

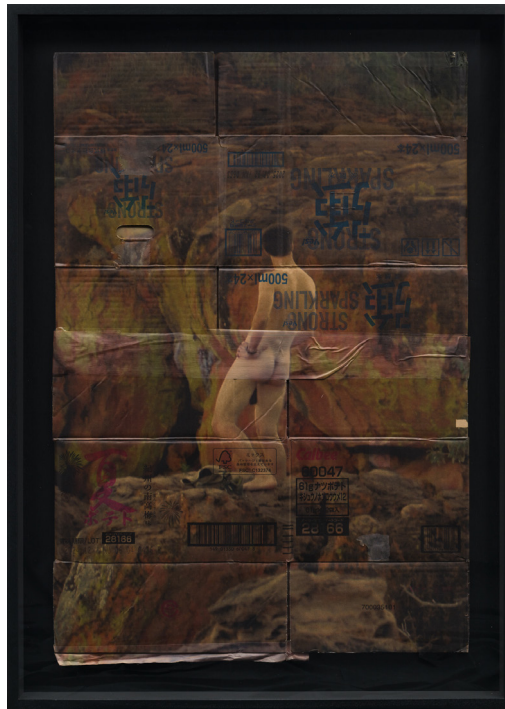


Taro Masushio

Selected Press

EMPTY GALLERY

SPIKE



Taro Masushio, *Untitled (CB #01)*, 2024, UV print on found cardboard, 119 x 88 x 9.5 cm.

Taro Masushio Folds the Fictional In on Itself

Jaime Chu

Amid his exhibition at Empty Gallery, Hong Kong, the Japanese bricolage photographer presents art as helping us sit with the discomfort of the unknown.

In the last essay he published before passing away on 23 October 2024, Gary Indiana wrote about photographs: “We all live at least one or two lives that we subtract from our biographies. Areas of un-revisited, unhealed pain or such monumental nothingness that they’re not worth remembering. Then, infrequently, some evidence turns up, often photographic evidence. You are seized, suddenly, by a grisly species of curiosity.”

Born in Japan and now living in New York, artist Taro Masushio’s exhibition “Pass” at Empty Gallery, Hong Kong is replete with photographic evidence, but contains little of facts and does not reward undue curiosity. Masushio’s reprinting of his father’s amateur travel photography on the cardboard of care packages shipped across the world from father to son conjures a haptic, material intimacy mediated by impersonal logistics networks. A series of sparing, high-contrast still-life photographs catalogues enigmatic objects sourced intuitively from his

father's belongings and the artist's own collection – a book of Rimbaud's poetry, a pair of male Ainu figurines, testosterone supplements, photo paper, a darkroom safe light. The effect is disruption of the impulse towards certainty in meaning-making, the recognizable objects utterly drained of their indexicality, despite their unambiguous familial, autobiographical, and sexual connotations.

Jamie Chu: How did you start putting together the images and materials for this exhibition?

Taro Masushio: It's something that I'd been thinking about for a long time. I'd seen some of the images when my dad first took them [on a solitary trip around the world in 2023], and some of them I discovered as I began working on the project more intently. The cardboard boxes functioned as an intermediary between myself and my father. Every once in a while, he would send me things from Japan. For example, during the pandemic, he saw on the news that the shelves at grocery stores here in New York were completely empty, so he sent me some dried noodles, which helped me get through that time – in more ways than one. So, they really came from my engagement with my own life. I see it as bricolage, and, by extension, as not simply a theoretical question of living, but a concrete one as well.

Of course, through this act of sending something to someone, things enter into a whole network of index, transfer, and transaction, accumulating marks, tears, stickers. I was thinking about these overlapping movements taking place, tracing my dad's own movement around the world, and the movements of the containers themselves.



Untitled (CB #15), 2024, UV print on found cardboard, 87.6 x 97.2 x 7.3 cm

JC: The photographs impart a smooth, shimmery effect on the recycled cardboard packaging. Was the UV-printing process difficult?

