



N O B U Y O S H I

ARAKI

Kaori

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NOBUYOSHI ARAKI

KAORI

This book is a diary of an unusual relationship, and a fable of an erotic adventure. Although the photographer/artist is always Nobuyoshi Araki, and while the model and Muse a young woman called Kaori from Tokyo, the story is not as simple as that. There is no beginning to speak of, nor is it your usual narrative, complete with a happy ending. Instead we are presented with a multi-faceted series of portraits of Araki's harem of one.

In Araki's images, Kaori appears in a variety of poses. Effortlessly, she displays an astonishing range of emotions - brashly self-confident and strong, baffled, insecure and mysterious. We begin to wonder whether Kaori is merely a willing subject? Is Araki really just the director and the voyeur? The guises change, and then change again. The roles are continually reversed. Who is really in control?

Since he first met Kaori in 2001, Araki has photographed her endlessly, taking thousands of pictures of her. All his innovations and inspirations, both classical and controversial, would appear to have come together under the influence of an ideal muse.

The photographs are printed both in stark black-and-white and in lush colour. More recently, Araki has been adding hand-painted elements to some of these portraits. The effect is a Kaori captured by a rainbow.

In his notorious bondage photographs, Araki shows women bound by tight ropes, trussed-up and helpless, often dangling precariously above the floor. "It's not a punishment. It's an expression of affection," says Araki. "In Japan, it's called kinbaku and it's not the same thing as the Western notion of bondage. For me, when the girl is tied up, she gets more sexy, more beautiful". His hand-painted photographs of Kaori show her imprisoned by waves of paint instead, tossed around naked in a swirling maelstrom of colour.

Araki, though, has never disdained strong colour. In many images, Kaori wear's a traditional kimono, partly open to reveal her pale skin in contrast with the boldly patterned fabric. The stylisation echoes the graphic art of erotic 19th century Japanese wood-block prints. At the same time, Araki nods to the high brow with the low brow. The elaborate, symbolic poses of Kabuki theatre and Noh drama, clash with the trash culture of cheap sex and Godzilla. With a knowing glance, Kaori clasps plastic dinosaurs in her hands. Reclining provocatively on a bed, the toy monster peeks into the folds in her kimono.

Nor is there a consistent mood in Araki's portraits. Kaori sits pertly on a boudoir chair. Kaori the temptress in a sheer negligee. Kaori tousled and unkempt. Kaori smeared with coloured liquids, dripping between her breasts and into a bathtub. Kaori imitating an exotic bird, a prisoner in a filagree cage. Kaori as an anonymous young woman standing in an empty Tokyo laneway. Kaori flung to the floor like a corpse. In some images, Araki's camera enters the shot. Even in the most intimate portrait, the artist's presence cannot be ignored.

"Araki's fundamental idea is that photography is an 'I-Novel'," writes Gijs van Tuyl in Tokyo Nouvelle, the 1995 publication commemorating Araki's solo exhibition at Germany's Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg. "In Japanese literature - but in European literature too, from Defoe's Robinson Crusoe to Nabokov's Lolita - the narrator tells his story in the first person, partly to lend verisimilitude to the fiction by making it seem as though everything is experienced in the 'I', and by describing the outside world from the inside.

Araki the man is likewise a phenomenom. The intensity of his life and work attest to a vitality so fierce that one is involuntarily reminded of death, the reverse of life, the shadow cast by a bright light."

Born in 1940 in Tokyo, Araki graduated from Chiba University at the age of 24, having majored in photography and cinema. He studied Italian neo-realism and the French new wave, the effects of which can still be seen in those photographs where the model appears to be on the verge of some new discovery, lost in an unexplained emotion. While working as a photographer at the Japanese advertising agency, Dentsu Inc, he began to use the company's equipment to photograph female employes. His commercial work was dedicated to cool, precise shots of refrigerators and kitchen appliances in the studio, while his private work began focusing on capturing nude models poised in the shadows of mystery. He practised with new techniques, circulating his one-off photographs as xeroed copies, and by the time he met his his future wife Aoki Yoko in 1968, he had already received the Taiyo Prize for his film *Satchin And His Brother Mabou*.

