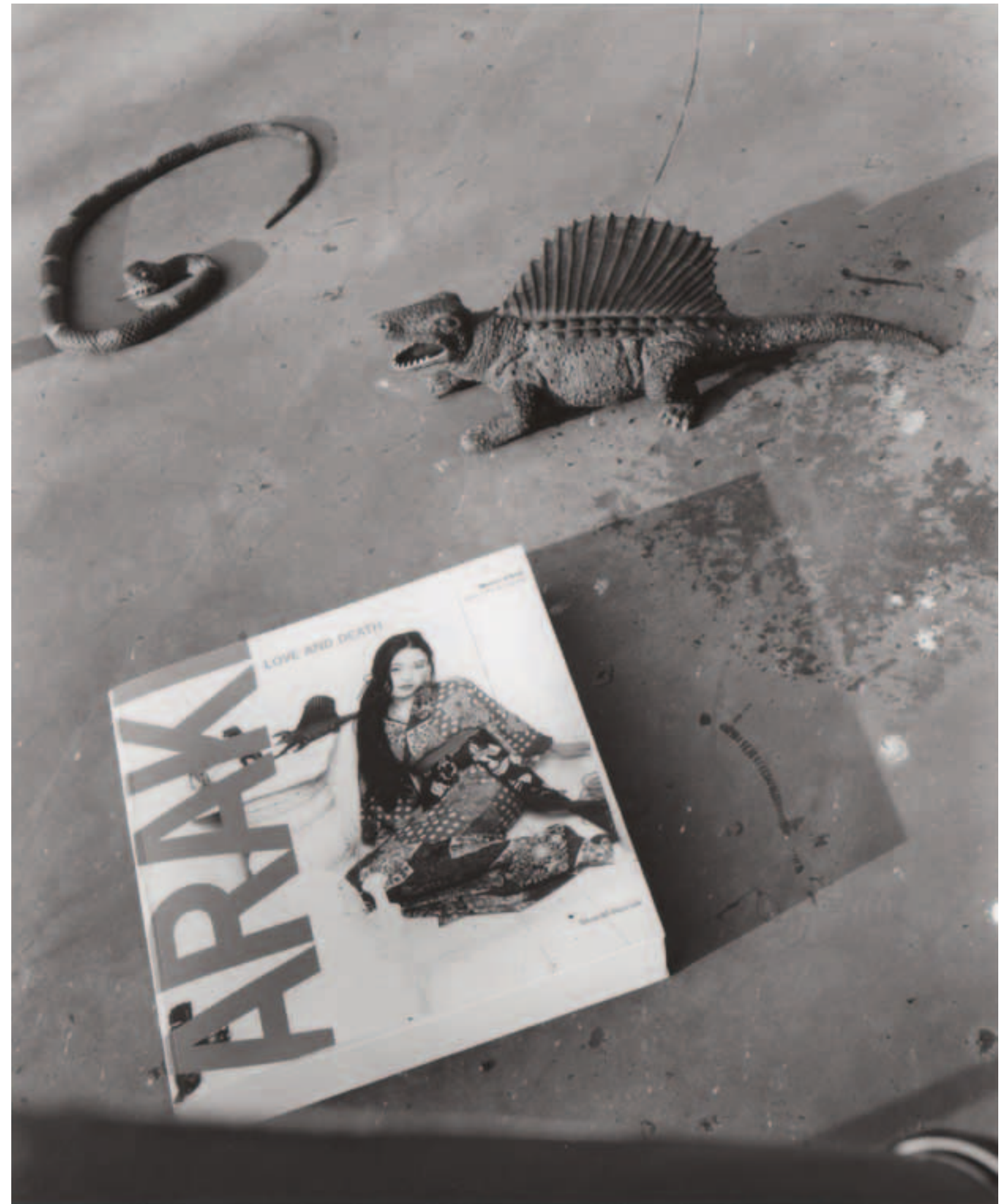


It Was Once A Paradise

NOBUYOSHI ARAKI

It Was Once A Paradise





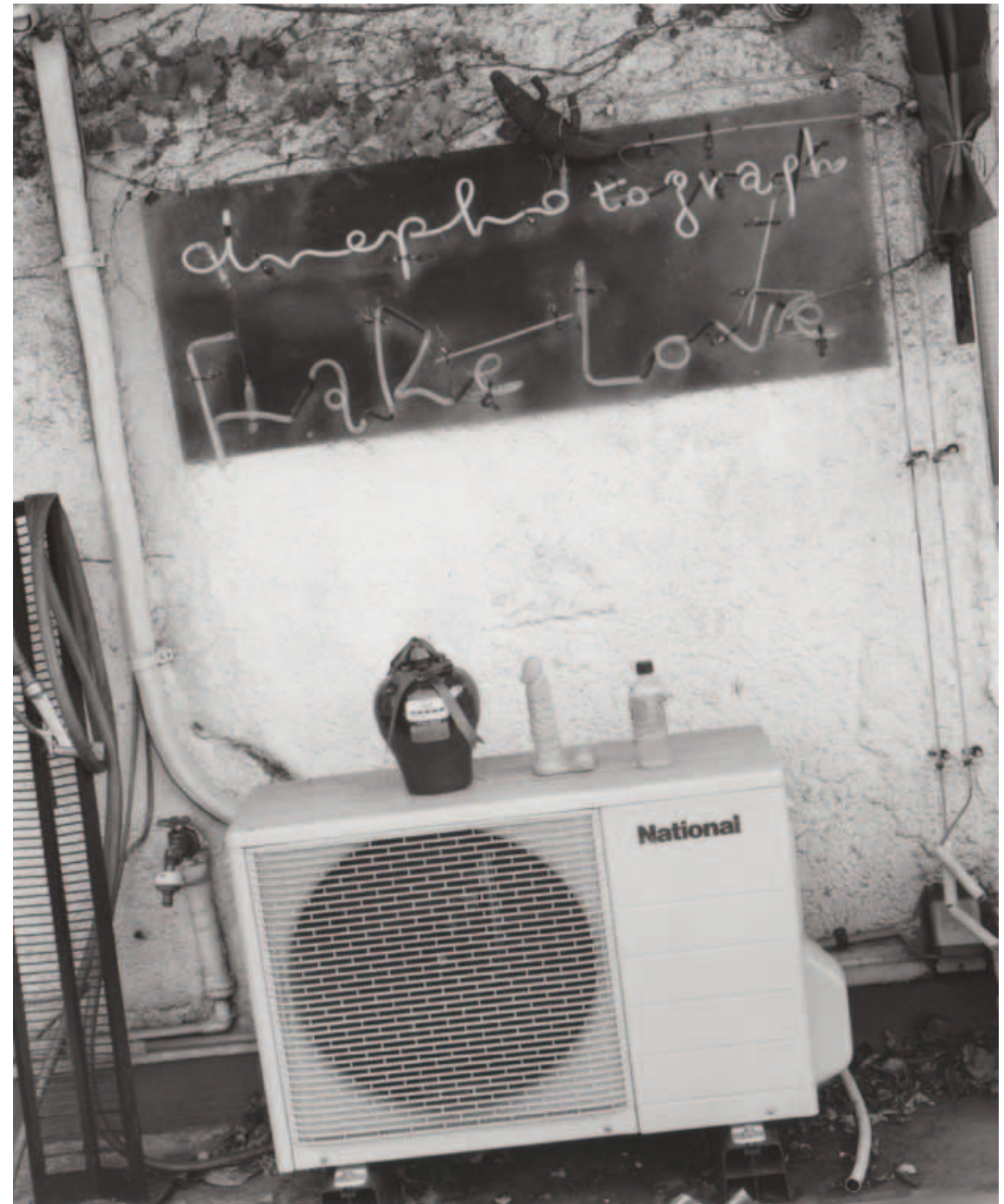
































Araki - Perseverance in the face of death

Introduction by Marcel Feil

Being one of the most famous Japanese artists of our time and having published the incredible amount of more than 425 photo books it is not easy to understand that Nobuyoshi Araki still is some kind of an enigma. But perhaps it is exactly this huge amount reflecting Araki's inexhaustible, insatiable, even obsessive working mode that both feeds and preserves the enigmatic, mercury-like nature of his artistry. Araki seems to take a pleasure in escaping from clear and final definitions by constantly fleeing forward towards new encounters, new possibilities and therefore, inevitably, towards new and challenging work. Araki is always on the move, living and exploring the experience of the 'here and now' to the full extend. By doing so Araki seems above all to defy the cruelty of time and therefore the inevitability of death.

'If I didn't have photography,' Nobuyoshi Araki has said, "I'd have absolutely nothing. My life is all about photography, and so life is itself photography." Araki's art overflows with life, and his life is awash in images. Since he started his photographic career in the mid-sixties Araki has taken many tens of thousand of photographs. They are personal, indifferent; posed, random, accidental; prurient, erotic, anarchistic, touching, vulgar, lascivious, lurid, sentimental. The cumulative effect is overwhelming. His art is all about movement and restlessness, even though he relentlessly returns to the same fixations. One of them is women.