TM: Part of the challenge was thinking about how the material interactions work with and against each other. I mapped everything out as much as I could, imagining the ways in which existing colors, symbols, tears, and marks on the cardboard would coexist on the surface with the print images. I was particularly interested in the interruptions of smooth imagery that draw you into the haptic. But, since the simulations aren't perfect, there were still elements of chance, of surprise. I accepted whatever the result, in part because I didn't have that many cardboard boxes.

JC: How did you toggle between these two modes of image-making, this chance-based, imperfect print medium and your very meticulous, controlled, and singular still-life photos?

TM: It involved a lot of intuitive processes. The kind of technical dimension of the two forms can allude to different attitudes, but they don't necessarily differ too much – across the processes, I trust my decision-making. While the still-lives are meticulously constructed, it isn't that I was exhaustively going through my father's belongings; when I saw [a Japanese edition of] Rimbaud's poetry book, I knew I wanted to photograph it. There is an element of chance encounter to that as well.

The arrival of meaning is not a linear process; it forces you to take detours, unexpected turns, and you sometimes find yourself at dead ends, where the humor has a tautological effect, being both the meaning and its cancellation.

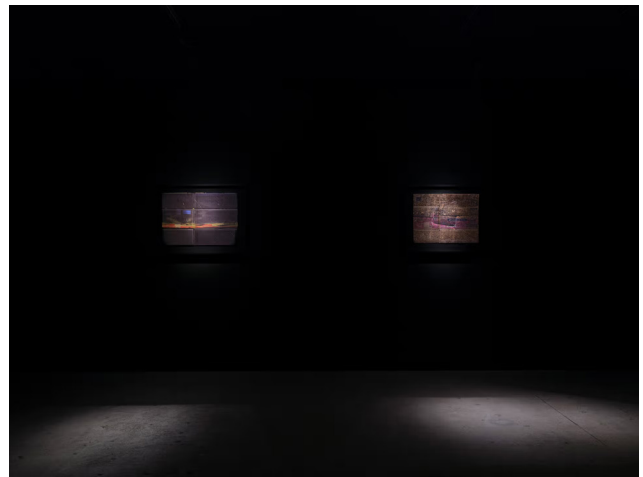
JC: How do you think about an "informal/imaginary archive" in relation to building an alternative storage space for these objects and their relations? And how does photography mediate between different worlds, forms, and time periods to construct an account of a "self?"

TM: Alex Lau from Empty Gallery came up with the phrase. He is one of my few interlocutors who has deep intimacy with my work and thinking. My approach was also described recently as "fractal," which I think gets to my methodology in that, like you were saying, these kinds of facts aren't necessarily what is being foregrounded; instead, it's the idea that what is already fictional is being fictionalized and folded in on itself. Like the idea of the relationship between a father and a son.

In the case of this exhibition, this fractal use of the imaginary/informal archive is a re-dramatization of the archetypal story that has lasted for centuries, from Greek mythologies to psychoanalysis. I think there is something kind of funny about this blatant use of an all-too-familiar story, like psychosexual development gone awry. I'm interested in this comedic obviousness because I think it complicates the process of meaning-making.

JC: I noticed the comedic gestures in your image groupings, like fireworks, the Rimbaud book's floral cover, and a Rococo ceiling all next to each other. But humor is also enigmatic, because you can't explain it; some people will just never get it.

TM: There is something about humor that epistemologically destabilizes our capacity to know. The arrival of meaning is not a linear process; it forces you to take detours, unexpected turns, and you sometimes find yourself at dead ends, where the humor has a tautological effect, being both the meaning and its cancellation. We are meaning-making machines that are constantly trying to make sense of the world, even when it's impossible. Maybe what art does is allow us to sit with the discomfort of the unknown. Everything becomes exotic at the limits of one's own subjectivity. It's similar to how queerness continues to maintain its loose contours – it can't be simply defined, but has to be placed alongside the negation of things that are un-queer to have some kind of working meaning.



