



Taka Ishii

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Nobuyoshi Araki, "THESEY, my Ende" 2009

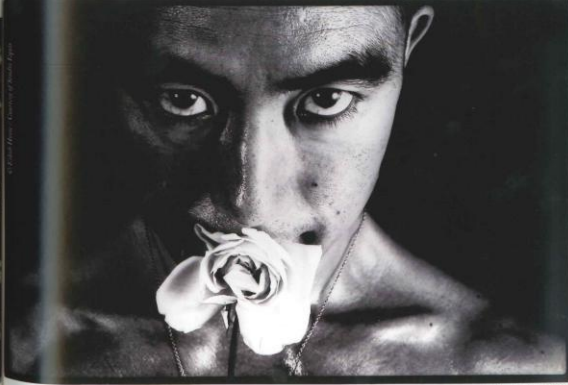


Daido Moriyama "Light and Shadows" 1981. Moriyama captures the urban scenery of Japan through the interplay of light and shadow.

capturing promise 55

The UNFLINCHING LENS

NOBUYOSHI ARAKI, EIKOH HOSOE and DAIDO MORIYAMA, three eminent Japanese post-war photographers, have captured radical views of a country and people shaped by conflict, atomic bombs and rampant consumerism. They share with Peter Yeoh intimate stories and insights on their art and life.



Eikoh Hosoe, Basuki #32, 1961. Hosoe's famous photograph of Japan's legendary novelist, Yukio Mishima, who committed ritual suicide in 1970.



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Peter Yeoh 'The Unflinching Lens: An Unrestrained Eye', *glass*, Glass Ventures Ltd, Autumn 2010, pp.54-59



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An Unrestrained Eye

Nobuyoshi Araki, the 'lascivious cat' of Japanese photography, reveals private thoughts about his loves, life and near death experiences at one of his favourite watering holes in Shinjuku's notorious Golden Gai entertainment district.



B & W print, courtesy of Tada Ishii Gallery

Nobuyoshi Araki, Koki No Shashin: Photographs of A Seventy Year Old, 2010. Araki bound, trussed up, and photographed Lady Gaga in kinbaku (Japanese bondage) in 2009.



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Nobuyoshi Araki, *2THESKY, my Ender*, 2009. Araki paints monochromatic skies with acrylic paints to celebrate life after discovering that he has prostate cancer.

Even while battling prostate cancer, Nobuyoshi Araki, the Japanese photographer of the intensely personal and erotic, gleefully celebrated his seventieth birthday this year at the Grand Hyatt Tokyo with the exuberance of a 'naughty schoolboy'. He sat surrounded by kimono-clad mama-sans (bar hostesses) from the Golden Gai entertainment district of Shinjuku, which he still frequents, and beamed with joy as friends toasted him with songs and speeches. A slide show of his photographs played and the mama-sans dabbed tears from their eyes when pictures of Chiro, Araki's beloved cat who died last year, flashed on the screen, as if they all shared the grief of a deceased relative.

Araki is often misunderstood in the West, accused of misogyny for his photographs of women with exposed genitalia or bound in *kinbaku* (Japanese bondage). Yet counterbalancing this salacious aspect are poignant images of his beloved wife, Yoko Aoki (*Sentimental Journey*, 1971; *Sentimental Journey/Winter Journey*, 1991) and of his constant feline companion, Chiro, both of whom he has lost. As a photographer, Araki has mostly aimed the camera at women he has met with pornographic intimacy, but in the process unearthed emotions that touched the nerve of his admirers (and critics). Through his autobiographical photography, Araki exposes the social and sexual mores of modern Japan. The warm reception in the West should not be seen as evidence of neo-Orientalism – the kind that fetishised geisha – but rather as the result of shared responses to fundamental human experiences of love and lust and life and death.

You have just celebrated your birthday with a new exhibition, *'Koki no Shashin: Photographs of a Seventy Year Old'*, at Taka Ishii Gallery in Tokyo.

The exhibition and book *'Koki no Shashin'* commemorate the feat of reaching the ripe old age of seventy. (The word *koki* comes from a line of an ancient Chinese poem by Du Fu, who wrote that 'for a man to live to seventy is most rare.') For me 'to live' means nothing other than 'to photograph', and I've now been photographing for seventy years. *Koki no Shashin* is an homage to myself, and to seventy years of being a photographer. I'm announcing that I started taking pictures as soon as I was born, and ever since I've never ceased taking, exhibiting and selling photographs. Now I feel as if I'm restarting photography at age seventy, and getting new energy from the photos I'm taking.

