

# Erotic? You're having a laugh

Some of Nobuyoshi Araki's photographs of sex and bondage seem seriously pornographic but this comic eccentric also appears to be poking fun at us – and himself, says **Kevin Jackson**

Most Western photography buffs will connect the name of Nobuyoshi Araki with... well, porn would be one apt word. His most famous collection to date, *Tokyo Lucky Hole* (first published in 1991, though photographed in the early Eighties, and now reissued by the German publisher Taschen), contains hundreds of shots depicting the working lives of that city's strippers, erotic dancers and prostitutes, most either naked or in minimal lingerie, some of them energetically fellating clients, and a lot of them exposing their pudenda for close-up inspection.

By the time you put the book down, you feel as if you've been studying for a higher degree in gynaecology. It takes some ingenuity to explain to Joe or Yukio Public why this monochromatic forest of pubic hair, this legion of labia, should be regarded as anything more than smut, and, sure enough, the apologists have galloped forwards to oblige: "For Araki," writes one, "the [female] genitalia are synonymous with his ontological beginnings and an entrance to a mysterious other world. One also senses a kind of impatience to discover the truth of photography in this motif." ("Typical bloody man, eh? Only interested in one thing: ontological origins.") Curiously unmoved by this sort of sophomoric guff, assorted police forces have persisted in raiding Araki's exhibitions and confiscating naughty works.

Even quite puritanical souls, though, might consider it only fair to ponder a few additional facts about Araki – who, by the way, is something of a celebrity in Japan, and often pops up on television and in the popular press – before siding with the constabulary. One is the sheer scale of his photographic opus, possibly the largest of modern times: he's published 200 books of his own words and images, and about 100 more have been written about him by critics and curators; in 1996 he produced a *Complete Photographic Works* that ran to

20 huge volumes. Another consideration is that the sex shots, plentiful and lurid as they are, represent only one strand of Araki's wit and warp of obsessions.

A huge new volume from Phaidon, *Nobuyoshi Araki: Self, Life, Death*, provides a compendious overview of the assorted bees in his bonnet, in more than 800 colour and 400 black and white plates, arranged over 720 pages. (It weighs about half a ton, and is decidedly not suited to what is euphemistically known as one-handed reading.)

Its scale is almost numbing, but if you wanted to select a single shot that might hint at the typical furniture of Araki's brain, you could do worse than choose the one in which an impassive,

Whether seen carousing with drunken pals over dinner or looming incongruously in the corner of some erotic encounter, Araki is one of Araki's favourite models. He cuts a comic figure: almost always nattily and expensively dressed, with perfectly round dark glasses, a neatly trimmed moustache and his hair combed upwards into two tufts. He looks, in other words, remarkably like a cartoon cat, and when he dons a silly cat mask for some shots, he doesn't appear so very different from his usual grinning or puffed self. Could it be that he is having a laugh?

It could. National styles of humour are notoriously resistant to export, but it would take a solemn soul

dinosaurs, and he likes photographing them in silhouette, against the Tokyo skyline as seen from his apartment terrace, so that they resemble that Japanese folk hero Godzilla.

When he isn't playing with his toys, he's playing with his cat, Chiro, a handsome white fellow with black blobs near the base of his tail. Has any major photographer ever spent so much time taking pictures of his cat? (As he is no doubt well aware, a vulgar Americanism links Araki's feline studies with his gynaecological ones; let us shun it here.) Some snapshots are unexpectedly touching, particularly one that shows Chiro frisking in the snow. It is not altogether a surprise to find this was taken shortly after the death of Araki's beloved wife, Yoko, in 1990. Their pet became, for the photographer, a kind of emblem for the persistence of Yoko's spirit.

You can see something of the same elegaic, *sic transit* mood in Araki's pictures of lowering skies, of the older parts of Tokyo that have been mutilated or destroyed by developers – Araki himself was born in the then unravished district of Shitamachi, in 1940 – and in the paradoxically gorgeous close-ups of decaying heliotropes, and of flowers thrown into rivers (an allusion, we are told, to the Japanese religious practice of Shoryo-Nagashi, which eases dead souls on their journey).

Our pornographer-trickster, our grinning Top Cat of Tokyo nightlife, is also, it seems, much possessed by death. Balance that side of his temperament against the more sensationalist work and you will come a lot closer to what Araki is truly all about: not "ontology", maybe, but certainly the various and often undignified struggles of life against death.

Perhaps the most genuinely shocking picture he ever took shows nothing more explicit than a woman's face in half-profile. The woman was his wife, Yoko; it was taken during

and craving for (the photographic pun is inevitable) exposure.

The propriety of his decision to place his wife's most intimate experience in the public eye is, to put it mildly, questionable, but it does underline what Araki meant when he quipped

that the truly private parts of the human body are those above the neck.

Araki: Self, Life, Death, Barbican Art Gallery, London EC2 (020-7638 8891) to 22 January; the accompanying book is published by Phaidon Press, £45

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half-naked geisha, trussed up so that her bare breasts are emphasised and her legs are wide open, is suspended by three ropes from the doorway into a traditional Japanese room. To the bottom right of the picture sits Araki himself in a black T-shirt, pointing up towards the woman's genital area; for once, the genitals can't be seen, as they're hidden behind a carefully placed flower. Araki is cradling a camera and a toy lizard; and on the other side of the picture from him is a small ceramic cat.

With the exception of street scenes and skyscrapes, this wide-angled shot alludes to pretty much every one of Araki's trademark subjects: half-naked women, bondage, suspension, cameras, toy lizards and dinosaurs, traditional Japan, cats (usually real ones), flowers and, above all, self-portraiture.

indeed to conclude that these "portraits of the artist as Top Cat" are wholly in earnest, and some people who pick up an Araki book in the hope of a sexual frisson may well find that it is only their funny bone that is being tickled.

Araki is obviously having great fun with his work; the curious thing is that a lot of his nightclub girls seem to enjoy their trade, too, to judge by the amount of smirking and giggling. If you define pornography not in terms of sheer fleshly exposure but as an act of real or metaphorical violence against coerced women, the status of *Tokyo Lucky Hole* as porn becomes a good deal cloudier than the cops might care to admit.

This quirky sense of humour, or at the very least of playfulness, extends to some of his other specialties. Araki obviously owns a lot of rubber lizards and