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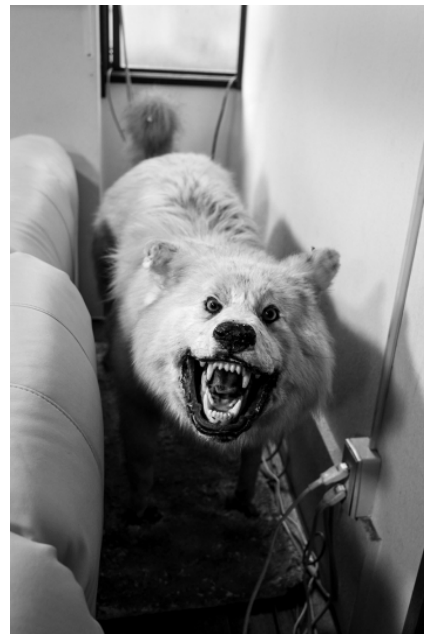
What's new, Chloé Jafé? Interview by Nadine Dinter

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2014, Ginza, Tokyo. Self-portrait. I became a hostess myself for a few months in order to observe and get closer to these women. © Chloé Jafé



2015, Saitama. Stuffed dog in the bosses office. © Chloé Jafé



2014, Chiba. © Chloé Jafé



2019, Osaka. Taka. © Chloé Jafé



2016, Takamastu. Mika san. © Chloé Jafé



2016, Takamatsu. Fighting dog. © Chloé Jafé



2016, Saitama. Yumi san and Shiori san. © Chloé Jafé



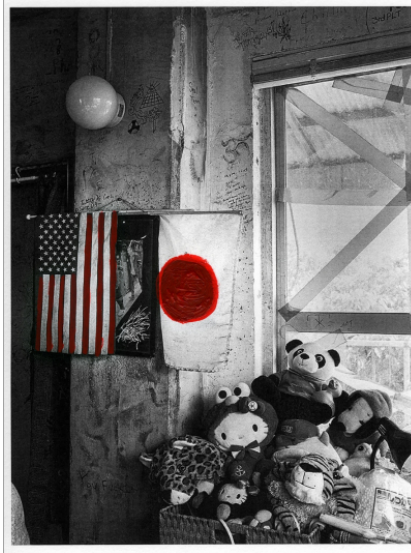
2019, Kamagasaki, Nishinari, Osaka. Transvestite Mary Keiko. © Chloé Jafé



2019, Koza, Okinawa. Nightclub in Koza. © Chloé Jafé



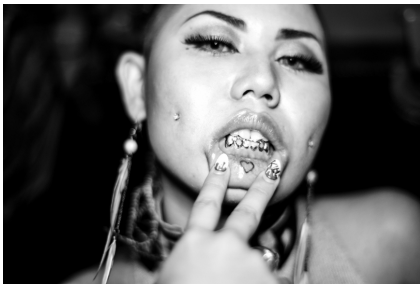
2019, Kamagasaki, Nishinari, Osaka. A man screaming. © Chloé Jafé



2017, Kin, Okinawa. At Liza's bar. A greek lady who owns a bar in Kin. © Chloé Jafé



2016, Naha, Okinawa. Saki's hands in the Love Hotel. "Hopeless Romantic". © Chloé Jafé



2019, Naha, Okinawa. Sawa with her heart tattoo. © Chloé Jafé



2019, Koza, Okinawa. In a cabaret. © Chloé Jafé



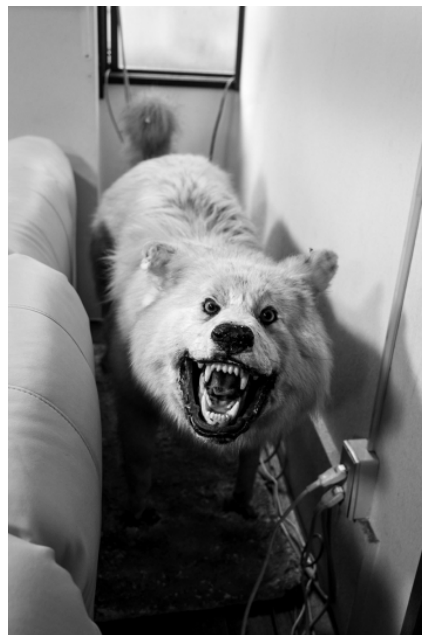
2016, Naha, Okinawa. View from the city. © Chloé Jafé



