

# Jean-Jacques Dicker

## Photography First

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Honolulu, Hawai'i, USA/Fribourg, Switzerland



*Jean-Jacques and Yuko*

Photo courtesy of the waitress

THE INSTANT I met JJ I knew that this man had crossed many more boundaries than I have. We both had been selected to exhibit our photographs at the Honolulu Academy of Arts for the Annual Artists of Hawai'i event and were attending the opening reception. As we were moving through the crowd our eyes met, and his first words to me were: "Oh cool! You must be that Swiss guy who wrote the *Tao of Photography* book." Surprised to be recognized, I acquiesced shyly, and he said that he had read the book and had been wanting to meet me for a long time. JJ then assembled the six young and beautiful Japanese women in his entourage, and pointing at my images, introduced me as "the genius who had taken the photographs," and added more credentials than I knew I had. Then

he threw his hands up in the air, stared at me, and referring to the festivities said laughingly: "They just love that shit!" Wearing sandals and loose clothing, JJ behaved with such unusual elegance that his appearance did not matter. His energetic presence, enhanced by his wild curly hair and bass-baritone voice, saturated the air with life. After this initial dadaist introduction, we got to settle down a bit and enjoyed hearing each other's life story—the beginning of a vibrant friendship.

Jean-Jacques Dicker was born in 1944 in Geneva to a Swiss father and French mother. Because of his parents' divorce, his childhood years were spent between Paris and Geneva. At the age of seven, he left with his mother and step-father for Honolulu. Passionate about surfing,

he eventually wanted to test other waters, and at seventeen he went to Biarritz, France, where he met the “gypsies of the road” who biked or hitchhiked across Europe and North Africa. It was then that he realized how exciting and fulfilling a backpacker’s life could be. From 1962 to 1967 he attended both the University of Geneva and the University of Hawai‘i. He parked cars to earn money for his hitchhiking trips across the USA, Mexico, and Central and South America. JJ managed to complete his B.A. degree in French in 1967 and then worked as a waiter in Waikiki to finance a two-and-a-half-year trip to Europe and North Africa. A year earlier he had met Polona, whom he married three years later in Slovenia (formerly Yugoslavia).

It was in 1968 that he purchased his first 24x36mm camera. With it, he headed off to Central America. Unfortunately, after three months of traveling in Mexico, jaundice interrupted his plan to move further south, and he flew to Switzerland to be treated by his father, a physician. After a quick convalescence, he bought a VW Camper in Germany and spent the next two years traveling around Europe, concluding with a return trip back to Honolulu to earn money for his next voyage.

JJ’s passion for photography was kindled in the darkroom by the excitement of seeing a large and clear picture being born of a small negative. The enthusiastic reception of his work added to his motivation to pursue the medium further. From 1970 to 1973 he attended photography classes at the University of Hawai‘i, and in 1972 he secured his first publications in two local newspapers—*The Sun Press* and *Sunbums*—and presented his first one-man exhibition. This was the first step toward a long series of international exhibitions and awards.

In 1974 JJ received a federal grant for applied arts from Bern (Switzerland), and spent the next two years traveling in Europe, followed by two years of travel through Africa. In 1978 he returned to Honolulu—and to Polona, who had divorced him for being absent. Back in the islands, he decided to print the images from his four-year trip. Two years later, he received another federal grant from Switzerland and spent three months in Southeast Asia. Upon returning to Honolulu, he was summoned to

Switzerland to settle a paternity suit involving a prostitute he had lived with four years earlier. Fortunately, he was concurrently offered a grant from the Banque hypothécaire of the canton of Geneva, which permitted him to pay for a two-week round trip to Switzerland. A year later a telegram from his father in Geneva arrived declaring, “You are not the papa. Love papa.”

In 1984 he was back for a last six-month trip to Africa with a Nikon and a Plaubel Makina 6x7. Since then, he has been concentrating on India, Nepal, Japan, Laos, Burma, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. “Why do you travel so much?—It’s everywhere the same!” an old philosophy professor once remarked to him. “Are you kidding?” JJ interjected, “You never know what you’ll discover around the next corner: unusual people, new smells, an expanded palette of colors—life is so rich! How can you not marvel at its diversity!”

