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Nobuyoshi Araki and His Paradise: Art or Porn?

Introduction

Nobuyoshi Araki, most known for his erotic photographs featuring women in *Kinbaku* (Japanese Bandages), is probably one of the most controversial Japanese artists throughout the history. Snapshots of nude models in audacious postures with their sexual organs exposed, many of Araki's works can be easily confused with pornography downloaded from online porn sites. The artist's deviant style has brought him not only recognition and fans from all over the world, but also critics condemning him as a "pornographer", "misogynist", "fetishist", and "erotomaniac"¹.

Is his photography porn or art? This is the essential debate centering on Araki and his works. Those who praise him would agree with Araki's own interpretation that his photographs are more than what they appear to be. Under the unmistakable eroticism, there is nevertheless an extremely artistic sensitivity as well as a sophisticated system of complex symbolism. While for someone who thinks less of his works can easily argue that the photographer is simply misleading his audience by reading too much into his own works. The bombast self-narration cannot justify the photographer's objectifying of females, and his numerous representations of sexual pleasure can be read as a kind of self-indulgence.

¹ Alice Nivolov. Dazed. "Your Ultimate Guide To Nobuyoshi Araki." Last updated June, 2016. Accessed Oct. 06, 2016. <http://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/31219/1/your-ultimate-guide-to-nobuyoshi-araki>

In this paper, I will introduce Araki's artistic style, present the point of views that support Araki's subversive style, and also provide voices that doubt or go against the photographer—with dints of my own interpretations and criticism sprinkled around. I will not, however, try to define Araki and his works into either category or to force the reader to agree with me. My conclusion to the debate is an open ending, and the answer to the question is up to the reader himself. My hope is that for whoever comes across Araki's works will understand the complexity raised by them, and, while appreciating the beauty of the images, still be able to look at them critically.

Araki the Photographer

Born on May 25, 1940 in Tokyo, where the photographer currently resides, Nabuyoshi Araki is now one of the most famous modern cultural icons of Japan. Having published more than 450 books, Araki is also one of the most prolific artists living or dead throughout the world².

With his father as a "semi-pro photographer", Araki assisted his father doing photo assignments and fell in love with photography at a very young age³. Araki studied photography at Chiba University from 1959 to 1963, where the rigid and conservative curriculum "bored Araki to death"⁴. After graduation, Araki worked as a commercial photographer at the

² Tomo Kosuga. "Nobuyoshi Araki." VICE-United States. Last updated July 01, 2008. Accessed October 05, 2016. <http://www.vice.com/read/nobuyoshi-araki-118-v15n7>

³ ASX. "All Women Fall in Love with Nobuyoshi Araki." Published Nov. 23, 2014. Accessed Dec. 08, 2016. <http://www.americansuburbx.com/2014/11/all-women-fall-in-love-with-nobuyoshi-araki-and-duchamps-is-a-swindler-2014.html>

⁴ Ibid. 3.

advertising agency Dentsu. There he met his lifelong wife, the essayist Yoko. Yoko married Araki in 1971 and became Araki's first nude model and his “greatest muse”⁵. The couple soon left Dentsu while Araki set off his career in search for more creative and expressive style. Shortly after their marriage, Araki self-published his first photo book, the first part of a prolonged series, “*Sentimental Journey 1972-1992*”. With evocative and intimate images such as those showing his wife during orgasm, and the more mundane ones such as those showing the couple on the train to their love nest⁶, the book established the two prominent features of Araki's works even in this burgeoning stage of the artist's career: sex and diarial narrative⁷.

Diptychs: Juxtaposition of Contrast and Paradox

In many of Araki's publications, such as *Erotos*, *Kekkai*, *Last Year 2001*, *Tokyo Nude*, etc., close-ups of body parts are usually juxtaposed with plants, animals, or landscapes in two contiguous pages as diptychs⁸ (pictures hinged on two panels like a book, the two leaves usually serve as alternatives of each other).

The implication induced by diptychs is central to the understanding of Araki's works. With diptychs its major format, Araki's works is prevailed by contrasts and becomes the very embodiment of a paradox. In one of Araki's recent books, *It Was Once A Paradise*,⁹ a color

⁵ Gavin Yeung. Hypebeast. “8 Facts You Need to Know About Nobuyoshi Araki.” Last updated Oct. 31, 2016. Accessed Dec. 12, 2016. <https://hypebeast.com/2016/10/8-facts-about-nobuyoshi-araki>

⁶ Nobuyoshi Araki. *Sentimental Journey and Winter Journey*. Shinchosha Company (September 1991).

