

A black and white photograph of a person's back and shoulder, with a hand resting on the shoulder. The image is soft and out of focus, with a grainy texture. The person's back is the central focus, with a hand resting on their right shoulder. The lighting is soft, creating a gentle contrast between the light and dark areas of the skin and the hand. The overall mood is intimate and tender.

Taro Masushio

Selected Press

EMPTY GALLERY

ARTnews

How a Covert Archive of Erotic Images Inspired Taro Masushio's Bracing New Photos



Taro Masushio, *Asagao 7*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery.

One recent morning in Hong Kong, while in the last hours of his quarantine, the New York-based artist Taro Masushio recounted a visit he made to a vast, little-seen archive of homoerotic photographs by Jun'ichi En'ya, who had worked as a photo-technician in Osaka, Japan. "I had just never seen anything like it," Masushio said on a video call, as he recalled flipping through hundreds and hundreds of En'ya's analog prints. "It was this very surreal and visceral experience."

En'ya distributed his pictures of men clandestinely, and was known as Uncle from Osaka. He had a wife and daughter, and died in 1971, the same year that the first gay men's magazine became easily accessible in Japan. "When I first got this glimpse of these objects, and this figure behind the objects, I became completely obsessed," Masushio said. "I wanted to work with this and try to understand what this person's life was like. The more I looked, the more mysterious things became."

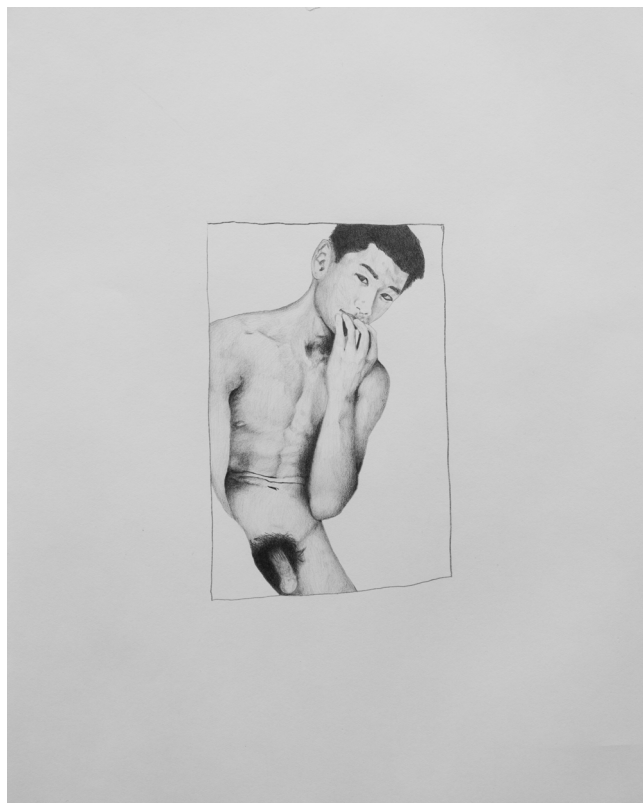
Uncle from Osaka has been a vital inspiration for Masushio's current show at Empty Gallery in Hong Kong, "Rumor Has It." The artist drew meticulous copies of Uncle's images—tender portraits, graphic sex acts—and then shot photographs of those copies. It's a process that in some sense parallels the intimacy between En'ya and his models while also underscoring the gap between maker and viewer, the person who presses the shutter button and the one who looks.

The earlier photographer's life also permeates the exhibition in sly, subtle ways. Against dark backgrounds, Masushio has snapped exquisite, close-up photographs of morning glory plants. They lead a kind of double life, flowering during the day and closing at night; he chose to catch them in the latter state.

The morning glory is popular in Japan, where it is known as *asagao* and is often given to schoolchildren to raise with their families. Masushio, who was born in that country, grew his flowers in his workspace in Manhattan's Tribeca neighborhood. "It felt very special to have something in the studio during this time, in which, you know, there's just so much sadness," he said. (Friends were caring for them while he visited Hong Kong to install his exhibition, which runs through February 20.)

Other photographs at Empty Gallery take the form of enigmatic still lifes, crisply rendered: two boxes of matches, a glass of water, a bottle of beer. These are objects that await human touch—to spark a flame or take a sip—but they are always shown alone, as if someone has just stepped out of the frame.

Another picture presents two tripods without cameras, a blurry one in the distance perhaps a mirrored reflection of the one in the foreground.



Taro Masushio, *Untitled 5*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery.



Taro Masushio, *Untitled 19*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery.

Masushio was warm and candid when discussing his art, but admitted he was hesitant to reveal too much about his exact intentions for each image. "If I just describe things," he said, then the artwork "becomes this arithmetic kind of equation. It needs to maintain its own mystery and amorphousness and its own spirit and life."

When asked what he wanted people to take from the show, though, he answered immediately. "I think I want people to think about absence," he said.

OCULA

Taro Masushio's Homage to the Uncle from Osaka at Empty Gallery

At the entrance to *Rumor Has It*, Taro Masushio's current exhibition at Hong Kong's black-box Empty Gallery (23 December 2020–20 February 2021), a giant, meekly illuminated pumice stone is supported by a steel structure—a sparse signifier of a subterranean cave.