Currently, JJ lives with his sweetheart Yuko Kamiyama in Hawai‘i Kai, a thirty-minute drive from Honolulu. His house is an imposing collage of dadaist/surrealist/existential art and humor—with erotic overtones. A tour of the house gives the open-minded visitor a jolt of creativity and offers a glimpse of his satirical mind and rebellious personality. It also reveals a very funny character who loves to entertain. Such a tour was even featured on ‘Ōlelo, a local television channel. His house is filled with an intriguing mélange of objects and props collected from his trips, including indigenous artifacts and humorous bibelots. The walls are covered with artwork and hundreds of political, philosophical, and art statements, including a sociological pinboard featuring the various ways marketers have misspelled his name as well as some notorious political figures pornographically juxtaposed in a satirical collage. Provocative quotations appear throughout the house: “How much reality can you stand?” “If you are traveling with other people, you’re a tourist; If you’re alone, you’re a traveler.” A quote by Erica Jong perhaps best captures JJ’s political agenda: “If we ban whatever offends any group in our diverse society we will soon have no art, no culture, no humor, no satire.”

In a culture dominated by marketing “canned” goods and ideas, not losing one’s creativity and

artistic sensibilities requires strength of character and resolve. JJ has succeeded in maintaining a fresh eye and a down-to-earth existential stance. Typically, transcending conventional social standards, JJ chose to go barefoot in a Nairobi brothel over more traditional and commodious destinations.

JJ's talent could have easily brought him material wealth had he elected a career in fashion photography; instead he has chosen to do documentary and fine art work. To sustain his artistic vision and freedom, JJ has been working for several years as a waiter in an Italian Restaurant in Waikiki, serving up spaghetti to pay his bills rather than be held hostage to the commercial demands of clients.

JJ's most conspicuous characteristic is his genuineness and passionate embrace of life—a palpable, infectious exuberance that raises questions about more conventional ways of being. JJ's unorthodox embrace of life is one answer to the question: "What kind of life is worth living?" The transpersonal field is overweighted with the assumption that renunciation of the senses and the body is the way to transpersonal understanding and liberation. The alternative path of "bathing in the senses" is most often viewed as a self-indulgent trap preventing self-growth. When interacting with JJ, however, one cannot but question such assumptions—his *joie de vivre*, spontaneous humor, and unencumbered enjoyment of life suggest that the path to fulfillment can be found anywhere. The key seems to not be attached to pleasures—and in that respect JJ embodies the famous advice of Chuang-tzu:

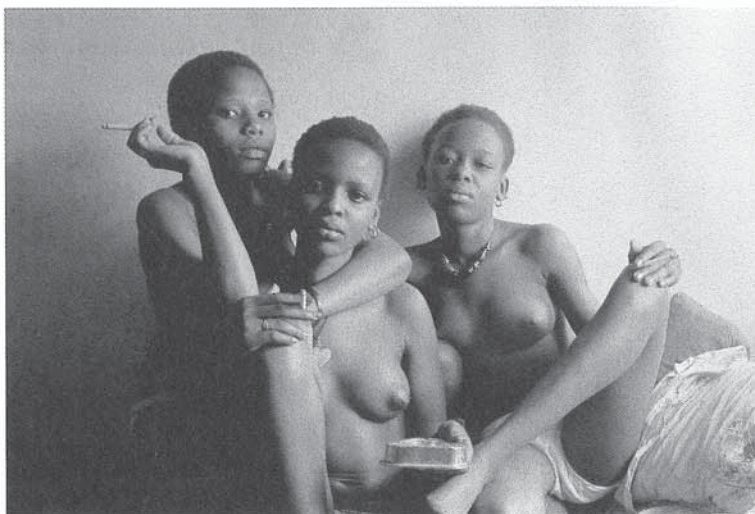
Mysteriously, wonderfully, I bid farewell to what goes, I greet what comes; for what comes cannot be denied, and what goes cannot be detained.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>In B. Watson, Trans., 1968. *The complete works of Chuang Tzu*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 213.