2016, Naha, Okinawa. Kenbo san who used to work in the organisation and now owns a restaurant and plays Okinawan music with his daughter and wife. © Chloé Jafé



2014, Ginza, Tokyo. Self-portrait. I became a hostess myself for a few months in order to observe and get closer to these women. © Chloé Jafé



2015, Saitama. Stuffed dog in the bosses office. © Chloé Jafé

The French photographer **Chloé Jafé** is a veritable powerhouse. Not only is she a brilliant artist, she's a gutsy and savvy person, too.

Upon discovering her work about four years ago during the Paris Photo fair, I was astonished to learn that they were taken by a French female photographer, and not by a Japanese disciple of Araki.

In order to find out why Jafé decided to live and photograph in Japan, how she managed to achieve her goal and establish a close rapport with her subject matter, and what her latest work focuses on, I connected with her a few weeks ago and am now delighted to share her story and “what’s new” with you.

Nadine Dinter : You moved to Japan around seven years ago, are fluent in Japanese, and have dared to explore the Japanese underworld. What’s the story behind this part of your life?

Chloé Jafé : I moved to Japan in 2012 with the idea of meeting women from the underworld.

At the time I barely spoke Japanese, so I took a few classes. But I mostly learned the language in bars and through friends. I was fascinated by the beauty and complexity of Japanese culture – a seemingly perfect balance that seems unbreakable but in fact hides a lot of darkness. The history of Japan was also of interest to me, first with the samurais and then the Yakuza (who originally identified themselves as modern Robin Hoods). I wanted to create work that I could identify with, so I decided to focus on the women of the Japanese mafia.

ND : When we think of Japanese photography, Araki and his women in bondage often come to mind. But there is so much more to it, as your photos and their subject matter show. How did you come up with this idea? And how long did it take you to prepare the project properly?

CJ : I had already been to Japan twice when I came up with this idea. When I started to think about it seriously I had just left my job in London and was living in Paris with my boyfriend at the time. One day we had a big fight, signaling the end of our relationship; the day after I bought my flight ticket to Tokyo. Of course I had already been researching the subject, and I was also inspired by the book *Yakuza Moon: Memoirs of a Gangster’s Daughter* and the Japanese TV series *Gokudo no tsuma-tachi* (The Yakuza Wives). But when I left for Japan to start this work I was mainly following my instincts without much preparation. I worked without fixers and just threw myself into it. I think vulnerability is an important part of my practice.

ND : Part of your preparations involved entering the inner circle of the Yakuza, gaining their trust, and ultimately receiving permission from Yakuza bosses to photograph their female companions. How did you manage to infiltrate this closed group?

CJ : I didn’t “infiltrate” but rather attempted to become “one of them” in the most sincere way possible. I wanted to make sure I had a good understanding of the people I was trying to photograph. When I started to photograph hostesses I could sense a gap

that wasn't quite right. I felt as if I was trying to steal something or was being an annoyance. This is when I decided to get a job as a hostess myself, so that I could communicate with the girls on the same level and better understand their position, and the relationship they have with the men.

I see photography as an exchange, and as much as I had to prove myself at the beginning, I think ultimately it was a mutual gain of trust between us.

ND : In the first part of your trilogy, called *I Give You My Life*, you depict wives, mistresses, and other women inside the Yakuza world, showing their elaborate and impressive tattoos. Although the women are naked, these powerful, individualized inscriptions of potent animals, signs, and symbols make them look strong, and not at all vulnerable. Was this your idea – to empower them this way?