⁷ In the later section “Araki's Diary: I-Novel” I will introduce this narrative style with more details.

⁸ Consulted *Erotos*(1993 Editions), *Kekkai*(2014), *Last Year 2001*(2001), *Tokyo Nude*(1989), and several articles cited in this paper, including Nicolov's “Your Ultimate Guide to Nobuyoshi Araki,” etc, which all refer to diptych as a significant feature of Araki's works.

⁹ published by Reflex Editions, 2012.

photograph of a semi-nude woman dressed in Kimono and tied with Kinbaku is juxtaposed with a still life monochrome of a desolate domestic setting, the decadent looks of which provokes a nostalgia sentiment. "Nostalgic ruins contrast with erotic hope, forming a contrast that is echoed in the packaging of the book, which has been designed to be read in either direction, and comes with a choice of two different dust jackets."¹⁰



Fig. 1 Untitled. From It Was Once A Paradise. By Nobuyoshi Araki.

¹⁰ Ibid 9.

This reading here is rather suggestive of a more important issue about Araki's art. Paradox and contrasts not only manifest themselves in the form of diptych, but also in the vital question, which this paper discusses, that whether Araki's works is pornography or art. The photographer seems to be enjoying playing on both sides, rejecting single polarizing definition. Araki is radical, but his radicalness is double layered. The same is with his use of colors, which at times overflowed with "vibrant colors," and at times quieted down by the intensified "black and white"¹¹.

Master of Eroticism and a Taboo Breaker

Likening his camera to the vagina, Araki says that he gets "inside the camera" while taking a photo, just like " 'entering' the subject in the same way as he enters a woman," and he even calls his camera his "vagin-eye"¹². Interestingly, the artist also claims that his camera "almost always has an erection" as if the "camera is a penis"¹³.

All these sexual metaphors about camera and photography is just a tip of the iceberg, in terms of how bold and straightforward Araki can be when showing off himself as a radical artist. Since the first publication of *Eros*, where Araki photographed his wife having sex and posing naked, the photographer has expanded his subjects to an astonishingly wide range. From explicit pictures of women tied-up in S&M styles¹⁴ and naked prostitutes serving male

¹¹ Artuner. "Nobuyoshi Araki, Art, Photos, Gallery, Exhibition." Accessed Nov. 20, 2016. <http://www.artuner.com/artists/nobuyoshi-araki/>

¹² See note 5.

¹³ See note 2.

¹⁴ Section "Kinbaku: Tying up the Body or the Soul" will expand more on this topic.

costumers (some images of which even include Araki performing these sex acts himself)¹⁵, to subtler ones of plants, animals, or even ground cracks that look like sexual genitals, Araki's erotic photographs has earned the reputation for their creator as the deviant artist who seems obsessed with sexualising everything in life.

Araki once referred to his style as “Erotic Realism,” a term he mentioned in an interview about him shooting for the second issue of the Tokyo-based style magazine, *The Reality Show*,¹⁶ without further explanation on the term. But the following paragraph from the Dazed online magazine gives us a hint of what Araki might be talking about: “Araki has undoubtedly had a taboo-breaking career. His graphic images confront the hidden eroticism that lies beneath the surface of polite Japanese society; sex, prostitution, BDSM and the role of the Geisha are all subjects the fearless photographer addresses. By pointing his camera lens at the hidden sexual underbelly of Japanese society, he tackles off-limit issues and confronts the hypocrisy of the country’s censorship laws. The nature of some of his pictures has been so outrageous, in fact, that he’s been arrested for obscenity under Japanese law.”¹⁷

Not Just Pornography: Intimacy Beyond Sex

For Araki, his photographic eroticism is from the start the documentation of vivid and intimate connections between people. Araki puts great emphasis on how his close and loving relationship with his wife has had a determining affect on his career: “Araki has always said that it is Yoko who made him a photographer. Without Yoko, he would not be able to realize

¹⁵ With photos from his famous collection, “Tokyo Lucky Hole,” as examples.

¹⁶ “‘Reality Show’ by Kensui Arai.” Youtube.com. NOWNESS. Updated May 17, 2011. Accessed Nov. 20, 2016.

¹⁷ See note 1.

his photography.”¹⁸ Yoko’s influence on Araki’s art suggests that, what is provocative in Araki’s photographs is more than just the lust for sex, but rather the intimacy between the photographer and his subjects, the aura of lingering desire and growing openness between two giving individuals. The fact that one of such connections is now impeded by the death of his wife only lends this dominant theme in his art more delicacy. It reminds us of the transcendence of spiritual connections as opposed to the temporality of the portrayed physical closeness.

