

荒木経惟と
彼に続く者たち

A foam

HEAVEN
& HELL

ART

RAK

IVAN VARTANIAN — Through this flows the continuous



Azuma Makoto, p. 105



Nomura Sakiko, p. 65

Araki's presence extends beyond the realm of the photography community and into the popular consciousness of visual culture in Japan.

I. Death

Nobuyoshi Araki's repertoire is remarkably expansive. He has made photography using nearly every available format, technique, and style in a copious output that spans decades of activity. Within this array Araki has also worked extensively with a stylus to produce a body of writings on photography, mostly in the form of memoirs, experiments in calligraphy and sumi-e (ink wash painting), and the introduction of colour pigment and brush work into his photography. Araki's treatment of the visual plane is intentionally complicated despite his lithe touch. Pigment, when applied with a brush to the surface of a print, is a layer that at times obscures the image it covers while transposing photography into the realm of painting. Elsewhere, Araki populates his compositions with flowers, plants, as well as dolls (and doll parts) that have been coloured either with pigment applied with flicks or with a brush. As shown in this volume, the dismembered body parts and flora are used as compositional elements that also point toward (but rarely define) various ideas. His focus on composition, or rather recomposition, is reminiscent of Henri Matisse, who in his last years generated an impressive volume of cut-outs using coloured paper. The jagged contours of Matisse's subjects (flowers, nudes, and graphic shapes) made his use of scissors explicit, almost as though showing the seams of a garment demonstrates greater allure and finish than flawlessness. Materiality itself

engages the viewer's eye, stimulating it to simultaneously see form and composition while at the same time being aware of the dissolution of those recognisable structures and patterns.

Araki's deftly assembled tableaux are, in this sense, a portrait of the photographer as an old man. Where once the photographer used his artistry to 'complete' an image, in these compositions the photography is a symphony of fragments, phrases, and gestures. Photography has oftentimes been equated with a sort of death and that is certainly present as a theme in these tableaux. In his essays *MY MOTHER'S DEATH, OR, AN INTRODUCTION TO FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHY* and *MY FATHER'S LOVER, OR, AN INTRODUCTION TO PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY (SETTING SUN: WRITINGS BY JAPANESE PHOTOGRAPHERS, Aperture, 2005)*, Araki draws a clear

link between the death of his parents and his photography. And the death of his wife Yoko catalysed his career and artistic output. At her funeral, Araki carried his framed portrait of Yoko and described it as 'the ultimate exhibition'.

The photographer's own death is the germinating factor in these tableaux, as he makes visual references to earlier works, his favoured poses for his models, and the representation of the phallus, which has been a consistent interruption in his compositions. The flora that he chooses as the stage for his toys and compositional motifs is at times prickly, finely texture, or a somewhat gross thing and represents the artist not visually but in spirit. Within the isolating darkness the flora becomes the support and generous giver for the motley players that adorn it.

II. Before Death

Araki's presence extends beyond the realm of the photography community and into the popular consciousness of visual culture in Japan. He is an omnipresent artist seeping into nearly every print publication in some form at some point over the last forty years. For a significant stretch of that career one of his mainstay assistants has also been his protégé Nomura Sakiko. Working so closely with Araki for such an extended period clearly has had an influence on Sakiko's work.

Araki's self-published photo-book *SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY* (1972) was a photo memoir of his honeymoon trip. The landscapes of that book are quite humdrum and without incident – even boring. While his contemporaries were actively

photographing urbanscapes and attacking the image to rework its potential, Araki turned his attention to recording an intimate time with Yoko. There is a total lack of drama in his photos. The lack of posturing and her relaxed composure circumvented the whole proposition of making a photograph and returned photography to its original function of recording something worth recording.

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In Sakiko's work, her reclining male nudes clearly inherit this photography ethos. But her subjects exhibit an odalisque quality, not unlike those of Matisse. The bed in Sakiko's photography is less a locus of sexual activity and more a dimensional canvas upon which she arranges her male specimens. The flesh and bed sheets sharing a similar quality of melting—so quickly and easily do her subjects crumble and lose their temporary shapes. Where the nudes of Araki equate taking a photograph with a sexual act, Sakiko's photography rests more on the opulence of the scene, drawing pleasure from the beauty of form. And the human vessels are once more flowers—a form to seduce and entice; a tool in the weaponry of the reproductive cycle. Or her males

are the nudes on a Grecian urn, forever suspended in animation, ever-young and vibrant.

Azuma Makoto can more properly be considered a florist-turned-botanist-turned-photographer. Their initial forays into working with flowers were more akin to the avant-garde ikebana creations of the legendary Yukio Nakagawa. Part of ikebana is the use of space and containing within itself a sense of what in western parlance would be considered an installation. The highly stylized and artificial composition uses cut flowers. Japanese flower arrangement, as ikebana is commonly translated, does little to convey the central tenets of genre. At its core is the idea of animism, which is prevalent throughout Asian philosophies and establishes a fundamental connection between any animate or inanimate matter. Though this doctrine is centuries old, it can for the western reader be a radical supposition and disruption of the status quo. In extreme western purview man has dominion over all matter, whereas animism acknowledges a equivalence amongst all matter with no differentiation of value. In a sense, Araki's photographs in the volume are less photographs and more ikebana (or photography as ikebana), which would be the clear bridge between his work and that of Makoto's. The exotic and rare specimens used in Makoto's work—which they have flown in from different parts of the world—remind us of the incalculable diversity of life and the sheer speed of its

development and mutation, underscoring the continual state of flux and transition that our existence—and by extension—our consciousness exists in. The visual hybridization of seemingly incongruous and incompatible plant species points toward a hypercultivation that has a frenetic speed of metamorphosis. The power to reproduce, proliferate, and change is such an apparent thrust that it even surpasses death and its finality; each flowering serving as a mere vessel or conduit of germs to initiate a subsequent iteration and generation. The continual flow of seed to seed, form to form, master to disciple is what we should be aware of and embrace the ever-evolving permutations. Death itself is but one moment. Through this flows a continual generation

and dissolution of bizarre and surprising forms, making the living soul of plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomenon all the more palpable.

Perhaps then, the artist decides if the purpose of the work is to cheat death or to resign to it. Or, better yet, to have some congruence and peace between the two.