JJ does what he does for the sheer pleasure of doing it. When asked about his motivation for the thousands of prints he has done, JJ simply answered: "I don't want to make money; I don't want to be famous. I want to make photographs."

The path of the aesthete, while perhaps deceptively appealing, requires discipline. One photographic ritual that JJ practices on his travels is to photograph his room before settling in.

I have to do it. Even though I am tired, and would love to throw my backpack on the floor and rest. The beauty of the room forces me to photograph it. It may never be the same again. And the dance begins, light meter reading, rearrangement of the mosquito net, changing lenses, opening or closing of windows and so forth until I feel the right image, until all the possibilities of the room are exhausted.



*Three Friends, Three Cigarettes, Nairobi, Kenya, 1977*

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A photographic collection of rooms he has occupied around the world can be viewed in his book *Chambres—Empty Rooms*, published by Michèle Auer's Photoarchives (or on line at: <http://www.lenswork.com/emptyrooms.htm>).

At present, JJ is selecting and printing a backlog of twenty years of negatives from his many world trips and he is eagerly awaiting the release of his 290-page book which chronicles a three-year experience in Africa. The book is published by Ides et Calendes.

When asked about his future plans, JJ always answers: "Photography first." The following images illustrate JJ's transcendent photographic eye for beauty, humor, and eroticism.





