

“When an Erotic Photographer’s Muse Becomes His Critic

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When an Erotic Photographer’s Muse Becomes His Critic



Kaori, a former model, recently described years of ill treatment by the Japanese photographer Nobuyoshi Araki. “He treated me like an object,” she wrote in a blog post.

TOKYO — How much does an artist owe his muse?

Last month a model who posed for Nobuyoshi Araki, Japan’s most notorious photographer, accused him of exploiting and bullying her for 16 years.

Now, with a New York exhibition featuring the work of Mr. Araki, known for his sexually explicit images of women, the accusations are raising questions about the power dynamics between a photographer and his subject.

In a blog post published in Japanese in early April after “The Incomplete Araki” opened at the Museum of Sex in Manhattan, the model, Kaori — who uses only her first name — said that over their working relationship, Mr. Araki never signed her to a professional contract; ignored her requests for privacy during photo shoots; neglected to inform her when pictures of her were published or displayed; and often did not pay her.

“He treated me like an object,” she wrote.

In an interview in Tokyo, Kaori, who stopped working with Mr. Araki two years ago, said she felt empowered to speak out by the international reckoning about sexual harassment and assault known as the #MeToo movement.

Kaori, who began posing for Mr. Araki, now 77, in her early 20s, has not accused him of sexual assault. Instead, she said she felt emotionally bullied by an artist who never acknowledged her as a creative partner.

“I want them to know what happened in the past between me and Araki,” Kaori said last month. “I was not allowed to speak out. People should know, and they should look.” Mr. Araki declined repeated requests to comment.

Mr. Araki’s work has long ignited controversy, given the provocative nature of his images, which include photographs of nude women bound up in a Japanese technique known as kinbaku-bi. He has been fined on obscenity charges in Japan, and while some critics consider him a maestro, others deem his work pornography.

Maggie Mustard, co-curator of the Museum of Sex exhibition, said Kaori’s allegations were forcing a new conversation about models’ rights.

“This gives us the opportunity to talk about what happens to a muse — and I use that word with air quotes — when she doesn’t have a contract or a sense of economic or legal agency about how her image was used,” Ms. Mustard said in a telephone interview.

Ms. Mustard added that she had spoken with Kaori and would incorporate her comments into the exhibition’s programming materials. Already, the wall text mentions another model’s anonymous allegations of inappropriate sexual contact by Mr. Araki, noting that “the controversy surrounding Araki’s work has almost exclusively been about reception and meaning, and far less about the issues of consent and the potential abuses of power that can be at the foundation of artistic practice and artistic production.”

The contentious relationship between artist and model goes back centuries, with men like Picasso or Schiele known for mistreating women. More recently, potential portrait models for Chuck Close have accused him of sexual harassment.

Art historians argue that it might be time for artists to rethink the basis on which these relationships are built. Models should have “more agency in terms of authorship of the work itself,” said Rebecca Zorach, a professor of art history at Northwestern University.

“The art world has a tendency to erase women as makers, and historically it just happens over and over again,” she said.

In Japan, Kaori’s disclosures come as women are just starting to raise questions about male power, sexual harassment and assault.



Nobuyoshi Araki in 2008 wearing a T-shirt with a photo of Kaori. One of her complaints is that Mr. Araki used her image in ways that she was never consulted about.



Mr. Araki's books displayed at an exhibit at the Museum of Sex in New York.

Last year, when one of Japan's best-known television journalists was accused of rape, his accuser received only a smattering of attention in the Japanese media. Last month after a television reporter anonymously asserted that a high-level civil servant in the Finance Ministry had sexually harassed several women, the official resigned, although he has denied the charges. The ministry has acknowledged he harassed a reporter.

In this staunchly patriarchal culture, women are often subservient to men. Japan consistently ranks low among developed countries on gender equality in health, education and the economy and has one of the world's worst records for women in politics.

For models working in Japan's art world, it is difficult to make demands of a male artist.