In 1970, a controversial exhibition which featured many images of female genitalia signalled the direction that Araki's work would then take. Yoko was to become his favourite model in the 1970s and 1980s, but at the same time, he began to document the emerging Tokyo sex industry. While most of his models were young women, including amateur sex workers kitted out in the kittenish costumes of giggling schoolgirls displaying a sort of peek-a-boo naughtiness, he also trained his camera on older models and "fallen women". He maintained his policy of all-inclusiveness, rather than worshipping perfection and desire. Now and then, clients enter the frame, or the photographer himself partly intrudes on the action. His obvious affection for his models, however, has never been in doubt.

"The most striking aspect of Araki's work during this time was the implicit earthy humour of his subjects," writes Wendy Cavenett in *Black +White* magazine in 1999. "These pictures were less symbolic but more complex, shocking yet engrossing, sometimes funny and beautiful to look at. Araki refused to censor his work, using his camera to give Tokyo's sex industry a place in the national conscience.

His work stands as a significant series of single moments that are a silent testimony to private worlds traditionally secreted away from public gaze. When placed in the context of Araki's entire body of work, it illustrates most vividly the vicarious line between cultural acceptability and cultural reality."

Sometimes he played along with the trials of censorship and his burgeoning reputation as "the hair photographer" by scratching his negatives before printing them, or applying black paint directly to his imagery, covering the vaginas of his models. He exaggerated the perceived shame of pubic hair, and such devices can be seen as the fore-runners of his painted photographs of Kaori from 2003-2004.

Araki and his camera became a regular sight in Tokyo's red-light district. He ventured into brothels, karaoke bars and sex shops, photographing prostitutes at work, but always with their full consent. His personal morality has sorely tried some critics, but few photographers have worked so succinctly with the linked themes of hedonism and alienation.

As well as portraits, Araki has also done urban landscapes and empty street scenes providing a metaphor for the loneliness of life in a metropolis. His black-and-white series titled *Sentimental Journey* records his wife Yoko's death from cancer in 1990, which was followed by a period in which Araki photographed striking, sparse vistas of the sky. In these images, the artist's sense of grief and loss is palpable.

His large scale *Painting Flower* series is devoted to close-ups of lilies, orchids and other waxy flowers which he has first daubed in glowing paint. It is as though Araki has decided to improve on nature, creating monumental still-lives which comment on Japan's ambivalent attitude toward untouched beauty. Meanwhile, over the past two years, his *Polaerotica* series provide the perfect marriage of technique and theme.







These unstaged snapshot portraits powerfully link the intense colours and instant gratification of Polaroid photography, to the rapid consumerism of sex by-the-hour.

With a career that now spans more than three decades, Araki's output is vast. His energy and his obsessions are legendary. With almost 300 books to his name, Araki's work has also been exhibited in prestigious solo shows at the Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain in Paris, the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, Centre National de la Photographie in Paris, Stedelijk Museum voor Aktuele Kunst in Gent, Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, the Photographers Gallery in London, Deichtorhallen in Hamburg, the Taipei Museum in Taiwan and the Frans Halsmuseum in Haarlem.

This book is being published on the occasion of Araki's third solo show at Reflex Gallery in Amsterdam. Araki first began to photograph Kaori at about the same time that he established his relationship with the gallery. Accordingly, the Amsterdam exhibition is dedicated solely to Araki's portraits of his current muse, his chameleon of expressive beauty.

Developing from his photographs of painted flowers, Araki's most recent photographs of Kaori are a further departure from the traditional world of portraiture. With broad brush strokes, he applies waves of bright colour to his black and white prints. Swirls of paint seem to "push" Kaori aside. The colours wrap sensually around her contours, like a blanket. Her silhouette emerges from lush fields. Her poses are relaxed and comfortable, or alternatively, she is shown with awkwardly splayed limbs. Shot from above, Kaori appears to be leaping like a ballerina, defying gravity against carefully choreographed backgrounds. She is spontaneous, desi-

nable and free-spirited. Bold calligraphy turns her into a brazen calendar girl. There is the sensation of both suspense and suspension of belief.

The paint itself becomes physical. It binds her to the paper, like the bondage ropes used in Araki's earlier photography. Simultaneously, the paint functions as a material which both cancels and accentuates. These are not the carefully hand-painted portraits of Pierre et Gilles or Jan Saudek. Araki's use of paint is not about cautious, meticulous beautification. It is about rough, expressive emotion. His gestures are the wild, raw stuff of Arnulf Rainer and Gunter Brus, closer to German expressionism than the high-style violence of Manga comics.

