

RE:VIEW

Aya Sugimoto bares her flesh to make you think

By WILL ROBB

Special to The Japan Times

Aya Sugimoto has been well known in Japan since the 1980s as a model, actress, singer, dancer and even as an erotic novelist. She is also someone people listen to and respect. Following her high-profile divorce in 2003 for which she cited "lack of sex" as a reason, sending shock waves through the media for her openness, she became an icon for frustrated wives in Japan who had been suffering a similar fate in silence and led to the coining of the phrase "sexless divorce." Several years later, Sugimoto still regularly hears from women who feel that she has empowered them to stand up for their rights.

Now the 40-year-old is in the headlines for baring all on Sept. 17 for a new advertising campaign organized by PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), aiming to draw attention to the antifur movement and animal rights in fashion-conscious Japan. However, what remains to be seen is whether the glare of the Japanese media focuses on the issue she is trying to



Fighting sin with skin: Respected erotic novelist Aya Sugimoto poses nude in a campaign against the

promote, or whether the campaign's message will fall on deaf ears as reporters focus on the flesh.

barbaric use of fur for fashion, holding a sign that reads, "Fur? I'd rather go naked." But will the Japanese media focus on her message or simply on her willingness to bare all? WILL ROBB PHOTO

After PETA contacted Sugimoto last year, she agreed to take part in a nude photo shoot while holding placards in both English and Japanese exclaiming "Fur? I'd rather go naked."

Critics may claim that she is just cashing in on the PETA movement, which has been steadily gaining attention in America, Europe and Hong Kong since its inception in 1980, but it appears that this is a cause that she genuinely believes in. Not only has she devoted her time to PETA, she has also started a fashion label called Dear Elsa, which is a collection of fake-fur clothing and no-fur bags designed to make consumers more aware of how they can dress ethically while still looking good.

Furthermore, Sugimoto is no stranger to the plight of mistreated animals. She explains in an interview with The Japan Times during a work trip to San Diego, California that she has been involved in volunteer work to help abandoned cats for around 15 years. However, she only really discovered the problems associated with fur farms and their inhumane treatment of animals two years ago.

"When I found out about that, I stopped wearing real fur immediately," she says. "I want to tell everyone the truth about how fur is produced and help decrease the amount of animals killed to make real fur products."

According to a PETA news release, the truth that it is trying to communicate to the Japanese public is that these animals spend their lives in tiny, filthy cages, suffering physical and psychological stress, before being killed by methods ranging from poisoning, gassing, neck-breaking, or anal or vaginal electrocution. Furthermore, in China, the world's leading fur exporter, fur-farm animals — including millions of cats and dogs — are commonly skinned alive, sometimes while they are still conscious.

When asked why it is not these images but that of a naked celebrity that PETA is using for its first campaign in Japan, PETA Asia Pacific Director Jason Baker asserted that this is not an "in your face" campaign that uses horrific images that will scare people away, but one that "people will remember longer than photos of animals being skinned alive."

Comparing this with street campaigns common in Europe, where gruesome images are displayed and chants of "Murderers" are bellowed at anyone wearing animal products, it seems that PETA's logic makes it a more approachable movement — especially in Japan, where conservative attitudes prevail. Fur fans here might simply ignore such gruesome images. Instead, both PETA and Sugimoto agree that they want this to be a "fun" campaign, where people become interested in the photos and then through their own volition find out more about the method in which fur is produced.

However, a potential problem is the way that this campaign will be served to the public via the Japanese media. PETA has previously staged a demonstration outside the Burberry store in Tokyo's Harajuku district, where PETA models stripped off to raise awareness of the antifur movement, but according to PETA volunteer Maho Cavalier, all the Japanese media did was "focus on the naked women." Sadly, after the shoot with Sugimoto, many of the journalists complained that they did not have enough time during the three-minute nude shoot to get what they needed, and they concentrated on asking staff how PETA had persuaded Sugimoto to bare all, not about the aims of PETA. The staff got more and more exasperated by the onslaught of questions from the assembled media pack, leaving some members feeling that yet again the media had missed the point.

Sugimoto herself says that from the start she'd expected the media to focus on her nudity, because she strongly feels "that the Japanese media can be very superficial."

However, she was not put off by this. "I want the media here to really understand my reasons for taking part," she says. "And no matter what, I want people to find out about and take interest in the campaign."

How the campaign works out remains to be seen, but PETA attracts big-name stars abroad, such as Pamela Anderson and Maggie Q — who, like Sugimoto, are genuine supporters of the cause. It's expected that the impact will be positive.

PETA campaigners hope that Sugimoto will influence other celebrities in Japan and, in turn, their legions of fans will begin to take on the message that the campaign is trying to promote. In a country where such concern about ethics is often surpassed by commercialism, the efforts of all involved are something worth applauding.

Visit www.petaasiapacific.com for more information. Aya Sugimoto dances at Tango Nostalgia Vol. 2, Nov. 21-24 at Shinagawa Prince Hotel, Tokyo; see www.office-aya.co.jp for details. Translation assistance by Suhyun Kang.

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