For some, Araki is utterly beyond the pale, especially because of his depictions of women: women in kimonos bound and suspended in Japanese rope bondage (Kinbaku), women's bodies smeared with what appears to be blood (in fact, it is paint), women masturbating, women with lipstick and cigarettes, women with Araki's bestiary of plastic dinosaurs and lizards. The women look at the man behind the camera, and their gaze reaches us. Often it is a look of severity, as if the spectator was really the one being objectified.

Although often accused of being pornographic or even obscene Araki's images of women are because of this cool, objective and detached posture hardly ever really erotic or disturbing. What we are watching is the complicit *menage-à-trois* of photographer, model and camera, a kind of ritualised theatre of objectification.

This might touch upon the essence of the endless stream of images. The importance is less with the actual photographic image that is the result of the interplay between model, camera and the photographer, but more and more with the photographic act itself. The actual act of pressing the shutter has become a true and existential ritual. The nature of a ritual, its essence, is the fact that it has to be executed, over and over again, repetitively, without too much questions asked. By executing the ritualized photographic act without prejudice and without moral, fully living the 'here and now', Araki creates a body of work that to him eventually becomes comparable to a mandala, a highly stylized model of the world containing both good and evil, light and darkness, emphasising the endless cycle of life and death.

Araki has brought himself to a point in life that the actual photographic act can be sufficient: "I am determined to solve everything just by taking a

photograph. I don't know how they will turn out, but while looking through the viewfinder, I really thought they look good."

With the photographic act turned into an existential ritual, the persona of the artists cannot remain unaddressed. Araki has been described as a pornographer, a monster, a genius, a "dirty uncle" and much else besides. He has called himself most of these things, too, and makes much of his persona as a somewhat cartoonish, priapic little devil with upbeat energy, idiosyncratic hairstyle and signature binoculars. And as it is always the case with Araki, you can't tell truth from false, a joke from deep insight or a play from sincerity. Because of this, Araki remains the untouchable spirit, the shaman who in the end can only exorcize his deepest fears by performing the photographic ritual. Only by ritually distancing himself and keeping life at an arm's length he can truly relate to reality and, eventually, reconcile life and death.

If what strikes one first about Araki is his frightening energy, it is matched by his inventiveness and generosity as an image-maker. Just about every technical expedient possible is played out by him, with the exception of digital photography, whose truthfulness Araki mistrusts. He is much concerned with authenticity, yet his work is also full of plays on what is real and what is not, what is staged and what has been discovered. This also becomes evident in the equally creative way he re-contextualises his past, and reworks images in order to bring them to life in new ways.

This becomes all too evident in his latest series of diptychs that brings together two highly different kinds of photography both fundamental to a proper understanding of Araki's artistry. Next to the

exuberant, colourful images of naked women in which a meticulous staging results in certain detachment from the world, Araki has positioned images of a very different nature: images addressing his private life presented in soft grey tones and mostly focusing on his beloved Tokyo balcony.

This very balcony and the choice for black-and-white photographs immediately brings to mind a collection of photographs that might be lesser known with the large audience, but is nonetheless at the core of Araki's work and life. In 1971 the little book *Sentimental Journey* was self-published by Araki showing a series of photographs he took recording his wedding and honeymoon with his beloved Yoko Aoki. In 1991, exactly twenty years late, a sequel had been published, also with black-and-white photographs, entitled *Sentimental Journey/Winter Journey* in which Araki combined more photographs of the honey moon, with a later series that documents Yoko's illness and death in 1990. Araki's eye never flinched as he photographed his own hand in Yoko's, his shadow before him as he carried flowers to her room the day she died, her bones on a gurney after her cremation. Afterwards Araki spent a year photographing the Tokyo skies unfurling beyond his balcony, Yoko's cat at the window with him.

In March 2010 there occurred another decisive event in the life of Nobuyoshi Araki. His beloved cat Chiro, originally given to Yoko Aoki by her mother in 1988, was finally nearing the end of her life. Araki movingly describes Chiro's ability to transform the lifeless world he inhabited following Yoko's death into a vital Eden, how simply by being there Chiro was able to turn his balcony, which had "turned to ruin", into "something resembling an Eden".

