

TIES THAT BIND

In the world of photographer Nobuyoshi Araki, pornography is made to look like normal life

By Andrew Lee

It's clear that Nobuyoshi Araki loves the company of women. During his recent visit to London the photographer's entourage included his agent, two curators, his favourite model, and a PR person; all women, all Japanese. He also flew in two *mamasan* – bar hostesses – from his favourite Tokyo karaoke bar. At the opening of his new exhibition, *Araki: Self. Life. Death*, at the Barbican Art Gallery, these two kimono-clad women seemed right at home among Araki's many photos of women similarly attired. In fact it was the tall western women in latex *cheongsams* and the naked female news presenter who stood out. Araki's circus was in town, but it was the locals who seemed to go over the top.

Araki has always attracted controversy, and this show is no exception. Made up of more than 4,000 images, *Self. Life. Death* – both the exhibition and the book that accompanies it – tracks the 40-year career of Japan's most celebrated photographer. In the west Araki is notorious for his erotic or pornographic photographs, but at home in Japan he is also known as a sensitive documentarist and a brilliant portraitist. His more than 300 books range from *Tokyo Lucky Hole*, which reveals the hidden decadence of a society at the peak of economic success, to the moving *Sentimental Journey/Winter Journey*, which records his honeymoon in 1971 and then the death of his wife Yoko in 1990. The Barbican exhibition displays a cross-section of Araki's work, but while *Self. Life. Death* makes it clear there is more to Araki than pornography, it is sex that drives him. And it is the sex that will draw in the crowds.

At lunch he proved his voracious photographic appetite by taking pictures during the meal. "The desire for eating, sexual desire and the desire to take photos are the three things that are important to me," he says with one eye to the camera. Araki likes to play with immature sexual innuendo: a lump of cod roe looking like a penis, an oyster mistaken for a vagina. As the shutter clicks, the photographer laughs. "When people have started eating

and food gets messy on the plate, that is the moment I like to photograph." His enthusiastic approach to the violated plate of food is that of the practised voyeur. This is "food porn" taken up a notch and his photos of food are among the most sensual in the exhibition. In Araki's world even the mundane becomes eroticised.

"I have always emphasised the importance of private photography," he says, "that style of photography really captures human life itself." He calls this semi-autobiographical approach "I-photography", a term borrowed from the "I-novels" of Japanese literature. "By definition an 'I-novel' is about the writer and is supposed to reveal everything. But it isn't true," says Araki. "In order to write, the writer would fabricate something that's untrue. There is more fiction about the artist himself. So it's a betrayal, the most interesting thing is the lie, the complete fantasy, the fiction."

Does this mean Araki's work is made up of lies? "It's all mixed," he says. "The interesting thing is you're not sure, it's blurred. It is all about the tales, the mixture of truthfulness and fiction, life and death."

The I-novelists emerged in the 1920s, consciously separating themselves from western styles of writing. Araki also distinguishes himself from western photographers. "[They] are very conscious about how they are seen, about how their work is seen. They're very conscious about society and what is going on around them. I don't care, I'm not interested. I'm only interested in what I want to do."

Araki does make a statement about what is going on around him occasionally, however. The first exhibition of his work I saw was in the early 1990s at a department store gallery in Tokyo. The photos depicted naked or partially naked women, tied in a form of bondage called *kinbaku*. Some lay bound on *tatami* mat floors, others hung from the ceiling. What made the work so shocking, however, was the violence implied by the scratch marks across the photos. Araki had censored the work by scoring the photographic negative, erasing the genitals. This was his attack on censorship laws banning the depiction of

genitalia. But Araki says "I was laughing at that, I didn't want to make it too big a deal." What he wanted to reveal by damaging the images was that all men have an urge for violence, he says. "Like wanting to rape the neighbour's wife," he says laughing, "you don't do it, but it is actually a basic human instinct."

There are similar images in this exhibition. In "Colour-Eros" Araki has taken some of his older black and white images, again of women tied-up or nude, and painted across them with lines of acrylic colour. "Black and white photos are kind of dead," says Araki. "So with the addition of colour paint I add life again." But he is concerned that people will misinterpret this. "Through that kind of experiment, and painting, the audience and art critics probably think 'so Araki is doing *art* now'. But I don't want that kind of stigma. I don't want to be misunderstood as a stereotypical artist. I want to explore the possibility of photography, because I am a photographer."