Views of "Pass," Empty Gallery, Hong Kong, 2024

JC: This destabilizing space is both the entry point for the erotic and what contains "the self" in your autobiographical approach. The landscape prints are quite discernible as landscapes, and there is little ambiguity in the subjects of the still-life photographs. At the same time, the longer you look at the images, the more they fizzle at the edges. The formal enigma actively dispels a sense of ownership over the narrative. How conscious were these affective decisions in your process?

TM: I'm very glad to hear this because my concerns tend to be more abstract and formal than strictly biographical. I think what is analogous to the erotic that arises from hermeneutics is a drive of some sort, this sense of movement, where the meaning of the thing cannot be found in a single locus of understanding, which places one in a dynamic situation. It is fragmentary, tentative, and contingent by nature. It is almost like a pact, that I am trusting the viewer to take this and run with it, and there is a certain sense of vulnerability in that trust.

JC: How do you understand intuition in your art-making?

TM: It's a process of thinking. There are thoughts in the recesses of your mind that feel more like approximations and do not manifest as concrete, articulated language, but when you see them in the form of artworks, they become articulated thoughts. I think that's the difference. I don't subscribe to the notion of "in the beginning was the word"; I think in the beginning was form.



Untitled (CB #17), 2024, UV print on found cardboard, 70.5 x 82.4 x 7.3 cm

MOUSSE



Taro Masushio "Pass" at Empty Gallery, Hong Kong, 2024. Courtesy: Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo: South Ho

Taro Masushio "Pass" at Empty Gallery, Hong Kong Wong Binghao

Just as he is uninterested in entrenching binaries of fact and fiction, resistance and capitulation, or authorship and appropriation, Taro Masushio is likewise wary of identitarian overdeterminations and the corollary imperative to verify and reveal any singular "truths" behind his photography. He sets himself the task of resisting the medium's claims to the indisputable legibility of subjects in front of or behind its lens. His latest show at Empty Gallery, Hong Kong (all works 2024), juxtaposes two types of photography—UV prints on found cardboard and more traditional still lifes—to complicate the medium's supposed technological purchase on truth and transparency. It highlights his proclivity for playful formal experimentation when faced with the camera's potential for capture, which has often proven symptomatic of the colonial hunger for knowledge, order, and coherence. Through his shrewd sequencing of images, the artist seems to suggest that the medium of photography holds the capacity to conceal and equivocate, despite its presumed indexical fidelity to the "real."

Fireworks and flowers inaugurate Masushio's elegantly restrained presentation. In *Untitled (CB #22)*, gleaming red gems catapult excitedly toward us. This sublime pyrotechnic burst is standardized by the

rectangular trellis of folds on its cardboard base. Creases, scotch tape, and shipping labels—banal clues to the cardboard’s original function as a container in logistical transportation and supply chains—reroute and demystify what would otherwise seem an elysian celebration. But our emotional response to Masushio’s experimental printing technique is nuanced in spite of, or even because of, this disenchantment, for the crimson fireworks take on a wholly more complex character when seen against such a humbly flammable material base. The ephemerality of their vigorous fire becomes more apparent, and therefore more beautiful. Positioned next to this photograph is *Untitled 37*, which depicts a book with a Japanese title and a charming, childlike sketch of flora and fauna on its white cover. We learn from the press release that this book is a Japanese translation of poems by Arthur Rimbaud belonging to the artist’s father, and that all the photographs on cardboard are reprintings of pictures originally taken by Masushio’s father.