Hokusai (one of Japan's most famed artists), who stated his intention to work and live as an artist past the age of one-hundred, self-deprecatingly said he had achieved 'nothing of great note' at age seventy; and now you say you're restarting photography at age seventy. Were you trying to channel Hokusai?

I'm a modern Hokusai, or Picasso. Yes, I'm a modern Picasso.

You lived through a war, atomic bombs, and the deaths of your wife ten years ago, and more recently, your beloved cat, Chiro. Why did you say death brings about a deeper lust for life and sex?



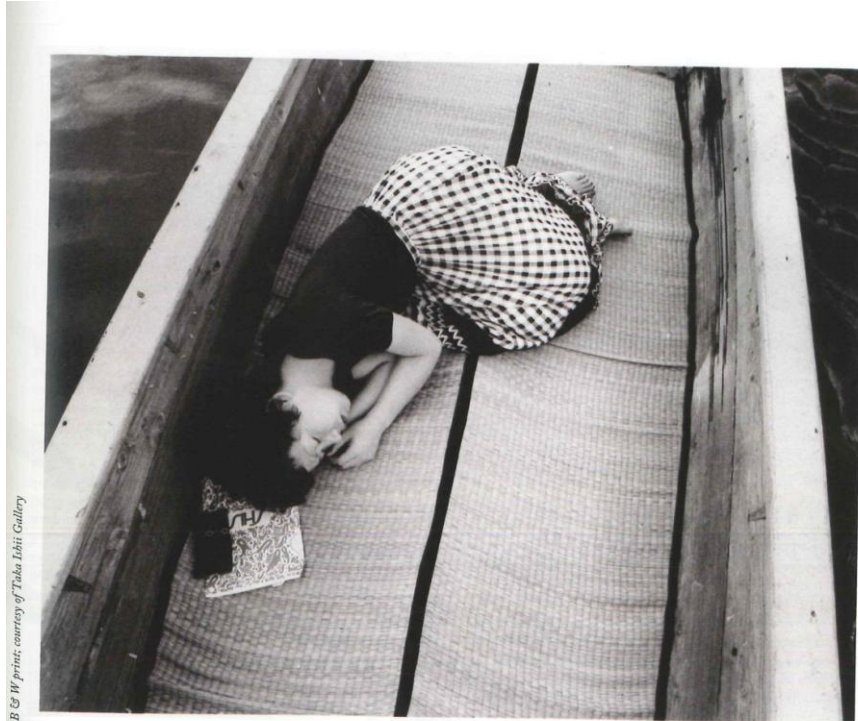
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Nobuyoshi Araki, *Sentimental Journey*, 1971. Araki's career-defining image of his wife during their honeymoon that presiments her death when the only letters visible from her *Shisuido* catalogue is 'shi' to mean 'death' in Japanese.

"If I didn't take photographs of my wife, Yoko, when she died, I would be really, really despondent."

their personalities – their lives or the spirit of an era. I mean to say that a photograph is a reflection or reproduction of a personality, life, or era. Calligraphy has qualities of both writing and painting, and is something in between. But creating calligraphy doesn't earn an income; in this modern society, money is more important and useful than fame.

What is the root of your fascination with the sky?

The sky is my film. Looking at the sky is like creating photographs without a camera. I enjoy painting the canvas of the sky; I like putting colours on the sky. After my wife passed away, I kept shooting the sky with black and white film. Even now, when I look at the sky, I experience it as monochrome. It depresses me, and makes me feel sad – since monochrome represents death. So I add colours to the moribund sky to bring it to life! Even after thirty or forty years, I still have this desire to colourise the sky. The act of painting the sky also brings back memories of the war, memories of my neighbourhood's sky being lit up by the red flames of burning buildings. This

memory of the pain of war also motivates my want to colour the sky.

Your hairstyle reminds me of your cat, Chiro.

Oh, I'm delighted to hear that! But I think that I must have done it unconsciously. Okay. From now on we can call my hairstyle 'Chiro hair'!

What are your plans now?

I'm just going to keep on moving so fast that the god of death can't catch me. But I'm sure at some point I'm going to trip and fall. I'm waiting for the goddesses to appear, and I'll keep heading towards them, even if along the way I might have to switch to a wheelchair! Who knows, maybe the end will come next year!

Peter Yeoh
Translated by Takayuki Mashiyama and Junshin Soga