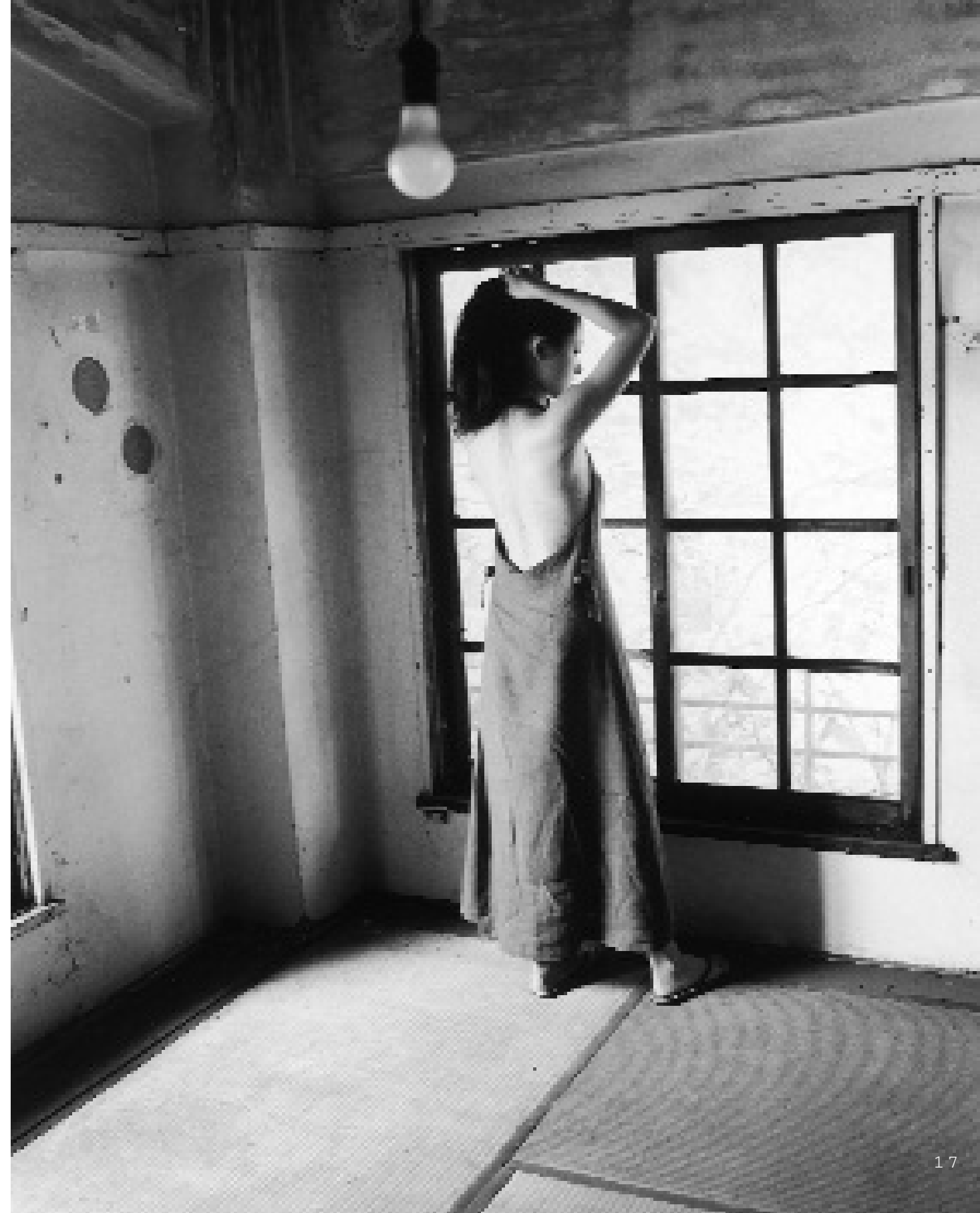


In any case, splashes of red and pink inevitably conjure up the instant impression of blood. In other painted portraits, especially those in which Araki has included abstract, bursting blossoms, he has transferred a sunny, tropical disposition to the playful pictures of Kaori rollicking and rolling on sheets. Against a yellow background, she appears to be swimming on sand, amid details painted using Gauguin's coral palette. She looks back at the viewer with bedroom eyes. As ever, there is the implication of an intimate

rapport between the model and photographer. Most photographers attempt to mask this unspoken relationship, but Araki exaggerates it with relish.