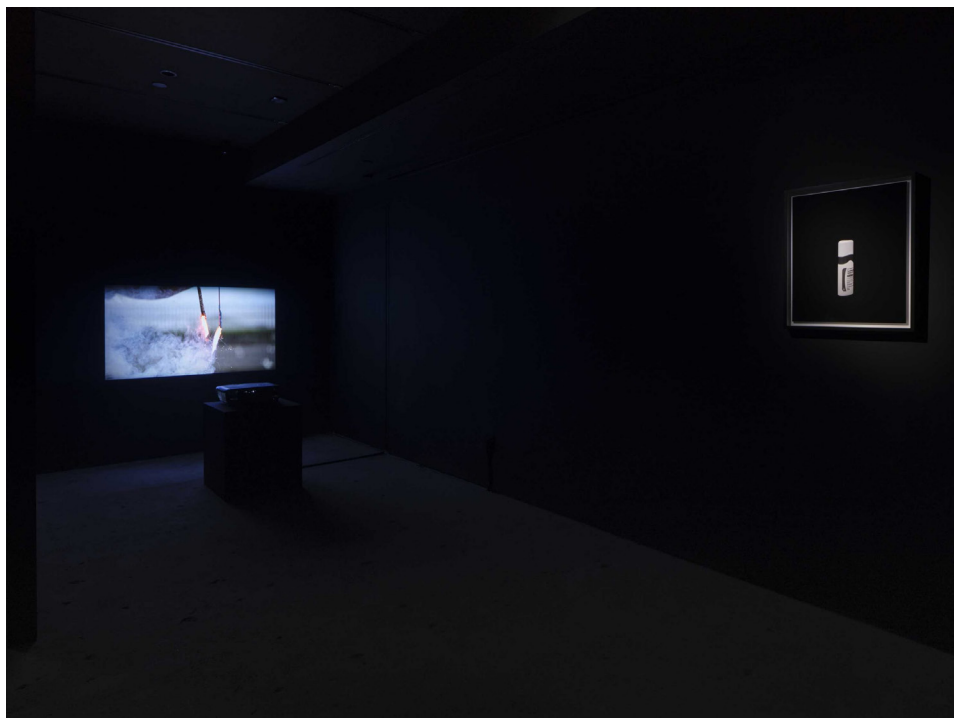
Such selective provision or withholding of visual or biographical information tinges the innocent appeal of Masushio’s photographs with the frisson of discovery. But the artist seems to suggest that complete understanding is beside the point. To make the photographs on cardboard, Masushio sifted through thousands of images that his father took on touristic sojourns to exotic destinations, editing and printing a selected few on salvaged or recycled boxes used for Japanese consumer products—some of which his father used to ship him food items during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. That this critical contextual information is not immediately evident begs the perennial question: Should mediation and interpretation—press releases, curatorial texts, explanatory labels, and the like—or an intuitive, guileless appraisal take precedence in our encounters with art?

This tension, particularly relevant to artists who are still reductively categorized by their cultural identity, plays out in *Untitled 40*, a still life of two totemic tchotchkes. Hands intertwined, the humanoid wooden figures appear as a pair: one bearded, the other wearing a necklace of red, yellow, and blue stones. Uninitiated viewers would likely not discern that these souvenirs are modeled after Indigenous Ainu people from Hokkaido, thus diffusing the ethnic and political valences of the iconography. Masushio positions this work next to another still life, *Untitled 35*, which depicts a pristine white semi-sphere against a black backdrop. I later found out this was a lamp used in the photographic darkroom. Together, the pair of images point to Masushio’s elusive, intentionally ambiguous gesture to photography’s mechanisms of production and reception.

Masushio’s pictures can also be markedly offbeat and witty. Certain landscape photographs, for instance, have a kind of majesty that is rendered absurd or anticlimactic by the eccentricity of their cardboard substrates. A tranquil sunset reflected in water in *Untitled (CB #15)* is

literally framed by cutesy cucumber illustrations. In the otherwise gloomy expanse of *Untitled (CB #23)*, a sliver of fading light at dusk is almost entirely obscured by utilitarian black barcodes, shipping labels, and red Japanese lettering. To create *Untitled (CB #4)*, Masushio vertically rotated his father's picture of Arctic glaciers such that it is superimposed on the cardboard's barcodes, insignia, and lettering, all in kindred shades of blue.