CJ : To be honest, when I started this project I didn't know what I would find and who I would be able to meet, so there was no clear concept. What I knew from the beginning was that I wanted to make a mixed-media artwork and that I wanted to avoid clichés. As a foreigner in Japan, I wanted to try and avoid a perspective that was too western, and it was important to me to show the women's feelings as much as possible. Even if they are in the shadows most of the time, I think they are beautiful and strong, and I did want to somehow give them a voice.

ND : Were the Yakuza bosses present during these photo shoots and did you have to get their authorization for the final photographs?

CJ : Thankfully not! I wanted to share some intimacy with the women I photographed. But each case was different, and sometimes I had to get approval from the boss before I started to photograph. Again, the relationship was based on trust, so I showed them everything I photographed and they trusted me with my choices.

ND : Are you still in touch with the women you depicted, and how has this series affected and influenced your personal life?

CJ : I keep in touch with most of them and have a close sister-like bond with some of them. This work has changed me. The people I met gave me strength and taught me about having a sense of honor and conviction. It will remain with me forever, just like the ink I have on my back now.

ND : In the second part of your trilogy, called *Okinawa, Mon Amour*, you created a sensual, yet honest, portrait of the city of Okinawa. Again in this series, women play the main role. Here, you looked for them in bars and hotels, among other places. What was your approach? How did you find and “cast” them?

CJ : The work I did in Okinawa was very personal. Far from its beautiful beaches. It's not a project I planned on doing but it rather came to me when I felt in love. I also became fond of the island and its people. On a personal level, I was going through a lot of difficult feelings at this time, starting with anxiety. I think I was searching for myself

through these women. I photographed the people I was attracted to and the ones who were reassuring to me. I found a lot of comfort spending time with the local *mama san* (older women). At the same time I was pushing my darker self to try and find my own limits. I just had to document what I was experiencing in a raw way, without plans; it was what was making sense to me at the time.

ND : The portraits and cityscapes are supplemented by war scenes and historic photographs. Do you feel that the city of Okinawa is still suffering under its history and the tragic losses during the Second World War?

CJ : I think the trauma Okinawa went through during and after World War II has somehow become part of its identity. Many Japanese people seem to see Okinawa as a dream destination for their annual vacation, and tend to forget that almost 15% of the island is occupied by American military bases. (Most US bases in Japan are located in Okinawa.) The scars from the past are still visible. Even today, Okinawan people are fighting to stop the construction of new bases on their island, but the government of mainland Japan doesn't show any support – the new base in Henoko is a case in point. Okinawa had its own culture from when it was the Ryukyu Kingdom, and that, along with the influence of the US, makes the island quite unique and different from mainland Japan. It's a very sensitive subject that is sadly not much covered internationally.

ND : What is the idea behind the third part of your project, *Osaka Ben*?

CJ : Osaka is known to have the highest crime rate in Japan. This is partly due to the district of Nishinari, aka Kamagasaki, or Airin – the latter name (which means “love your neighbor”) is its official name given by the government in an attempt to change the image of this shantytown. It attracts those who wish to make a fresh start, who are looking for a place to escape an abusive husband, debts, or the police. The homeless, day laborers, prostitutes, former criminals, transsexuals, anarchists, poets, and other marginalized people inhabit this neighborhood controlled by the Yakuza. Far from conformist traditions and judgments, Nishinari has its own laws. The people of this “other Japan” are real and palpable.

ND : For the next generation of photographers wishing to make a career in another, foreign country, what are your recommendations and tips?

CJ : “Find what you love and let it kill you.” – Charles Bukowski

Thank you, Chloé, for taking the time to share your latest with us!

Stay tuned for the upcoming exhibitions:

- September 16–30: Exhibition in Kodoji, Golden Gai (Tokyo)
- September 18–October 18: Kyotographie, KG Select (Kyoto)
- October 7–11: Photo London
- November 12–15: Paris Photo

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[Nadine Dinter](#)

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