

# Looking for the Realness of Fiction

## An Interview with Masaya Chiba by Midori Matsui

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### I. Frontality, Paint Application, Simulacra—Entries into the Painting of Masaya Chiba

**Midori Matsui (MM):** Today we have a talk marking Masaya Chiba's first solo show in a year. The ultimate objective of this talk is to reveal the motivations behind Masaya's artistic practice. I look forward to hearing him speak freely about his ongoing commitment to painting at a time when the contemporary art world milieu does not seem very favorable to painting.

The itinerary for today's talk is as follows:

First, we will interpret the new works in this (2017) exhibition; second, we will consider the significance of the major technical changes that took place in the paintings shown in his 2016 gallery solo show; third, we will observe the representative themes and techniques adopted in his paintings between 2005 and 2014; and finally, we will assess the fruits of the cumulative technical and thematic changes to his work over the last ten years, discussing how such innovations led to new inventions in the present show.

Masaya Chiba has a very distinctive, immediately recognizable style. At the same time, since 2005, he has repeatedly modified his painting methods every two years or so. I hope that by tracing these subtle modifications to his techniques we will gain insight to his intentions, achievements, and prospects and plans for future creative endeavors.

Allow me to point out the three characteristics unique to Masaya Chiba's paintings. First, the positive use of frontal presentation. That is to say, the fundamental nature of painting—to be looked at from the front—is intentionally positioned as an important factor in the composition of his paintings. Second, Masaya's master skill in paint application, which allows him to easily control the flatness and three-dimensional illusion in order to communicate his unique and complex worldview.

The third characteristic of Masaya Chiba's paintings is the unique nature of his images and the worldview elicited from them. Masaya's paintings are accumulations of images of disparate things, including everyday products and scenes, printed materials such as postcard images and calendar photos, T-shirt designs, and sculptural objects created by the artist himself, causing the worlds of realistic representation and pure fiction to meet and change places in every corner of his paintings, thus creating a multi-layered artificial landscape. In addition, through the sensory intensity of their visual effects, his paintings allow the viewer to experience the interchange between the two-dimensional and three-dimensional illusions as a palpable experience.

The physical sense of reality experienced through Masaya's painting enables the viewer to perceive the painted fictional landscape as if they had encountered it themselves, or even receive it as a psychological landscape etched on the deep layers of their memory. One could tentatively call the construction of his images and composition of his paintings

the production of a lived fiction. In other words, Masaya Chiba's images are not explanations or representations of logical thought, but psychological images created by the combination of feelings emanating from the body's depth and intense sensory effects. Although they are fictive products, they can become part of the artist's and the viewer's life, constituting a vision of emotional reality.

I shall attempt to interpret the unique images created by the combination of feelings emerging from the body's depth and sensory effects occurring on the body's surface, by referring to the idea of "simulacra" as presented by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze in his book *The Logic of Sense*. Deleuze proposed a new interpretation of simulacra, which was defined in Platonic philosophy as a secondary and inferior order of being to the Idea, being a copy of reality rather than its model; his own definition, aided by the Epicurean school of philosophy, presented simulacra as a drive of "pure becoming," beyond the opposition between matter and concept. In the creative work of simulacra, physical effects like sounds, smells, tastes, and temperature, which are emanations from the body's depth, and visual elements such as forms and colors, which occur on the body's surface, combine and produce images that are independent of either category. Deleuze gives the name "simulacra" to this kind of image that emerges as a result of instantaneous communication between deep physical effects and surface visual elements. I think that Deleuze's definition of the image as pure "fiction/event" that exists as an independent entity, not as a copy, taking shape through the combination of feelings and physical effects, and existing beyond the distinction between the "imaginary" and the "real," helps us to understand the nature of the image in Masaya Chiba's paintings, and would like to explore this hypothesis through today's discussion.

Ultimately, I hope to prove that Masaya Chiba's painting strongly affirms the deeply "fictional" nature of painting, which is not just an illusion of reality, but a constructed object that has an independent, material presence, conveying to the viewer the processes by which physical effects combine with emotions to become a "sense" or synthetic perception of physical and inner reality.

## **II. The Emotional Space of Painting, Its Light and Distance—Changes in the 2017 Paintings (1)**

**MM:** As the first step towards this goal, I would like to discuss the changes in technique and imagery that have taken place in Masaya's most recent paintings. The paintings in this 2017 exhibition present, apart from the establishing of artistic autonomy within the pictorial frame, a strong experiential tendency that appeals powerfully to the viewer's senses, endowing them with extraordinary perceptions that take them beyond everyday routines.

Masaya's paintings have regularly created a unique fictional space in which disparate images combine to create the illusion of interchange between the two-dimensional and three-dimensional domains, or the "real" and fictive worlds, but the paintings since 2015 are more focused on giving viewers a sense of the physical intensity of individual things or phenomena, by painting two-dimensional objects even more flat and

“three-dimensional” objects even more thick and solid, so that individual things stand out as distinctive presences. He frequently enhances such estranging effects by appealing to light and distance, which directly affect the viewer’s senses. In short, in recent paintings, he seems to be heading toward the presentation of pure experience, rather than a fictive illusion.