Masushio's still lifes, for their part, conjure consternation and doubt precisely because they are so crisp and clear in communicating what they represent. This paradox is palpable in *Untitled 33*, which I was told is a meticulous close-up of one of the artist's favorite rings. Against a foreboding black background, the textured and chipped silver of the well-worn accessory makes it look more like a hunk of asteroid—something elemental or extraterrestrial—than an everyday adornment. *Untitled 36* presents a labeled bottle of testosterone solution, unspooling a string of potentially invasive questions about whether and/or why it belongs to the artist. *Untitled (CB #1)*, a photograph of a man's backside printed on cardboard, prompts equally flummoxing questions (for instance, when and why did the artist's father take such a sensuous and intimate snapshot?). With his hand on his hip and face turned away from us, the man appears unaware of the camera's homosocial gaze. He admires the gargantuan rock formations before him, which are now, through Masushio's artistic intervention, annotated with packaging symbols and texts. "STRONG SPARKLING," inverted and in capital letters, is plastered over the man's taut back like a wholesome tramp stamp.



Taro Masushio "Pass" at Empty Gallery, Hong Kong, 2024. Courtesy: Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo: South Ho

Masushio's six-minute video *Untitled (Dear Dante)*, the only moving-image work in the exhibition, sheds some (but only some) light on his intentional ambivalence. We hear the artist reading a letter to a former paramour while the camera hones in on sparklers he ignites with his father. As the flames inevitably extinguish, we hear Masushio speaking about an incident involving asphyxiation, but whether it was motivated by eroticism, accident, or aggression remains unclear.

Masushio's images both repress and release their messages. We cannot be sure whether cluelessness in the face of his art is a more disadvantageous position than insight and backstory. With this evasiveness, Masushio seems to nonchalantly "pass" on the desire to exert control over the experience of spectatorship when it comes to the supposed evidentiary root of photography. Paralleling the video's narrative of an entangled love, it is suggested that this sort of power is tantalizing, but also dangerous. We ourselves might choose to "pass" on the burden of semantic resolution or claiming possessiveness over another's artistic ambit. This cessation, Masushio's work seems to say, can be a gracious and generous gift.

at Empty Gallery, Hong Kong
until November 30, 2024

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."

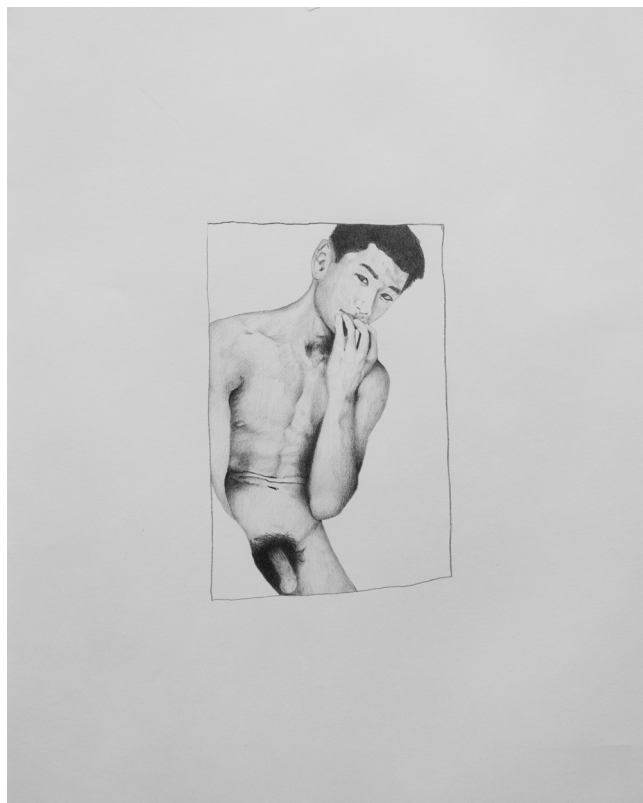
Uncle from Osaka has been a vital inspiration for Masushio's current show at Empty Gallery in Hong Kong, "Rumor Has It." The artist drew meticulous copies of Uncle's images—tender portraits, graphic sex acts—and then shot photographs of those copies. It's a process that in some sense parallels the intimacy 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.

