

“DO you know about Himiko?” Shintaro Shiratori asks on the phone from Tokyo. “She was sort of like a sorceress, or a witch.” We are discussing whether Japanese horror films influenced the dark mood in his new series of nudes. Apparently not. “I’m interested in the magical, mysterious side of women. But it’s not exactly ‘horror’, it’s something more mystical.”

Himiko, it seems, was a legendary witch queen who ruled Japan some 2000 years ago. She used to deliver oracles during erotic ritual dances and some scholars believe she is the basis for a character central to Japan’s creation myth. As this story goes – and it’s much more sexy than Genesis – just after the islands of Japan were formed, the sun goddess, Amaterasu, got pissed off at her storm god brother and locked herself in a cave, plunging the world into darkness. In order to draw Amaterasu back out of the cave the goddess Ama-no-Uzume (whom some equate with Himiko) knocked over a wooden tub and used it as a stage on which to dance. To the great delight of the onlooking crowd, Uzume’s dance got more and more frenzied until she started to strip and flash her genitals. As she shimmied naked on the tiny platform the crowd’s horny cheers grew so loud Amaterasu got curious. As she opened the cave door to take a peek she was pulled outside and the world was once again bathed in sunlight.

It’s easy to imagine this celestial striptease looking like one of Shiratori’s nudes; a goddess dancing naked in the primordial mist. But it’s not only Japanese myths that fascinate the photographer. “When I was a child I saw an illustration of Andromeda, the Ethiopian princess of Greek mythology. She was chained to a rock as a sacrifice and I think this was the beginning of my attraction to the dark side.” This interest led him to artists whose work also explored this theme, such as painters Gustave Moreau and Hans Bellmer. Later when he became interested in photography he was influenced by the soft-focus eroticism of Sarah Moon as well as the work of Helmut Newton, Serge Lutens and a famous advertising photographer called Kazumi Kurigami.

As a child Shiratori, who is now 58, grew up in Matsumoto City, Nagano where his father owned and ran a photographic studio. “I learnt from him at first and then I went to Chiba University to study – actually Araki went there as well.” After college

Shiratori worked as an advertising photographer and it’s his commercial work for which he is now famous, racking up a host of awards throughout the ‘80s and ‘90s. But it’s his nudes that bring him the most pleasure.

“LAYER BY LAYER I CONSTRUCT AN IMAGE FROM MY IMAGINATION OF AN UNTOUCHABLE WOMAN. A WOMAN WHO CASTS A SPELL ON ME...”

“The difference with the commercial work is that you are selling a product and the models have to be healthy and bright. The images are dependent on the clients’ requirements. But with my nude work there’s no limit. I can do what I want.” It’s here that the influence of painting comes in. “I try to create like a painter does on a white canvas. Layer by layer I construct an image from my imagination of an untouchable woman. A woman who casts a spell on me.”

Shiratori only uses Japanese models for his nude work and they are rarely professionals; some are even housewives who write to him asking to be photographed. Western models, even with perfect bodies, just don’t do it for him. “In my opinion Japanese women may not be that perfect, but their sex appeal is much more raw. They seem to be able to express so many emotions just by looking at you and their wet eyes appeal to me. It’s probably because I’m Japanese too, but the models in foreign magazines seem to stare at you with such hard eyes. Maybe western men find this sexy, but I don’t.” Instead Shiratori says he wants to look beyond the eyes to the inner soul of the women he shoots. An ancient soul dancing naked in the dark. ◉

GALLERY

SHINTARO SHIRATORI

A JAPANESE LEGEND THROWS LIGHT ON THE WORK OF A PHOTOGRAPHER WHO DEALS IN DARK EROTIC IMAGERY, WRITES **ANDREW LEE**.

SHINTARO SHIRATORI'S WORK CAN BEEN SEEN IN THE BOOK *GRAPHIS NUDES* (WATSON-GUPTILL PUBLICATIONS).