Moreover, according to Araki, he has shifted his focus on his personal connections with his models to the connections that are entirely among the others,¹⁹ opening up a whole new scale of intimacy. In one of his latest works, *Kofuku Shashin* (Happy Photographs), Araki’s works are no longer about nude females tied up in enclosed space, but about ordinary people’s daily life in the open streets of Tokyo. “I came to realize that I can get much more out of the shoot if I focus on the relationship that my subjects have among themselves, rather than the relationship between them and me,” says Araki. “I shoot that moment. That’s far more profound. Of course the spatial relationship that we create for ourselves at that moment is also important, but the time that we share together is far more appealing and precious to me...it’s like I frame ‘time’ rather than ‘space.’”²⁰

From the immobile models to the families playing together, Araki seems to be reaching into another realm of “intimacy”. It is less about physical openness built through body

¹⁸ Raphael Ong, et al. “Interview with Nobuyoshi Araki.” Invisible Photographer Asia (IPA). Published September 05, 2016. Accessed October 04, 2016. <http://invisiblephotographer.asia/2012/07/25/interview-with-nobuyoshi-araki/>

¹⁹ See note 2.

²⁰ See note 3.

exposure and spatial tightness, but more about self-erasure from the narratives of others, an openness that transcends the boundaries between self and other, as well as that between professional photographs and frameless living environment and quotidian activities.

Nudity as a Motif: Less-Shy Makes Less-Pornography?

Though many have accused his works for pornographic obscenity, Araki himself holds a different view: “My photography reveals everything, differently from typical pornography. There is a Japanese proverb, ‘Hiding makes it flower (秘すれば花).’ [If you hide something, it becomes more valuable and beautiful.] But my models and photographs show everything.”²¹ Araki seems to argue that the absolute openness of the subjects in his works does not serve to be sexually provocative, and neither are his photographs meant to shock or to repel.

“Nudity does not simply mean nakedness for the artist, who says he doesn’t see “nudity as an exposed breast or pubis but rather believes that a woman is exposed through her face, not by her naked body”²². Indeed, many of the nude and tied-up models in Araki’s work are portrayed as staring straight into the camera without the slightest trace of shyness. The direct and often emotionless gaze is a signature of Araki’s erotic photos. While the women in the conventional pornography often seem to be timid and embarrassed, the women in Araki’s photos sometimes appear confident and audacious.

21 Hyewon Yi. TAP. “Crossing Boundaries: An Interview with Nobuyoshi Araki.” Published Spring 2011. Accessed Dec. 02, 2016. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tap/7977573.0001.205/--crossing-boundaries-an-interview-with-nobuyoshi-araki?rgn=main;view=fulltext>

²² see note 1.

However, Araki's explanation on what distinguishes his art from pornography does not apply to all his works; in fact, there are quite a lot of exceptions for both his photos and Shunga, where neither do his models look audacious, nor do the females in traditional erotic art pieces look shy and "hidden" with their bodies barely covered up.



Fig 2 Araki's photo where the models' faces are unseen. Untitled. From Arakism(1967-1987)



Fig 3 Shunga showing a woman with exposed private parts and actively conducted in the sex act. By Yanagawa Shigenobu.

The cases where some of Araki has models their heads covered or faces turned away are far from rare. With their entire face intentionally erased from the image, the women's identities are obscured, their voices muffled. While their nakedness reveals everything about their physicality, the models are but only bodies without names, losing their remaining agency as a subject. Even their bodies are reduced to the totalitarian concept of sexualization. In images like these, it is hard for Araki to convince his audience that his erotic photos are not pornography that dehumanizes and objectifies women.

Kinbaku: Tying Up Body or Soul?

Kinbaku ('the beauty of tight binding,' a form of traditional Japanese sex bondage²³), omnipresent in Araki's works, is the photographer's favorite theme. Araki claims that, the process of tying women up in *Kinbaku* "is not about the tying of the knots or the sexualized position, but rather about how the flesh changes color when bound."²⁴ Perhaps what the photographer is trying to make clear is that conducting Kinbaku on his models is yet another way of communication, of establishing relationship and connections. While tying up the subject, Araki also observes the way the subject reacts actively to the restrictions imposed on them.

"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,"²⁵ Araki once said. Yet still, the idea of bondage is essentially based upon the idea of immobility, the deprivation of autonomy and the imposing of control. Many of Araki's photos that feature Kinbaku are also the ones where the models' faces are masked or hidden, and the bondages double up the extent to which the models are objectified and dehumanized. The ropes intrudes the models' existence, marking their images almost like an assault, while the models' nudity makes the presence of the bags on their heads and the ropes around their bodies even more conspicuous.