*Madras Café, Udaipur, India, 1999*

© Jean-Jacques Dicker



*Cow in Kashmir*, Srinagar, India, 1985

© Jean-Jacques Dicker



*Sarah with Net*, Honolulu, 1982

© Jean-Jacques Dicker



*Heads with Parasols, Kagoshima, Japan, 1987*

© Jean-Jacques Dicker



*Birdman*, Tokyo, 1987

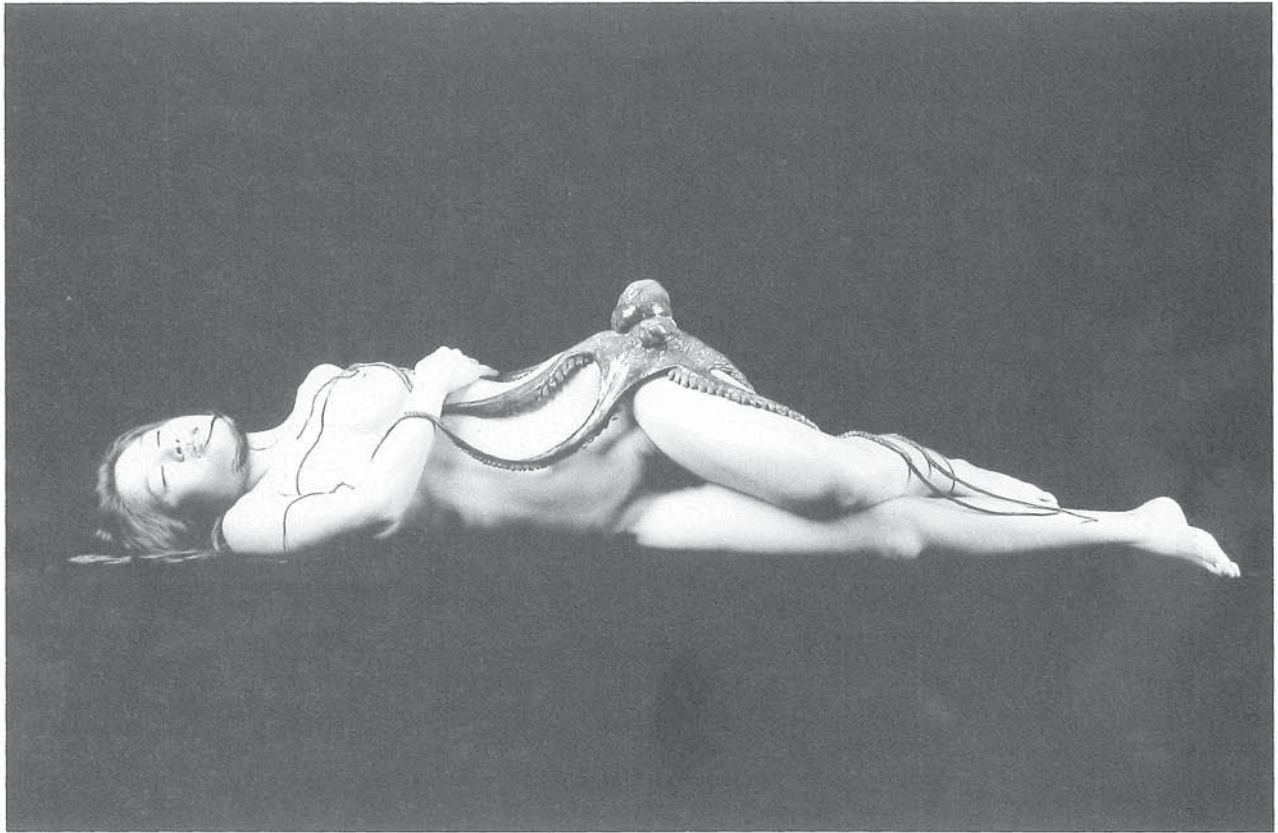
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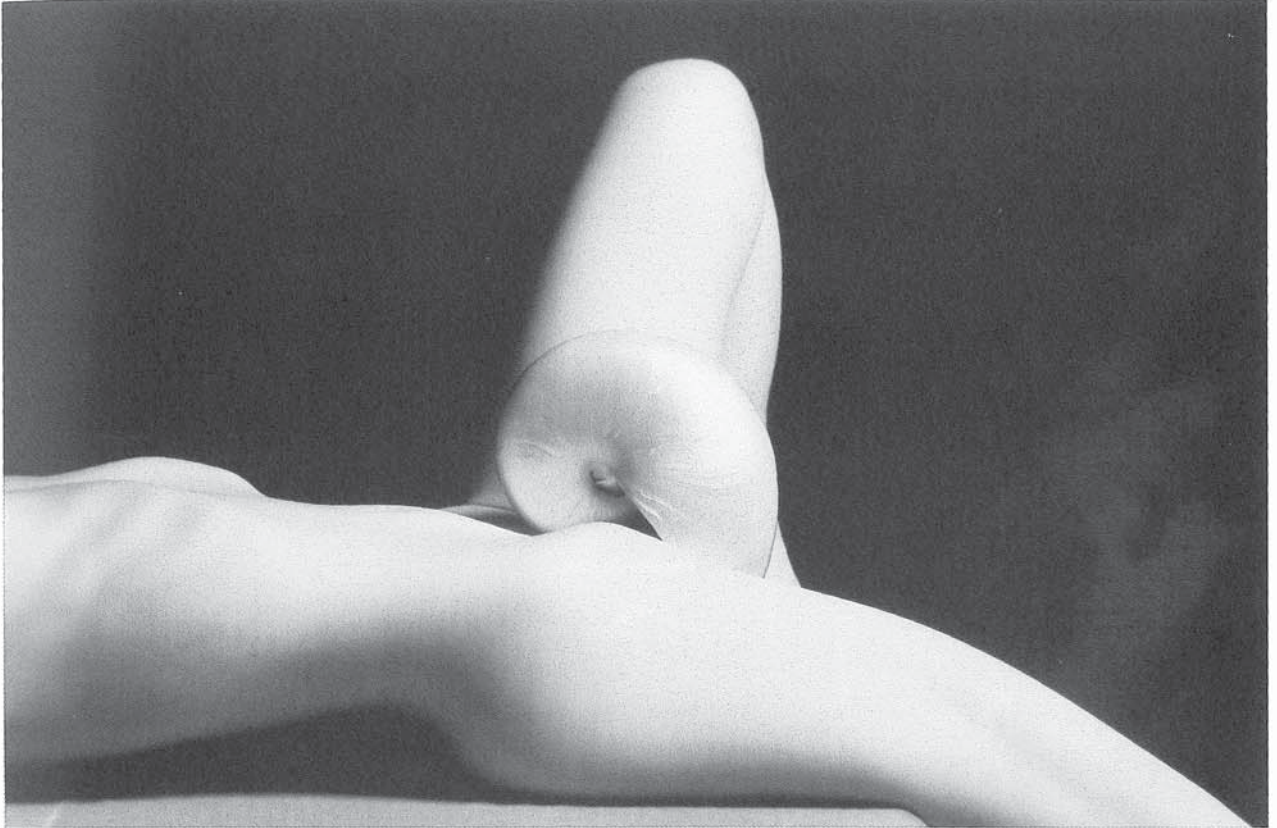
*Bernard at Barbershop in Agra, India, 1985*

