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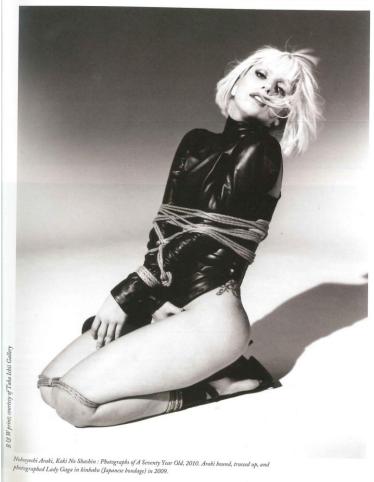
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56 capturing promise

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.





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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 kimbaku (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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Everyone has had an intimate experience with death. Even if someone you love disappears, that loss can give you energy in the sense that you must work hard to fill or replace that loss. If you don't seek to restore the loss, you will be overtaken by depression. One way for me to come to terms with death had been to photograph the deceased. It might seem morbid, but I'm attracted to death. Taking pictures of the dead is like erasing a heavy sorrow, to help avoid being overwhelmed by sorrow. If I didn't take photographs of my wife, Yoko, when she died, I would be really, really despondent. By taking pictures of her at the time of her death I made that moment into an eternity, the eternity of a life – the eternity of the living – and an eternity I can cherish. My photography is not about shooting or capturing specific moments, but rather about turning moments into eternities.

You recently had an operation for prostate cancer.

After the doctors operated to remove the cancer from my intestines, I discovered that I had lost my sexual desire. But my sexual desires became 'living' desires. Now my desire to live is greater than ever, even greater than in the past. The Japanese character for sei (sexual desire) and sei (living/life) are the same. Sex and life therefore can be considered closely related in Japanese language and thought. I do still have sexual urges, but I can't get an erection anymore. But, of course, an erection isn't



Nobuyoshi Araki, 2THESKY, my Ender, 2009. After discovering his cancer, Araki photographed his 'final' images including this flower dripping with red paint.

necessarily crucial for enjoying sex. There are actually women who like a flaccid penis – really! – I'm not saying this because I don't want to sound like I'm a loser. The crucial thing is living, and to keep on living to the fullest. For me to be able to keep on taking photographs is to keep on living.

Do you think cancer is a form of divine punishment for your promiscuous behaviour?

I've never believed in the concept of sin and punishment, or seriously thought about what that means. What I know is that the sky is like film for my camera – analogue and not digital – on which I can project reality or illusion. So whatever I believe inside is reflected on the sky. I can't tell if my cancer's a punishment or not. People can judge as they wish. So when people ask me such a question I will need somebody else to decide for me. Why don't you decide for me?

You published a 'posthumous' book, '2THESKY, My Ender', in 2009 as a testament to your work. Do you now think it was premature to publish your 'last' book?

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I'm a swindler at the core! I'm supposed to be dead by now, especially after publishing my so-called final photographs. But I swindled my way out of death! If you think about it, every single photograph is a final act. When you take a photograph, the subject stops breathing. It's the same as death, or perhaps a type of suspended animation. I don't 'kill' my subjects, but suspend their lives by pushing the shutter. So everything is a part of a testament. From the beginning I was making a testament. Nothing for me is ever a masterpiece. My photographs are never great works of art, they're just a cumulative testament.

What made you decide to photograph Lady Gaga?

Bjork and I were doing a shoot in Tokyo. Bjork is really cool. Lady Gaga happened to stop by and saw some of my photos, and mentioned that when she goes to Japan she would like to be photographed by Araki. It's much more meaningful to be recognised by international artists or performers than by critics. It makes me feel as though my photography is being understood across cultures. It makes me happy when female celebrities ask me to photograph them, and want me to tie them in kinbaku (Japanese bondage). They say if it's for Araki, we would be willing to be seen and photographed naked in bondage poses. For instance, Lady Gaga didn't ask me to cover her up during the photo session. I might have cancer and the god of death is chasing after me, but all of these divas are scaring him away!

Your photographs of housewives are reminiscent of Renaissance nudes. What's the difference between these classic nudes and your models?

The desire to shoot happens more when I'm with housewives than when I'm with young models. In the past I used to fantasise about doing things with the young models without my camera. I used to think that pushing the shutter is like an ejaculation. I lased to think that pushing the shutter is like an ejaculation. I have cancer and don't think that way anymore. Now I can look at the housewives with clarity – face them objectively – so they can become my life's work. I like that you said they're like Renaissance nudes. It's a compliment. Photographs of housewives are the best. When you think of paintings that are considered to be masterpieces, they are often housewives or prostitutes. Paintings of reclining housewives or prostitutes are ivarashi (Jascivious) and wonderful like Magnet's against are ivarashi (Jascivious) and wonderful like Magnet's against and the state of the same prostitutes. re iyarashi (lascivious) and wonderful, like Manet's painting of Olympia.

What were you trying to convey by inscribing calligraphy on monochrome skies

There's an intimate connection between the Japanese culture and sumi (black ink). People say calligraphy comes from China but the Japanese approach to sho (calligraphy) is even more intense. Pm actually quite good at brush writing, and in fact I consider myself a better calligrapher than photographer. Sometimes, I inyseir a better canigrapher train photographer. Sometimes, I enjoy creating something without going through the intermediary of film or the mechanical process. People take photographs, people write sentences, and people do calligraphy. It was a bad idea for Gutenberg to invent printing technology, but at the same time when I look at ukiyo-e (pictures of the floating world) I prefer hanga (woodblock prints) over nikuhitsuga (paintings). Nikuhitsuga are really quite boring. Photography reveals people or



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Nobuyoshi Araki, Sentimental Journey, 1971. Araki's career-defining image of his wife during their honeymoon that presentiments her death when the only letters wishle from her Shiseido 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

