

Yuichi Hibi

Neco

[Michael Dawson Gallery](http://www.michaeldawsongallery.com)

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Yuichi Hibi, *Wish*, from the *Neco* series, 1992, silver gelatin, 11" x 14". Courtesy Michael Dawson Gallery.

"I like dogs more than cats . . . However, I've always taken more pictures of cats than dogs." Scrawled across the page in an erratic open hand with scratch-outs and ink blots, Yuichi Hibi's opening statement assessing his relationship with his subjects encapsulates both the ambiguity with which many viewers regard cats and the competition into which cats are involuntarily pushed with their canine compatriots. However, it is exclusively cats that inhabited Hibi's solo show.

The series, entitled *Neco*, is composed of grainy, high-contrast, black-and-white photographs of cats taken in New York and Japan. Hibi is known for his bleak, nighttime images of urban settings populated by often-solitary human inhabitants. In this series, his dark vision is further intensified by the vulnerability of the cats, who figure small against imposing architectural elements. Eyes spookily illuminated by Hibi's on-camera flash, the animals are trapped behind chain link fences, dwarfed by long alleys, and pinned against intimidating flights of stairs.

The artist clearly resists the formulaic vision of a cat living out its nine lives in pampered domestic comfort. The images, while formally rich, nonetheless foreground the obviously detrimental effects of the harsh urban environment. Hibi's coy written disavowal of affection for his feline subjects and reaffirmation of typical stereotypes concerning cats -- aloof, mysterious, self-contained -- contrast with his clear photographic empathy with the animals' perspective. Further, some of the titles Hibi uses -- *Hide and Seek*, *Found You* (referring to a "game" a group of three cats "plays") -- again invest the images with anthropomorphized content. Catapulting between genuine curiosity for the point of view of the cats and reliance on clichéd tropes, Hibi highlights our paradoxical treatment of domesticated animals. The tension generated by the contradictions in Hibi's photographs creates an intriguing space within which we can reconsider these subjects.

by Julia Schlosser