© Jean-Jacques Dicker



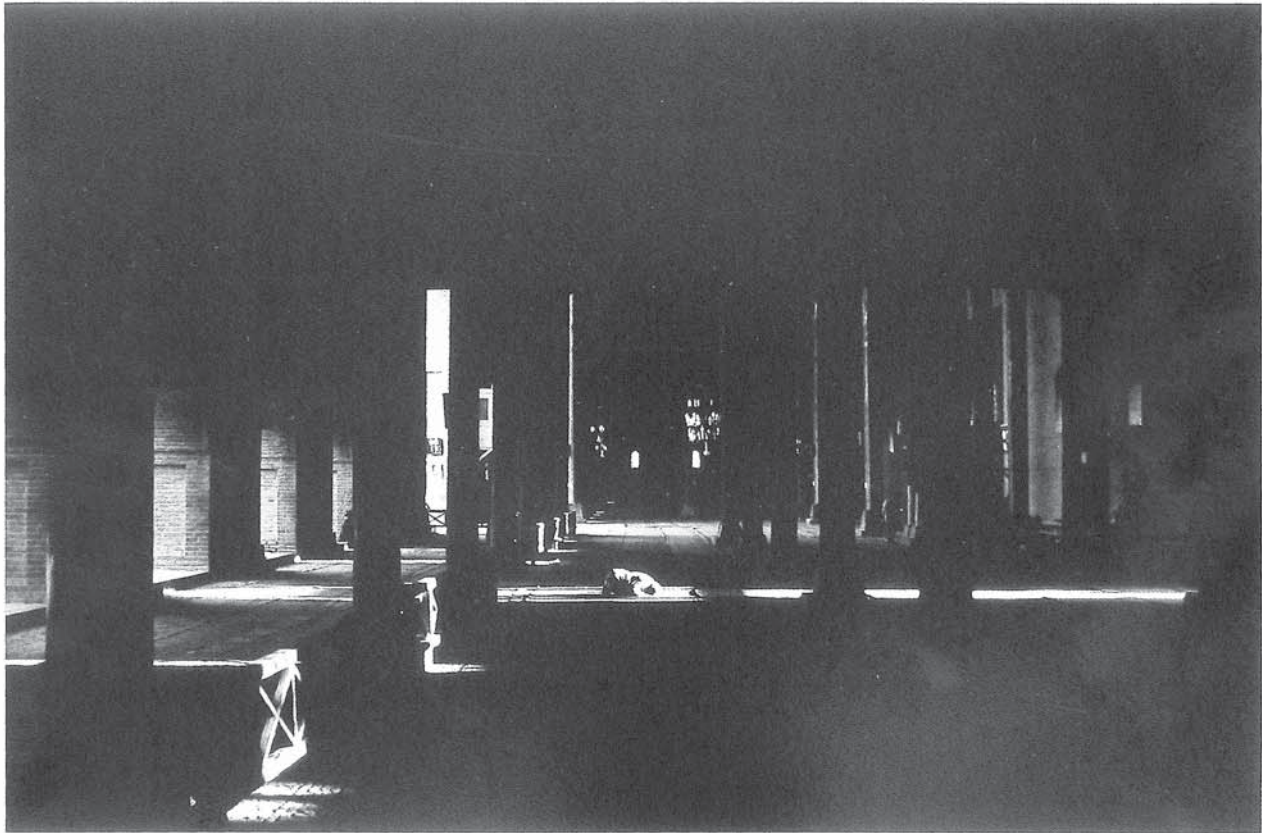
*Yuko with Octopus*, Honolulu, 2000

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*Yuko with Shell*, Honolulu, 1998

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*Man in Mosque, Srinagar, India, 1985*

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