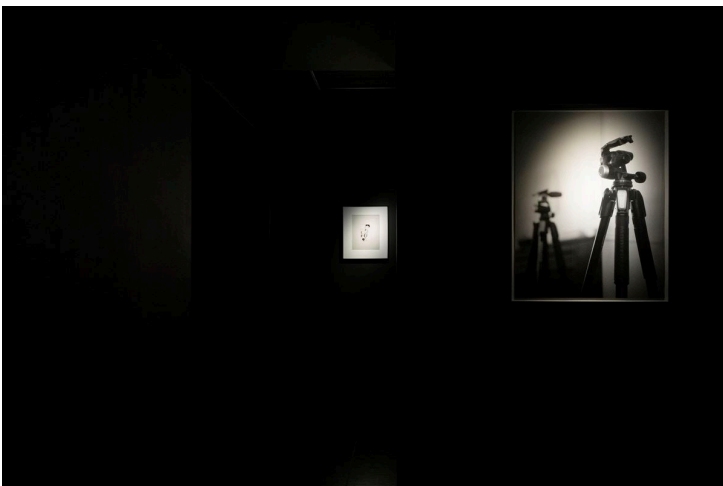


Exhibition view: Taro Masushio, *Rumor Has It*, Empty Gallery, Hong Kong (23 December 2020–20 February 2021). Courtesy Empty Gallery. Photo: Michael Yu.

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.

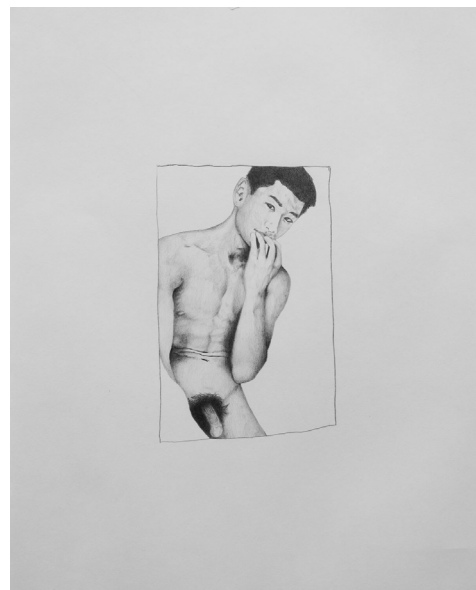
'I cannot produce as many photographs as he does,' says the Japanese voiceover in the culminating black-and-white video, *Untitled 28*. Referring to the fecundity of En'ya's output, this is the only proper textual reference to a figure that is both central and elusive to the exhibition.

'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.



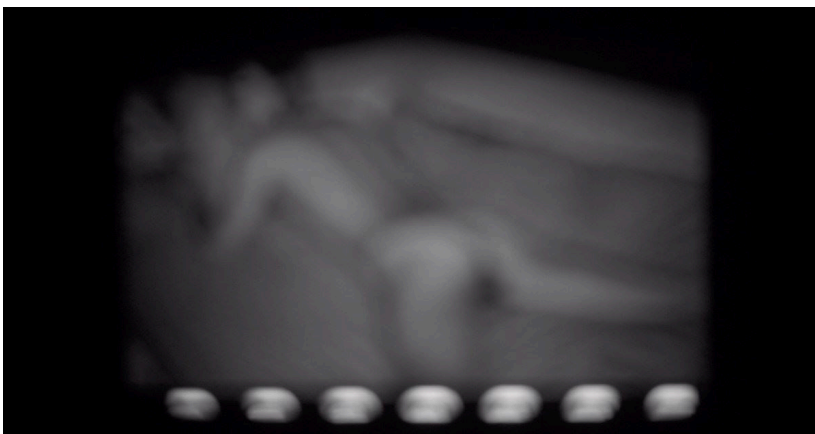
Taro Masushio, *Untitled 26* (2020). Platinum Palladium print / 300gsm Hahnemuhle rag. 132.6 x 107.7 x 2.6 cm. Edition 1 of 3 + 2 AP. Courtesy Empty Gallery.

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.