Flower fetish
By shooting ordinary subjects such as flowers and goldfish, Mika Ninagawa has become a cultural icon in Japan. The photographer talks to Edmund Lee as her stardom takes another absurd turn in Hong Kong.

That’s my hand!” Mika Ninagawa says, grinning, while showing me a black-and-white photograph that she recently took with gorgeous Japanese actor Masanobu Ando. The 39-year-old is in a great mood; and as she spots herself in the corner of another photo from the set, she again tells me excitedly: “My leg!”

It’s just as well that Ninagawa speaks of her black-and-white photography as if it’s a secret passion – complete with all the guilty pleasure that accompanies. When she started with the medium herself in the corner of another photo from the set, she again tells me excitedly: “My leg!”

It’s just as well that Ninagawa speaks of her black-and-white photography as if it’s a secret passion – complete with all the guilty pleasure that accompanies. When she started with the medium in her second year of high school, the Japanese artist was merely shooting herself and her younger sister in monochrome; but fate would have it that Ninagawa became her country’s most popular female photographer with her blindingly colourful imageries. “That’s me!” she finally exclaims, giggling, when we come to a portrait shot of the photographer and Ando lying side by side against a mirror. The photo is hardly recognisable for Ninagawa’s signature style – and, from all her childlike enthusiasm, you realise how much that diversity privately means to her.

Whether she actually likes it or not remains anybody’s guess, but the situation remains that the photographer’s reputation will be forever linked to her extravagant images of flowers, goldfish and colourfully-dressed young women – all her favourite subjects since the release of her first photographic album in 1997. (She has published dozens more since.) Indeed, even Ninagawa’s début as a film director, Sakuran (2007), has displayed an unusual fascination with exactly the same subject matters. “I didn’t intentionally set myself on them,” she reflects. “It’s only after the fact that I realised so many of my works are on them. When I look at it now, I can tell that both flowers and goldfish have relatively short life-spans. They are beautiful, but also come with a touch of sadness.”

Ninagawa is talking to us, via a translator, during a brief visit to Hong Kong, which sees her officiate the opening of a flower-themed installation inside the newly-opened Mikiki shopping mall in San Po Kong. The attraction is supposed to provide a chance for visitors to take photos in the set of a usual Ninagawa shoot. It isn’t your usual cartoon character theme park; rather, it’s pushing the fetishisation of an artist’s work to its very extreme. We ask Ninagawa if it isn’t a little strange to be putting on a display of this kind under her name, without inventing any popular icons along the line of, say, a Hello Kitty.

“What you said is right: the flowers and goldfish that I shoot are really ordinary subjects,” she admits, visibly bemused. “Especially when I introduce my works to other countries, I often have to choose the ones with more vivid colours. That said, I’ve never especially made it more vibrant than what I consider to be natural and spontaneous.”

Does it surprise her that people are reminded of her just by looking at the flowers? “I also hope that’s the case,” Ninagawa continues. “I think everybody who has a camera will take some photos of flowers at the beginning. You may say that it’s my ambition to be able to turn flowers into my signature.”

Apparently, that ambition has been equally valued by the influential Tomio Koyama Gallery, which the photographer approached in the hope of being introduced to the art world. “I really wanted to have my work presented by a gallery, so I looked around and found this one, which had represented many famous artists, like [Takashi] Murakami and [Yoshitomo] Nara,” says Ninagawa, who, ironically, has enjoyed so much success as a commercial photographer that she’s arguably a bigger star than both Murakami and Nara inside Japan.

“And I like the works by [Yayoi] Kusama and Murakami very much,” she explains of the ultra-colourful quality of some of the top Japanese contemporary artists. “Especially for Murakami and me, the impact of manga and anime has been huge. Maybe it isn’t as obvious to the overseas audience, but people of my generation have had a lot of contact with colours. In a country dominated by male photographers known for their erotic portraiture, like Nobuyoshi Araki and Kishin Shinoyama, Ninagawa stands alone with her portraits of often sexy, yet always self-assertive, women. It is particularly remarkable if one considers that her father is the renowned theatre director Yukio Ninagawa, who’s perhaps better known internationally for his S&M erotic film Snakes and Earrings (2008). “Perhaps it’s due to their existence that my approach appears refreshing,” says Mika.

“It may also have to do with the fact that I’m a woman shooting other women.” She bursts into laughter at this point. “It’s a different story when I shoot men.”

Men like Masanobu Ando, we suppose.

For updates on Mika Ninagawa’s latest exhibitions, visit www.ninamika.com.

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