SAKIKO NOMURA
Tender is the night

Sakiko Nomura (Shimonoseki, Yamaguchi Prefecture, 1967) is one of the most prominent Japanese photographers of her generation, the first to include a significant number of women. In 1990 Nomura graduated in photography from the University of Kyushu Sangyo (Fukuoka), known for its innovative artistic and cultural programs. Upon completing her studies, she became the assistant of Nobuyoshi Araki, the renowned Japanese photographer, with whom she worked for twenty years. Nomura's career began in 1993, exhibiting and publishing photobooks. Now numbering close to forty, these publications have always been carefully produced by the artist herself and represent a key aspect of her work. This exhibition constitutes her first retrospective in Europe.

Sakiko Nomura is best known for her dark and nocturnal photographs of male nudes in black and white. She alternates these works with other nighttime views of animals, urban and natural landscapes, airplanes, ships, empty roads, streets, trees, flowers, fireworks, cemeteries, the sea, the sky, weather events, and bedrooms. The photographs are dark, grainy, and even blurry; they depict a world of ambiguous and mysterious, albeit celebratory, shadows. Seen together, these images form temporal narratives that are reminiscent of cinema. Although she also makes portraits of women, as a woman who photographs male nudes, Nomura breaks Japanese stereotypes, taking on feminist perspectives.

The 1990s are known as the "lost years" in Japan: the economic bubble and the financial crisis of 1989 had stifled the growth of Japanese society. Conversely, photography and art experienced a period of internationalization and change. Museums and galleries opened, while infrastructures surrounding photography were strengthened and both public and private institutions began to collect photographs. Nevertheless, Japanese society, at that time, harbored enormous discrimination against women, which was no different in the world of photography. There were outstanding women photographers, but they were few and far between, and it was difficult for them to abandon anonymity. It was precisely in this context, within a traditional society, that women's consciousness changed radically, and a true blossoming of new women artists emerged. Nomura was part of this wave and began to pave her way as an important Japanese photographer.

This exhibition presents the works of Sakiko Nomura in thematic categories, which may be specific, such as flowers, nudes, animals, and portraits of a renowned kabuki actor. Likewise, the show features the artist's photobooks, including *Night Flight*, and photographs grouped together based on technical characteristics, such as the series *Another Black Darkness*. Lastly, a selection of photographs produced in Granada during the summer of 2024 that were commissioned by Fundación MAPFRE on the occasion of this exhibition will also be on display.

Night Flight

Night Flight is the title of a photobook produced by Sakiko Nomura in 2008; one of her few publications in color. In this instance, the artist alternates photographs of nude men—who look directly at the camera as they pose on beds in dark hotel rooms and are either smoking or with their lovers—with images of airplanes taking off or landing, out-of-focus night lights, fuming industrial chimneys, and fireworks that acquire obvious erotic undertones. These images appear to be the memories of different sexual encounters and are centered on the moments before or after said encounters, as if ultimately each one were a journey.

The photobook includes a text authored by the filmmaker Tatsushi Omori, in which he recalls posing nude for Nomura ten years earlier, in a dark room with orange light. According to Omori, Nomura places her subjects in a melancholic, chaotic, and seemingly fleeting world of light and shadow, with no precise boundaries, in which the beds are a representation of the sky. Everything is shifty and unstable, conjuring a metaphor of memory as something emotional that is simultaneously precise and inaccurate.

Flowers

Many of the motifs photographed by Sakiko Nomura evoke the intrinsic relationship between life and death. Likewise, the staging of her compositions, the darkness of their atmospheres, and the monotony of tonalities also suggest the coldness of death, as if—despite the artist's restraint—they were expressing hidden notions of tenderness and intimacy. An example of this can be found in her series of flowers, in which orchids, lilies, roses, chrysanthemums, and other decomposing flowers are placed in vases in the middle of a room; together their form an extension of baroque vanitas and represent allegories of the fleetingness of existence, its beauty being purely transitory.

Three Photobooks

Black Darkness (2008), *NUDE / A ROOM / FLOWERS* (2012), and *Fate in spring* (2020) are three of Nomura's most cherished photobooks, perhaps because they all include photographs that bear the artist's hallmarks: dark photographs that convey an epic of intimacy.

Black Darkness—a Buddhist term that is related to hell—was jokingly proposed to the artist as a title by the master photographer Nobuyoshi Araki. This book includes images of male nudes, skyscrapers that become visible through the fog, empty bedrooms, flowers, and the seafoam created by crashing waves, all depicted in black and white. The photographs are rather dark, conjuring a variety of dreamlike meanings and ancient emotions.

NUDE / A ROOM / FLOWERS includes a number of photographs in color and broadens Nomura's vocabulary with images of trips through different cities—such as Venice, Berlin, Beijing, and Krakow—combined with interiors of hospitals, churches, cemeteries, and a few daytime scenes.

Conversely, in *Fate in spring* the artist presents pairs of images—which are not necessarily related to one another—that evoke unexpected ideas when combined.

Another Black Darkness

After participating at the Rencontres d'Arles photography festival in 2016, Nomura published her first experimental works utilizing the technique of solarization. These images were printed with glossy black ink on matte black paper under the title *Another Black Darkness.*

Dark and hermetic at first sight, on this occasion the viewer is forced into contemplating this untitled and undated series. One must make a considerable effort to decipher the content of these images, which is practically hidden. The figures appear as landscapes flickering in distant memories—the silhouette of a naked man laying on a bed, another of a man sitting down and smoking with his back turned to the viewer as a woman exposes her buttocks, a kiss, the outlines of a city, a forest, a car, a flower, and a tree can all be spotted amidst the shadows—akin to images found in the work of Junichiro Tanizaki.

Nudes

Nomura's male nudes first appear in her 1994 photobook titled *Naked Room*. She has since produced this type of portrait recurrently in private or semi-private spaces. When she published her book in the 1990s, Japanese society exerted much discrimination towards women, which extended into the world of photography. Then it was common for women to be the protagonists of nudes, exhibiting themselves for the patriarchal gaze. Nomura subverted the norms that had been tacitly accepted for decades by featuring males as her subjects, despite her work being distanced from the cliché of the naked body as a sexual fantasy. Hiroki Kurotaki was the first model to pose nude for her. The artist portrayed him over the course of twenty years, until his death. Through Kurotaki, Nomura conveyed one of her main beliefs regarding the medium: "Photography is taking pictures of nudes, confronting bare existence," as she pointed out in an interview in 2022.

Miscellaneous

Koshiro Matsumoto X is another individual who Nomura has portrayed for decades. Born into a family of male Kabuki actors—a genre of Japanese theater that originated in Kyoto in the early 17th century—dating back to his great grandfather, Matsumoto began his career as Kintaro Matsumoto at the age of six. Two years later, he changed his name to Somegoro Ichikawa and acquired his current name in 2018 at the age of forty-five, which he inherited from his father and had been previously carried by nine actors in his family. Nomura published *My Last Remaining Dream* in 2018, documenting the actor's career through 593 photographs.

In the photobook *majestic*, published in 2022, Nomura gathers images of tattooed men who are part of the Edo-choyukai association in their yearly pilgrimage to Mount Oyama. Along with these photographs, this room also includes images of animals—which the artist is interested in as symbols of instinct and desire—combined with others that capture the precise moment when sight is about to vanish at dawn and dusk.