"I can imagine that as a male photographer who is more than 70 years old, he unconsciously has the perspective towards women that he can do whatever he wants," said Yukie Kamiya, head of the Japan Society Gallery in New York, speaking of Mr. Araki. "Male power is such a common understanding, and women don't have much of a voice."

Kaori, who trained in Paris as a dancer, began posing for Mr. Araki after meeting him at a party in 2001.

She said he paid her 100,000 yen (about \$930) to pose in the studio wearing a kimono or performing dances that Mr. Araki would photograph. For nude projects, he took her to so-called "love hotels" and paid her about 50,000 yen for each assignment.

But she said he also called her for impromptu, unpaid sessions where he took photos while she walked in a park or sat in a bar at his command.

It was not enough to make a living. Asked how she supplemented her income, Kaori demurred. "I don't want to say," she said.

In public, Mr. Araki described her as his "muse," but she said he did not tell her when or where the work would be published or exhibited, and she had no say in how the images were composed. "For him, a muse means someone who doesn't speak or have any of her own opinions and just keeps obeying his orders," she said.

Early on, the two did have a consensual sexual relationship, Kaori said.

During one photo session, she balked when he snapped Polaroid pictures of her and sold each individually without paying her any royalties. "That money that he earned is based on my contribution," Kaori said.

“He says, ‘I am Araki, and you must be happy and honored that I am taking a picture of you,’” she said.

Kazuko Ito, a lawyer whom Kaori consulted last November, said Kaori told her that after nude photos appeared without her permission, a stalker broke into her home. Kaori asked the lawyer for help obtaining some rights to the photos, but Ms. Ito said that such disputes were very rare in Japan and that she was unlikely to win in court.

Ms. Ito said she had heard similar complaints from other models for Mr. Araki.

Of course, power inequities between artists and models are not unique to him. “There has been no public discourse about this structural problem within the industry and the photographer-model relationship,” said Michio Hayashi, a professor of art history at Sophia University in Tokyo.

Kaori described one incident when foreign photographers came to observe Mr. Araki as he took pictures of her. She did not want to appear nude in front of strangers, she said, but Mr. Araki told her, “They aren’t here to photograph you, they’re here to photograph me.”

But when pictures from that session came out in print, Kaori appeared in them, naked. “He invited many photographers into the studio and he ordered me to spread my legs in front of that big audience,” she said. “I didn’t like that.”

Still, it took her a long time to quit as Mr. Araki’s model. She started working with him when she was young, and he was already famous. When he was hospitalized, she did not want to abandon him.

“Looking back now, everything was excessive and extreme,” she wrote on her blog. “Something in me was numb. He asked me to do abnormal things, and I did them as if they were normal.” At one point, she became suicidal.

By 2015, the relationship had soured so badly that Mr. Araki insisted she sign a document vowing not to defame him or his business. In 2016, Kaori, who by then was running her own ballet school, stopped working with him.

When she requested that he stop republishing or exhibiting some photographs of her, he warned in a March 2017 letter that she had no rights. “All models should understand the potential for unlimited use of the work,” he wrote in the letter, seen by The New York Times. “I will decide which publication, which exhibition, when to publish and what kind of products I will give permission to use my work. It’s all up to me.”

Kaori is not the only model to have objected to Mr. Araki’s distribution of photos. In an interview, another woman who occasionally modeled for him between 2003 and 2013, who requested anonymity because she did not want her family to know she had posed, said that when friends discovered nude photos of her online that she had not known about, she asked Mr. Araki to take them down. “I don’t understand the internet,” he told her.

The model said a gallery that represents Mr. Araki, Taka Ishii in Tokyo, eventually removed the images from various websites.

As for Kaori, she had started to move on with the support of a new partner. But when #MeToo began and the Museum of Sex mounted its Araki retrospective, they inspired her to go public.

Many of the comments on her blog offered encouragement and called her courageous. “It must have been a horrible experience,” one commentator wrote.

Kaori said she did not expect an apology from Mr. Araki, and she is not asking the Museum of Sex to remove the three photos of her it is displaying.

The work, she said, should serve as a reminder. All she wants, she said, is for visitors to “know my sad background and experience.”