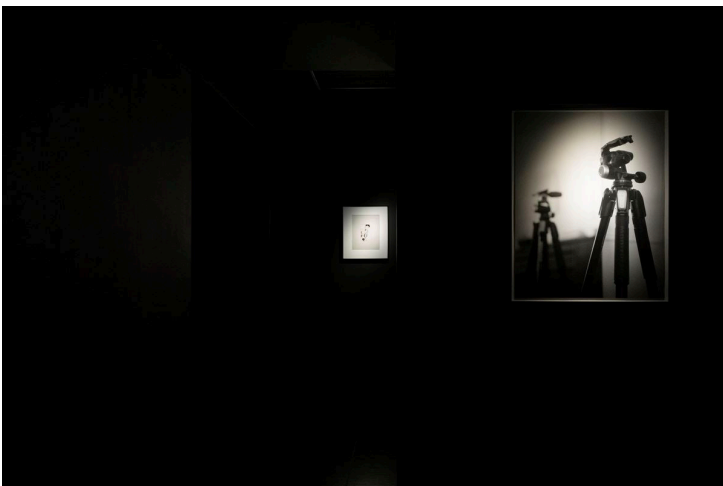


Exhibition view: Taro Masushio, *Rumor Has It*, Empty Gallery, Hong Kong (23 December 2020–20 February 2021). Courtesy Empty Gallery. Photo: Michael Yu.

The atmosphere is mysterious, mythological, almost transgressive; not so much a Dionysian cruising club or a lascivious sauna than a mise-en-scène constructed with restraint.

Single rows of framed black-and-white silver gelatin photographs line black walls: still-life captures that include a camera stand, flowers, soap, and erotic hand-drawn sketches.

For an exhibition centred on the work of Jun'ichi En'ya, one of the first Japanese homoerotic photographers known colloquially as the 'Uncle from Osaka', Masushio's compositional frugality is a striking statement.



Exhibition view: Taro Masushio, *Rumor Has It*, Empty Gallery, Hong Kong (23 December 2020–20 February 2021). Courtesy Empty Gallery. Photo: Michael Yu.

Of course, this abnegation is also born out of poverty. Not much is known about En'ya save for his years of birth (1916) and death (1971), his marital status and occupation, and that he photographed over 2,000 men.

Upon accessing En'ya's archive contained in a humble apartment on the outskirts of Tokyo, Masushio describes feelings of trauma and displacement.

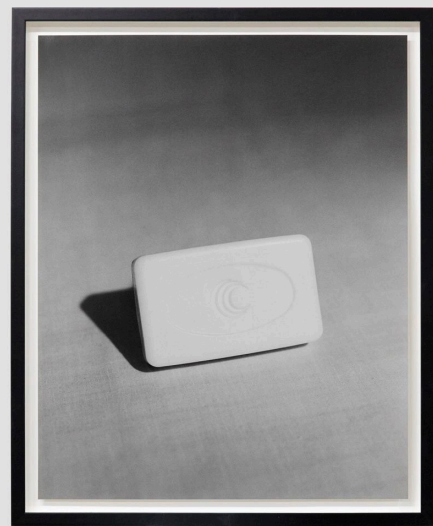
The few hundred photographs and negatives he saw by En'ya are the tip of the iceberg; many more were dispersed, or worse confiscated and destroyed, due to the strict Japanese law on the possession and dissemination of pornographic images.

Masushio likens his two-year research process to navigating a gravitational pull, perhaps of a black hole. (The Plutonian En'ya was himself orbiting a larger constellation of influences—perhaps image-makers such as Tamotsu Yato or aestheticians like Yukio Mishima.)

The search has led him to octogenarians and nonagenarians who were on the fringes of En'ya's loose multi-city circle, recounting rumours and anecdotes of encounters with the photographer, or with friends of friends who modelled for him. The unbridgeable distance between past and present is painfully evident.



Taro Masushio, *Asagao 7* (2020). Silver gelatin type LE/ selenium toned print. 69.4 x 57 x 2.6 cm. Edition 1 of 3 + 2 AP. Courtesy Empty Gallery.



Taro Masushio, *Untitled 11* (2020). Silver gelatin type LE/ selenium toned print. 56.7 x 46.3 x 2.6 cm. Edition 1 of 3 + 2 AP. Courtesy Empty Gallery.

The aforementioned trauma, therefore, comes from confronting the rare and nakedly candid expression of a queerness from the past, and the realisation that it cannot be broached directly, but preserved in sacrosanct opacity and irresuscitable absence.

What results is the commemoration of a life in palimpsest and pentimento; an elegy written in doublespeak and codes. Staged photographs become the site where Masushio imaginatively intervenes in the present, gathering mundane objects from the Shōwa era for storytelling, yet maintaining a silence around their historical provenance and lore.

'I am interested in how we represent ourselves and are consumed in our current society,' Masushio explained in conversation, 'where queerness is overly circulated.'