Tying up the body or the soul, however, Araki's love with Kinbaku may well be another manifestation of the photographer's obsession with paradox. When the image of the model's delicate body collides with that of the grotesque ropes and knots, or when the skin is freed and exposed from garments yet still strangled behind the cage-like bondages, there is a

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

certain grace in the co-existence of pleasure and pain, comfort and danger.

“Lecherous Old Man”²⁶

One fact that often draws harsh criticism towards the photographer is that he has slept with all of his models during the shooting sessions.²⁷ “The model(s) and I expose ourselves to each other. We cannot hide anything. Even the feeling or the relation between the two is open. It also applies to the cityscapes that I make. There is always a certain naked relationship between my subjects and me.”²⁸ Here Araki brings up the idea of exposure and intimacy again. But is it really necessary for the photographer to go that far in his radical experiment? And is such experiment sincerely just for art?

The possibility that Araki is using art as an excuse for his own indulgence in sex is hardly ignorable, given that the artist is never ambiguous about his craze over women. “I immediately get a hard-on if I touch the girl,” says Araki during an interview,²⁹ “...A photographer who doesn’t take photos of women is no photographer, or only a third-rate one. Women teach you much more about the world than reading Balzac’s *Human Comedy*.”³⁰

Moreover, Araki’s self-indulgence seems to extend way beyond off-camera. The image of his “alter-ego,” reptiles³¹, frequently appears in his photographs, sometimes as a plastic dinosaur in his self-portrait (fig 2.), more often a crocodile, a lizard, or even a Godzilla model

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ see note 3.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ see note 21.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Printed Editions. “Kaori-by Nobuyoshi Araki.” Published 2005. Accessed Oct. 10, 2016.

<http://www.printed-editions.com/art-print/nobuyoshi-araki-kaori-42202>

approaching the model's crotch or breast (fig 1.). Araki is never subtle about the sexual connotation of these toy reptiles and the phallic image they stand for. Inspired by the tradition of animism in Edo Japanese prints, these monster figures in Araki's works are equivalence of human desires³²—including that of his own.

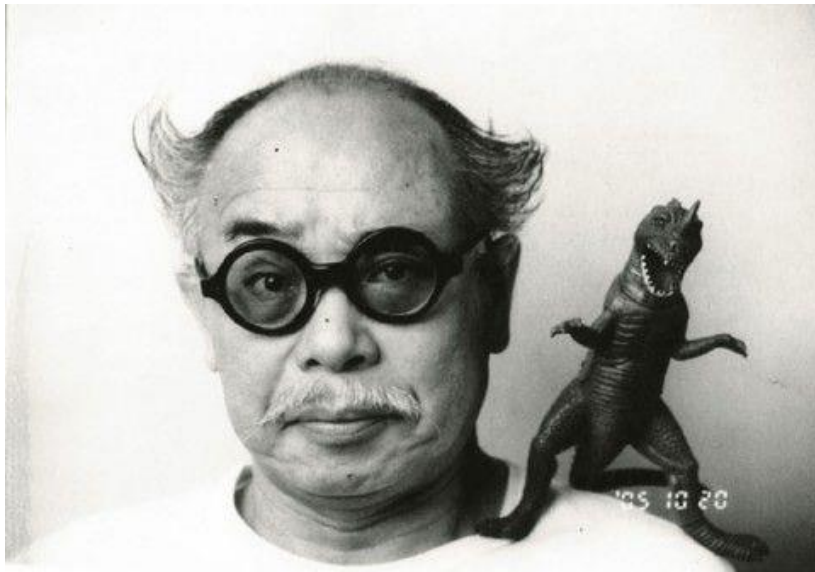


Fig 4. Portrait of Araki with a dinosaur standing on his shoulder.



Fig 5. Edo-period Shunga with monster figure. "the Dream of the Fisherman's Wife." By Katsushika Hokusai.

³² See note 1.

Conclusion

Is Nobuyoshi Araki's works porn or art? This remains the biggest myth about this photographer. While Araki once said that "his sex drive is weaker than most..." and it is his "lens (that) has a permanent erection,"³³ the endless sexual implications in so many of his photographs, his sexual relationship with his models, all makes the motivations behind his radical practices questionable. Yet despite all the controversies centering on his works, Araki's mastery in producing beautiful images with sophisticated symbolism is however undeniable. From flowers to monsters, Kinbaku to Kimono, nuanced sentiments to plain obscenity, the richness in Araki's photos call for the audience's careful reading into the artist's world.

³³ see note 18.

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