

Masahisa Fukase

Private Scenes

7 September - 12 December 2018

The life work of Japanese photographer Masahisa Fukase (Hokkaido, 1934-2012) remained largely inaccessible for over two decades, following a tragic fall that left the artist with permanent brain damage. After his death the archives were gradually disclosed, revealing a wealth of material that had never been shown before. Foam presents a large-scale retrospective with original prints from the Masahisa Fukase Archives in Tokyo. In addition to his seminal body of work *Ravens*, the exhibition contains a number of important photo series, publications and documentation dating from the early 1960s to 1992. The works combine to form a remarkable visual biography of one of the most radical and experimental photographers of the post-war generation in Japan.

Fukase incorporated his personal struggle with loss and depression into his work in a surprisingly playful manner. His subjects are personal and highly intimate: over the years, his wife Yoko, his dying father and his beloved cat Sasuke regularly featured in sometimes comical, at other times sombre visual narratives. Towards the end of this working life, the photographer increasingly turned the camera on himself. The huge number of self-portraits – precursors to today's ubiquitous selfie – testifies to the singular, almost obsessive way that the artist related to his surroundings, and to himself.

Fukase worked almost exclusively in series, some of which came about over the course of several decades. He would become famous for his *Ravens* (1975-1985), an atmospheric and associative visual narrative conceived during a trip to his native Hokkaido. The series would become his life-work and is considered his absolute masterpiece. *Ravens* was published as a book in 1986 and hailed as the best photobook of the past 25 years by the *British Journal of Photography* in 2010. The flocks of ravens, a sign of an approaching doom, formed a metaphor for Fukase's state of mind as his marriage with Yoko was falling apart. A little-known fact is that Fukase also photographed his famous ravens in colour. The rare colour Polaroids from the *Raven Scenes* series (1985) are exhibited outside of Japan for the first time.

The coexistence of buoyancy and personal grief became a recurrent theme in Fukase's work from an early date. In the exhibition *Kill the Pig* (1961), Fukase presented experimental studies of his pregnant wife and still-born child in combination with photographs made in a slaughterhouse: an at once playful and macabre reflection on love, life and death. *Memories of Father* (1971-1987) shows the life, the slow decay and ultimately the death of his father; a tender homage and a poignant 'memento mori'. The sometimes humorous and sometimes earnest family portraits of *Family* (1971-1989), for which the artist portrayed his family in his parents' photo studio year after year, form an exceptional family chronicle.

Fukase's idiosyncrasy and inexhaustible drive to experiment culminated in the self-portraits and street scenes of *Private Scenes* (1990-1991), *Hibi* (1990-1992) and *Berobero* (1991). The series document Fukase's wanderings through the streets and nightlife of Tokyo. Three months before his fateful fall, the works were presented in the exhibition *Private Scenes* (1992), along with *Bukubuku* (1991): a series of performative self-portraits of the artist in his bathtub. The prints are typically dated with the digital stamp Fukase started adding in the final years of his working life. Together the works form an idiosyncratic diary and mark out the days, months and years that Fukase spent living, and playing, in isolation.

Masahisa Fukase

Masahisa Fukase was born in 1934 in Bifuka, in the northern region of the island of Hokkaido. As the eldest son, Fukase was destined to take over the family photo studio, founded by his grandfather in 1908. He was already helping to rinse the prints by the age of six, and he continued to help his parents run the studio until moving to Tokyo in 1952 to study photography. His exhibition *Kill the Pig* first brought the photographer public acclaim, and from that moment on his work would be exhibited regularly and published in magazines such as *Camera Mainichi* and *Asahi Journal*. Three years after the sudden departure of his first wife, he married his great love Yoko in 1964. She would remain his main source of inspiration for 12 years. In 1974 Fukase founded the Workshop Photography School with the well-known Japanese photographers Shomei Tomatsu, Eikoh Hosoe, Noriaki Yokosuka, Nobuyoshi Araki and Daido Moriyama. Their work was presented collectively in the seminal exhibition *New Japanese Photography* in MoMA (New York), which first introduced a new generation of Japanese photographers to the west. Fukase's divorce from Yoko in 1976 marked the start of the now world-famous series *Ravens*, but also resulted in depression and excessive alcohol consumption. In 1992 Fukase, while intoxicated, fell down the stairs and remained in a coma for the next 20 years. After his death in 2012, his work was gradually made accessible by the Masahisa Fukase Archives, established in Tokyo in 2014.

Fukase's work has previously been exhibited in museums including MoMA, Victoria and Albert Museum, ICP, Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain and Tate Modern. His work is included in various collections including the Victoria and Albert Museum, Tate Modern, SFMoMA, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Getty Museum, and various private collections.

Masahisa Fukase – Private Scenes was created in collaboration with Tomo Kosuga, director of the Masahisa Fukase Archives. The works were generously lent by the Masahisa Fukase Archives, represented by Michael Hoppen Gallery. Foam thanks Simon Baker, director of the Maison Européenne de la Photographie, and Les Rencontres d'Arles for their advice and involvement.

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Private Scenes by Masahisa Fukase can be seen from 7 September – 12 December 2018 at Foam. Open daily 10am-6pm, Thurs/Fri 10am-9pm.

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