



Daido Moriyama: Master of the Unseen

On the occasion of Daido Moriyama's recent exhibition at Simon Lee Gallery in Hong Kong, CoBo Social managing editor Denise Tsui reflects on her first encounter five years ago with the highly acclaimed Japanese photographer's intuitive visuals of the unseen in an erotically charged world.



"My basic recognition is that the world is full of eroticism."

Daido Moriyama, 2019

Daido Moriyama is a man that needs little introduction. One of Japan's most prolific photographers, his expansive portfolio has been extensively exhibited around the world and widely published. A recent exhibition at Simon Lee Gallery in Hong Kong seeking to encapsulate Moriyama's work across five decades triggered a personal reflection on his black and white, often grainy, photographs and brought me back to the exact moment his visual oeuvre captured my imagination five years ago.



During my years at art school in Melbourne, eroticism and nudity had always been a prevalent subject in my own practice. I worked across various mediums, from beautiful raw charcoal and watercolours to clay, wax, glass, and more. The sensuality of touch was constantly something I yearned for. German artist and Surrealist photographer Hans Bellmer (1902–1975) was a continual source of inspiration; I felt his life-size pubescent dolls and photographs were both deeply magnetic and disturbing at the same time.

My first encounter with Moriyama's photography outside of a printed photobook was in 2015, at a group show on erotic photography titled "**Up Close**" and hosted by the Hong Kong Contemporary Art Foundation. Also featured in the exhibition was Eikoh Hosoe whom Moriyama worked as an assistant for, and Nobuyoshi Araki. I was still new to the city and it became an exhibition that I have been enamoured with since.

Moriyama's street photography, which he broadly calls "a contemporary record," details the perspective of his daily life. His candid and intimate shots present Japan—very often Tokyo and in particular, Shinjuku—with a raw grittiness that when viewed alongside his sexually charged photos, seem to pen a narrative rich with human desire. The deliberate graininess he adopts and the prevailing sense of never revealing a full picture leaves the viewer seeking the *unseen*; or in the least that is how I read Moriyama's works. It isn't concealment, which we are so good at in modern life. When I stand in front of Moriyama's photographs, I am always looking for what *isn't there*, what *isn't seen*; his photos, in particular those from his series "Tights," "Lips" and "Kagerou" always incited almost the same electrifying sense of attraction that I found in Bellmer's works despite both practices being hugely different. Embracing this notion of the unseen in other aspects of my life has softened my own judgement on the definition of attraction.



I never could understand why elements of the erotic—and only a very particular definition of it—repetitively resurfaced in my own work in such an intuitive manner. Finally, nearly 10 years later, I had my answer. Encountering *Tights* (1987–2011) and *KAGEROU* (1972/2013) on the walls of Simon Lee Gallery together with a friend last year and sharing my story led to the realisation that it was my discovery of Moriyama's photographs in 2015 which allowed me to realize my difficulties with body dysmorphia—and to learn a healthier way to appreciate the body. In 2016, inspired by his "Tights" series, I embarked on an exploration in nude photography with a photographer friend. It was one of the most terrifying and yet liberating moments I've ever had and unbeknownst to myself at the time, the experience triggered a change in how I would look at beauty, art, and the body.

In a 2012 interview with the [Guardian](#), Moriyama shared how he came to begin his "Tights" series:

"One day I was drinking coffee with my girlfriend when I caught a glimpse of her legs, which happened to be in stockings with fishnet tights over the top. I immediately started taking photographs."



The sheer intuition and shared space of intimacy struck me; it was an element so simple, yet rich in meaning. Tights and stockings have long been abused in media and entertainment for added sexual connotations; Burlesque dancers have embraced it very successfully as a tool in their oeuvre. For me, Moriyama's "Tights" captured the epitome of primal human desire and our yearning to touch the forbidden. A woman's legs presented as seamlessly flowing forms, curvaceous and at times voluptuous, bathed with an undercurrent of eroticism. Vulnerable, yet never truly exposing.

The exhibition at Simon Lee Gallery gave me a chance to fall in love further with what Moriyama offers us through his photographs, and led me to rethink my own motivations four years ago. I realised that without Moriyama and his beautiful and erotically charged world, I would still be struggling with how to embrace confrontations of the human body.

When I asked Moriyama what he was searching for in his work, he replied, "I'm always looking for a different world hidden from daily life whenever I take my camera with me." Maybe that's what I find so alluring about his work; a desirable world away from our own, a return to intuition, and an all-encompassing definition of beauty. Every time I see his photographs, I walk away feeling the world is richer and more beautiful.

Daido Moriyama**13 November – 20 December, 2019****Simon Lee Gallery, Hong Kong**