Araki's work shows in galleries around the world but Araki says he isn't interested in international fame. "All that I am doing is what I like, wherever my inclination takes me. I'm not conscious of the international art market and what is the latest thing in the art scene, I just do what I want."

And the Japanese art scene certainly differs from other countries. Takashi Murakami and other Japanese artists argue that there is no distinction between high and low art in Japan because "art" was a concept introduced from the west. Araki agrees. "In my mind there is absolutely no hierarchy. Just like all women are beautiful. I really don't like the idea of what is right and what is wrong. What is sacred, what is profane. What is art and what is obscene. I don't want that kind of categorisation."

This apparent lack of hierarchy is often spoken of when Japanese art is discussed, but largely refers to the artists themselves rather than patrons of art. Artists such as Hokusai, famous for his landscapes and his "Great Wave", would produce work for everybody – including pornographic books called *shunga*. It's no surprise that Araki



Araki's women: clockwise from main picture, "Shino", 2000; "Colour Eros", 2004-05; "In Ruins", 1997; all showing at the Barbican Art Gallery

chooses to compare himself to Hokusai. Araki explains the similarities: "In his later years Hokusai started calling himself *gakyojin* which means 'art maniac' and in response to that I started calling myself *shakyojin* [photo maniac]... Hokusai draws absolutely everything he can see. Ranging from the sky, to animals, landscapes, flowers, genitalia. Absolutely everything. So I have the same kind of feeling. I photograph everything. Don't misunderstand, I'm not imitating Hokusai, it is a continuation of that kind of tradition, but it is unconscious."

In one room at the Barbican more than 3,000 Polaroids are stuck to the wall. It is a veritable orgy of food and sex, and the pornographic connotations of the Polaroid adds to the sense of debauchery. Hundreds of images of Japanese women in various sexual poses are mixed with images of the sky, sliced chilli cod roe, and "*onsen tamago*" – eggs poached in a volcanic hot spring. The women are "passers by", his "accidental lovers", he calls them. "Some are models I met through work. Some are housewives. But nevertheless, once photographed, they all become 'Araki's lovers'." He's lying again, blurring the truth.

In the press advertising for the exhibition, the Barbican uses a portrait of a geisha-like woman and labels Araki

"Some are models. Some are housewives. But once photographed, they all become 'Araki's lovers'"

"Japan's most controversial photographer". But capitalising on stereotypes about Japan and Araki's sexualised images will do little to dispel orientalist views of the sexually alluring and passive oriental woman. "This is my personal work, in my own world, women are like this," he says. And although his work puts women in sexually compromising situations, he is often approached by volunteers to be photographed.

Araki has a way of normalising the pornography in his work. By juxtaposing everyday images of Tokyo streets, flowers, portraits and food with all these images of women tied up, it's almost like they're normal too. "That's right," he says. "In a sense photography is magic. So of course the *kinbaku* and that sort of image may not be ordinary Japanese life but nevertheless by photographing ordinary things and daily life and also *kinbaku*, everything looks completely normal, part of the big ordinary life."

So that's the lie in his work. "Yes, but my lie is the truth," he says, laughing.

"It's like a Zen kind of picture. Going around in circles. It's also very Japanese."

In a documentary, *Arakimentari*, that accompanies the exhibition we are able to see one of his *kinbaku* bondage photos being shot. A young woman in a kimono is bound and hangs by ropes from the ceiling. Her legs are apart and her clothes are open to reveal she is naked underneath. The striking thing about this scene, and the interview with the model afterwards, is the sense of collaboration and even fun that occurs during the shoot. It is the same when we see him shooting his housewives series. While the final images may be attacked as misogynistic, the models in Araki's work are all willing participants in the creation of these images.

He understands some will be shocked, of course. "I don't think it is a question of nationality or whether you are Japanese or English," he says. "The same kind of negative response can be found in Japan, too. It is a question of individuality. I expect, and look forward to, English women coming to the Barbican and feeling like they want to be tied up and photographed by me."

But maybe the result would be different with western women? "Yes, maybe it would be me that is actually tied up."

"*Araki: Self. Life. Death*" runs at the Barbican Art Gallery until January 22. "Nobuyoshi Araki: Self. Life. Death" is published by Phaidon (£39.95).