Again with an interval of twenty years a third *Sentimental Journey* has published: *Sentimental*

Journey/Spring Journey. The total *Sentimental Journey*-trilogy only contains well-considered black-and-white photographs. The choice not to use colour photographs for these very private and personal occasions seems to emphasize one of the characteristics of photography, which is to engrave the occasion into our memory. The lack of colour immediately makes the photograph into an artefact showing something that inescapably belongs to the past. There is no need to present the image otherwise then lost. These images go to the bone of bereavement, nostalgia and loneliness. These are not images aiming to keep the world at a distant by showing it with a detached flair, but in stead to try to connect with a world irretrievably lost.

With the loss of his beloved ones Araki's balcony is turned into a mere sanctuary filled with the memory of his late wife and cat. In these images, that personal space, although still redolent of happier times, has become a wasteland inhabited and patrolled by plastic dinosaurs. The dinosaur – at once fascinating, predatory and fabled – has long been recognised as Araki's alter-ego. While Araki himself is not present in these black and white images, the toy dinosaurs that populate the scenes serve to show the indelible, inescapable, nature of memory.

The incredible daring and powerful juxtaposition of these two different strategies to deal with reality as presented in these latest diptychs not only emphasizes the enormous and inevitable force of death that has been decisive for most of Araki's work but most of all reasserts his insatiable will to live and to persevere in the face of death.

Marcel Feil,
Foam Photography Museum, Amsterdam

Nobuyoshi Araki and the act of binding up hearts

By Robbert Roos

The work of the Japanese photographer Araki is on all levels provocative. It is never ‘flattering’, no matter if he is photographing a street scene in Tokyo, his wife, his cat, his balcony, casual everyday scenes or one of the many (nude) models. Through Araki we are forced to look. We can’t lay back and treat the images as eye candy. We have to ‘work’ to really experience the photographs.

A classic approach to street or reportage photography is defined by the iconic phrase ‘the decisive moment’, coined by Henri Cartier-Bresson. It is an approach to photography by keeping calm, waiting for your moment and then ‘click’ at precise the right time, to create an image in which everything is right: the spur of the moment, the anecdote, the composition, the balance between protagonists and supporting roles. A moment you would like to stage in a studio, if you had the chance.

Araki is no such photographer. He is like a soldier with a Stengun: he fires shot after shot, agile, moving like a cat around his subject, prowling, but also casual, as if no rules of photography interest him. Most of the times it is from the abundance of photographs that his stories arise, not the meticulous crafted single image.

The stories in Araki’s pictorial novellas are never linear, with a clear beginning or end. They are bold, multi-layered and full of hidden meanings.

His sheer shameless depiction of naked women - he knows the backstreets of the brothels in Tokyo intimately and has a love for Kinbaku ('bondage') - suggests a proto-pornographic mind. And to a certain extent this will certainly be true. The main theme however is the reality of life, without any boundaries between 'high' and 'low' and without any hierarchy between the subjects. 'Real life' is the world you live in and the context that frames you. It is your own personal story, with all its struggles, joys and misfortunes. It is eating, sleeping, fucking, loving and dying. It is your wife, your cat, your balcony. In Araki's case at least.

A telling photograph - shot on January 29th, 1990 - shows the dead wife of Araki (Yoko) in her coffin, covered with flowers with next to her right ear a booklet with the image of a cat. The cat is Chiro, the love of both their lives, and subject of many photographs. An emotional message of Araki, written about the night Yoko died, learns that she had very much looked forward to the book called 'Itoshi no Chiro' ('Chiro, My Love'). Two loves in one coffin. Chiro's habitat was the big balcony of the house. It is littered with plastic dinosaurs, snakes, leguanas and other toy animals. Animals that also pop up in the sexual/pornographic portraits of naked women, bound and unbound, in which the animals seem to perform lewd acts. What are these animals? Props? Alterego's? Characters in Ovidius-like metamorphosis stories? As protagonists in a wide ranging collection of photographs, they might seem to play a role, but they are very prominent nevertheless.

The balcony is the place where Araki and Yoko would reside most often. It was for them a safe heaven above the hectic streets of Tokyo. A paradise. First of Araki, Yoko and Chiro together. Then, after Yoko died, of Araki and Chiro alone. And after the cat died a couple of years ago, the paradise as paradise ended. It became

a lost paradise, or better: the memory of a paradise. This deeply melancholic feeling seeps through the photographs that Araki continues to shoot of the balcony. Even littered with the toy animals there is a palpable emptiness in the pictures. They are devoid of life. No cat, no wife to play the supporting role between the animals any more. The concrete floor is a pre-historic waste ground, with the animals as the fossils of memories lost.