In an age of digital manipulation, Araki instead uses an extremely manual, hands-on technique to create a new celebration of feminine beauty. Kaori becomes a buoyant symbol of joy, hope and freedom. Neither the photographer nor his muse live under the pewter skies of tragedy and suffering. Every moment deserves our attention, no scene is without beauty and no pleasure is forbidden. Amid the bustle and neon lights of Tokyo, Araki has given us his own version of paradise.

Jonathan Turner

















THE
PRODUCTS
OF
STRENGTH
ALL COME
FROM
THE
HUMAN BODY















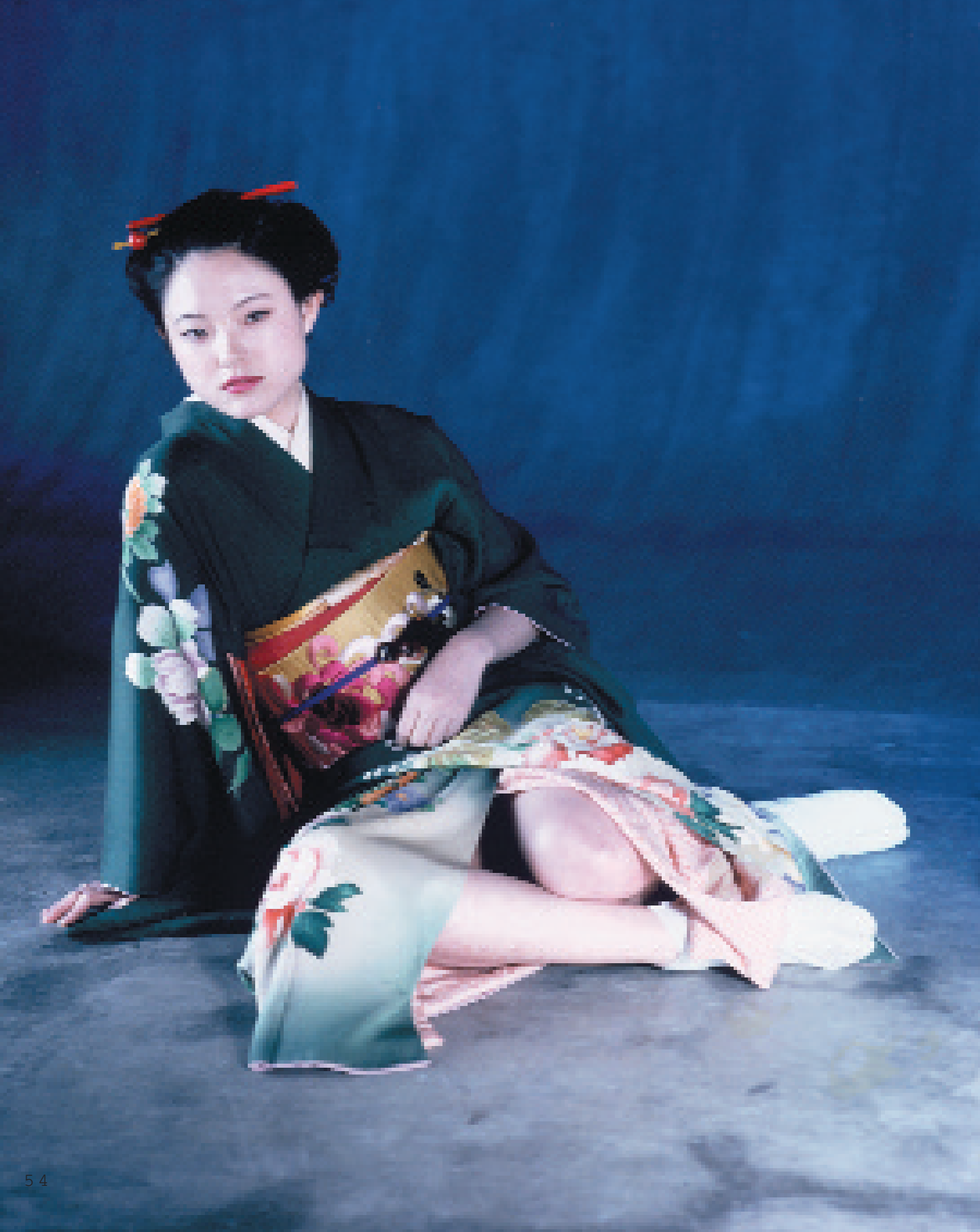
























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