by death. In these photographs the ever-personal character of the artist’s work—notably, his 1990 cycle *Sentimental Journey/Winter Journey* documented Yoko’s passing as an immediate experience—becomes unnervingly intimate.



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Nobuyoshi Araki,
*Koki No Shashin:
Photographs of a
Seventy-Year-Old*,
2010, color photo-
graph, 13 x 16 1/8".
From the series
"Chiro," 2010.

showing the terrace of Araki's house, formerly the site of many family meals. Now, with overturned and rusty garden furniture and weathered ornaments blackened with rot, the terrace is a backdrop for a small army of rubber dinosaurs that famously figure in other images as Araki's alter egos. They lurch all around the terrace, but in one poignant image they are gone, leaving only the cracked carcass of an old wooden sculpture resting on turquoise concrete flooring.

The life-and-death motif in the photographs of Chiro and the dilapidated terrace unites the eight other series in the exhibition, including Tokyo cityscapes, revealing portrayals of housewives, views of the sky shot from the terrace, and Araki's notorious *kinbaku* (bondage) photographs of Japanese women. A series of a dozen images capturing a provocatively posed Lady Gaga, though at first seeming out of place, is in fact a perfect overture (it is installed at the entrance of the gallery) to Araki's seventieth birthday celebration. For all his awareness of death, it is life and fame that he is welcoming. That a major Western celebrity should offer to fly into Tokyo and be tied up for a photo shoot meshes perfectly with Araki's trademark pronouncements of his own artistic hegemony. Yet his self-fashioning as an absolute photographer for whom the empowering act of dropping the shutter almost matters more than the images themselves also reveals his weakness. This show lets slip what was masterfully concealed in "2THESKY, my Ender": Araki's fear of the end, of not being able to make any more photographs.

—Julia Friedman