In one of the shots of the balcony Araki zooms in on a tabletop that holds several figurines, a glass object and a plastic snake. Decay is omnipresent here. We see a classical sculpture of a hero and goddess - nude of course - in embrace, legs missing. In the middle lies the phallus-shaped head of a toy duck, broken loose at the neck. The beak points toward a sculptured version of Botticelli's Venus. Next to it is a funny Buddha, that looks like an alterego of Araki himself. There are a kitschy tourist replica of the 'Pietà' of Michelangelo and the wolf of Romulus and Remus, both weathered and slightly eroded. On the left side stands a clay portrait of the photographer-master himself, including his trademark glasses and the hair that stands up on either side of his head as devilish horns. The snake is wrapped around its base, and seemingly bites it. The eyes of the sculpture-portrait are fixed on a worn statue of a cat, lying wide-eyed on the right side of the table. It is a still life full of connotations that speaks about love, lust and the forbidden fruit of desire.

In the most recent series - shown at Galerie Alex Daniels - Reflex Amsterdam - shots of the balcony (all black & white) are coupled with the bondage photography of nude women (all colour). 'Kinbaku' literally means 'the beauty of tight binding'. The sexual pleasure is almost as important as the 'process' of binding itself and the aesthetical patterns that are created with the ropes. It's - just like the balcony-photographs - a *mer à boire* of connotations. A much

quoted comment of Araki says: 'I only tie up a woman's body, because I know I cannot tie up her heart. Only her physical parts can be tied up. Tying up a woman becomes an embrace.'

Bondage is a very peculiar form of sex. The submissiveness of the women can be found offensive and degrading. This makes looking at the photographs rather uncomfortable. The voyeurism involved is also an integral part of the photography. We are a voyeur in the intimate interactions between Araki and his models. 'Tying up' is a very personal 'journey' into the unknown that involves a great deal of trust between the master binding and the woman being bound. The bindings themselves are not only there to restrain - the BDSM-part -, but serve an aesthetic purpose as well. The run of the ropes, the knots, the imprints the ropes leave in the flesh, they are like abstract landscapes on the nude - or partly clothed - women. However 'cruel' the act of binding might seem, as a viewer you don't really feel this cruelty. Despite their bondages, these women don't seem helpless or weak, even though their gaze might seem 'empty' at some times, detached. What Araki manages to do is subtracting the pornographic connotation which is inevitably connected to these images. Lust will most certainly play a role at some point, but most of all, the whole scene is the result of an aesthetic, artistic endeavor between the model and the photographer. The setup of the Kinbaku-photographs - more worked through and monumental than in the agile reportage series - is an interplay between the woman and Araki with the act of wrapping up as delicate as making love. We are allowed into this game through the lens of the photographer, but only in the role of the voyeur, the onlooker.

It is a consistent position, when dealing with the work of Araki. More often than not we are manoeuvred into the position of the 'voyeur' because of the

relentless - some might say shameless - intimacy in his photography. This is most evident in the nude portraits (bound and unbound), but it is also very palpable in the photos that surround the death of his wife and his cat. When we see Yoko in her coffin. And when we see the endlessly delicate and tender photographs of his cat dying almost in front of the lens. A writer once wrote that Araki is fascinated by two things: Eros (sex/life) and Thanatos (death). In many of his photographs both are dancing a subtle pas de deux. In Kinbaku sex and death are closely bound together in the suggestive act itself. In the series about Yoko the merging of the themes is of course very prominent. Maybe we can see the recent pictures of the balcony as a field of memory, where it becomes a manifest that Thanatos ultimately conquers Eros.

That brings us to a strong undercurrent in Araki's photography: melancholy. No matter how playful, gay, naughty, provocative, liberating or shameless the pictures are, there is always the 'abstract' element of melancholy lurking somewhere in a corner. But melancholy will never subdue Araki. Thanatos might win over Eros in the real world, in Araki's world Eros will always win, with women dominating the center. "Meeting a woman anywhere teaches you more about the world than reading Balzac. Whether it be a wife, a woman encountered by happenstance, or a prostitute, she will teach you about the world. In fact I build my life on meeting women and I have hardly read a book since primary school. ... I think that all the attractions in life are implied in women. There are many essential elements: beauty, disgust, obscenity, purity ... much more than one finds in nature. In woman, there is sky and sea. In woman, there is the flower and the bud ..."

Robbert Roos,
Kunsthal KAdE, Amersfoort.

Colophon

NOBUYOSHI ARAKI

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