Smudged shoe prints crisscross a urinal's rim in *Untitled 2*, suggesting the activity of an anonymous cruising public bathroom. The untouched freshness of a bar of cheap hotel soap (*Untitled 11*) and unstruck restaurant-bar match boxes (*Untitled 18*) contrasts with the debasement of a used paper bag (*Untitled 14*), creased bed sheets (*Untitled 1*), and consumed Asahi beer and tobacco (*Untitled 15*).

A series of photographs capture morning glory plants (known as asagao in Japan) at night, their circadian rhythm suggesting a dual existence not unlike En'ya's. More explicitly in *Untitled 26*, Masushio luxuriously photographs a live model stroking an erect penis in a tatami room under studio lights.



Taro Masushio, *Untitled 15* (2020). Silver gelatin type LE/ selenium toned print. 57.1 x 46.6 x 2.6 cm. Edition 1 of 3 + 2 AP. Courtesy Empty Gallery.



Taro Masushio, *Untitled 1* (2020). Silver gelatin type LE/ selenium toned print. 42.8 x 36.3 x 2.6 cm. Edition 1 of 3 + 2 AP. Courtesy Empty Gallery.



Taro Masushio, *Untitled 2* (2020). Platinum Palladium print / 300gsm Hahnemuhle rag. 52 x 44.7 x 2.6 cm. Edition 1 of 3 + 2 AP. Courtesy Empty Gallery.

Pornographic jouissance spills into Masushio's redrawings of En'ya photographs, painstakingly framed and rephotographed by the artist. After so many elliptical and obscure orbits, Masushio shyly plucks up the courage to step into En'ya's shoes and channels Uncle's lusting hand.

'I cannot produce as many photographs as he does,' says the Japanese voiceover in the culminating black-and-white video, *Untitled 28*. Referring to the fecundity of En'ya's output, this is the only proper textual reference to a figure that is both central and elusive to the exhibition.

'After all,' the voice meanders on, 'the cock, at least while erect, does not betray the one that adores it.'

Composed of moving images tracking Masushio's pilgrimage to Osaka as he cruises the few places bearing En'ya's traces, the script for *Untitled 28* is composed of fragments written by Fujita Ryū in 1971 for the iconic *Barazoku*.



Taro Masushio, *Untitled 3* (2020). Platinum Palladium print / 300gsm Hahnemuhle rag. 49.6 x 43.1 x 2.6 cm. Edition 1 of 3 + 2 AP. Courtesy Empty Gallery.



Taro Masushio, *Untitled 5* (2020). Platinum Palladium print / 300gsm Hahnemuhle rag. 132.6 x 107.7 x 2.6 cm. Edition 1 of 3 + 2 AP. Courtesy Empty Gallery.



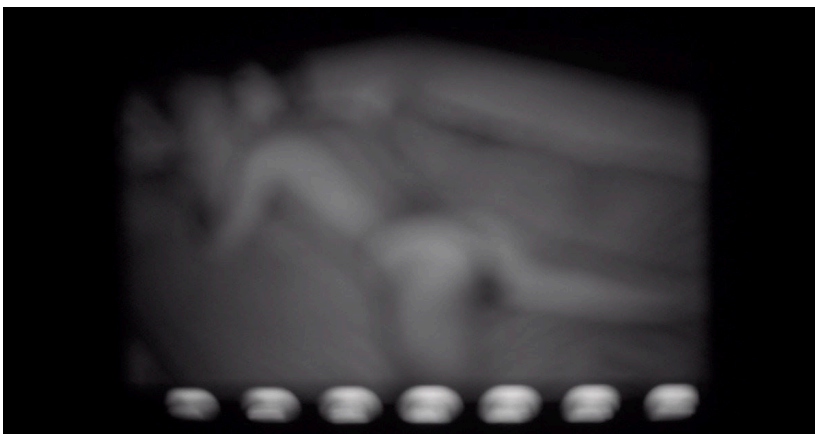
Taro Masushio, *Untitled 26* (2020). Platinum Palladium print / 300gsm Hahnemuhle rag. 132.6 x 107.7 x 2.6 cm. Edition 1 of 3 + 2 AP. Courtesy Empty Gallery.

Beginning publication in 1971, this was the first commercial magazine catering to gay men in Japan, containing erotic spreads, drawings, letters, columns, ads, and fictions.

A silent video nestled under a stairway ends the show, languidly showing slides of underground gay erotica that Masushio sourced in Japan and projected in a dark studio.

Filmed out of focus, poses are veiled, suspended before identity—they bring to mind *Poetics of Relation* (1990), in which Edouard Glissant champions the ‘right to opacity’ for the Other in a creolised post-colonial Caribbean in contradistinction to the Apollonian transparency of the prying historical white gaze.

Analogously for the gay Japanese archipelago, Masushio’s radical opacity keeps alive the untranslatability, immemorability, and untraceability of En’ya’s life and times. To feel opacity’s weave, to relate to it, is to suspend the desire for discovery. —Nick Yu



Taro Masushio, *Untitled 27* (2020). (still). HD video. 25 min 42 sec. Edition of 1 + 5 AP. Courtesy Empty Gallery.