For example, seen from a distance of approximately a meter, many paintings in this exhibition may appear to be intimate landscapes and still lifes, but to be accepted as “nice small paintings” they have too many eccentricities, including intense light, partial use of perspective, and plural viewpoints that create many centers. In fact, through such “eccentricities” his new paintings suggest that they are not easy paintings to interpret, but conceal the painter’s unique intent and methods of painting. When the viewer stands close to these paintings, individual painted objects distinctively stand out: those objects that are assigned a two-dimensional character—such as a piece of paper—are presented as flat, and those that are supposed to have “three-dimensional” thickness are given an illusion of material solidity. Drawings and printed images on stickers or postcards are painted with a thin (planar?) texture typical of fictive products.

Masaya, what are your reasons for making these choices? What were the intentions behind them? What are the goals of this exhibition?

**Masaya Chiba (MC):** First of all, the title of this exhibition is “What to Do With Memories.” When it comes to solo shows, it’s easy to fall into the mindset of “summoning up every last bit of energy to paint,” but ordinarily I look back on the past, ponder what my legacy might be if I were to die here and now, ask myself what my life has been all about. So I thought I’d take the plunge and place these questions at the center of the exhibition: developing, as the shape of the exhibition, the basic idea that, if certain elements make up something resembling the kind of flashbacks people have before they die, what are those elements? I suspect I opted for this composition for the show because I assumed that this is what having one’s life flash before one’s eyes would look like, and to some extent this was a universal thing, that is to say, others would understand; the message would get through.

In my view, reality is terribly saturated, I suppose you could say; a deluge of different elements, so when I do a large painting, this gives the work some kind of direction: I feel compelled to depict that deluge. Though in the end this means giving the painting direction in that flooded state.

On this occasion I thought that painting on small canvases might allow me to express a single idea more clearly, so decided to paint lots of small, fragmented pictures. I think small pictures have their own special charm; meaning that particularly in modern painting, and perhaps even in older painting, smallness appears to have its uses.

**MM:** That’s a pretty rare view in the world of contemporary painting after Abstract Expressionism. The American art critic Clement Greenberg wrote in his 1948 essay “The Crisis of Easel Picture” that although Cubism created a new species of avant-garde abstract painting, some European painters, such as Mondrian, even in the 1940s, were creating a “scene of forms,” still attached to the symbolic legacy of figurative painting to present a copy of reality. He argued that while easel painting’s traditional function was to create, within a “cavity” on the wall on which it is hung, an illusion of forms, light, and space,

since Cubism, or even before—since Manet, Monet, and Pissarro—the radical trend of modern painting was toward the flattening of the pictorial space by decentering its viewpoint and covering it with identical, or similar, elements. And most recently and prominently, that in the painting of Jackson Pollock, minimal patterns are repeated from one edge of the canvas to the other, constituting an “all-over” composition, demonstrating that the painting had its own self-generative rule. Pollock’s large-scale painting also gave the viewer the visual experience of a glittering net emanating from the decentering movement of atomized fragments, creating a painting that cannot be united by a single viewpoint, but possesses a new kind of reality suited to a new age.

In short, Modernist painting after the Second World War abandoned small canvases whose pictorial space was united by a single viewpoint, for the enormous canvas that contains the human body, in order to release the generative force of painting, thus attaining a truly “contemporary” character. On the other hand, your present return to small paintings, in the 21st century, feels refreshing. Is that because you feel you are standing at another crossroad of painterly invention?

**MC:** It struck me while watching a 3D movie: though it jumps out at you, the end result is to make the frame of the film much stronger, and I find I can no longer concentrate on the film at all. A flat picture plane actually makes me feel more like I’m inside that world. This being the case, if you have to go to all the trouble of adding the device of virtual reality, allowing people to look over everything, and that becomes the mainstream, with film and video rapidly going in that direction, I think paintings are better off smaller.

I believe the temporal quality possessed by paintings goes beyond 3D. I imagine I see it that way because in the space of a painting, time can flow slowly, you may be able to continue associating with it; it has more dimensions. So I feel that being conscious of such things as I paint, allows me to produce something more useful.

**MM:** Do you mean that painting’s limits, that is, its two-dimensional character and the pictorial space confined in the frame, create opportunities for the viewer to attain more intense perceptions and imaginative thinking?

**MC:** The thing is, the time not spent standing in front of the painting can also be really fruitful, wouldn’t you agree? There are some unique experiences to be had: for example, you might wonder when you saw a particular painting and go back to the museum ten years later and happen to find the painting there, or unexpectedly come across it at some group or other show. In the way that one can go, “Ooh, I know that picture way over there,” paintings encompass many different things, and also have the potential to intentionally transcend the likes of distance and dimension.

**MM:** I agree. Your comments suggest that what establishes the meaning of painting is the combination of painting itself and the imagination and emotions of the viewer provoked by it, in short, its effects. This sort of thinking points to an opposite direction from Minimalism, which tried to rid artwork of any sort of metaphor or allegory.

The paintings in this 2017 exhibition at ShugoArts have certain shared characteristics. First, many of them contain images of light boxes, although it’s quite ambiguous whether they are light boxes, or box-like objects, such as a glass case or mirror,

intensely lit.

The second characteristic is the frequent use of local perspective. You can see it clearly as you move closer to the canvas. In one painting, the “three-dimensional” objects are painted with plastic materiality, printed or drawn images on the piece of paper are painted flatly, and doodles are painted casually, as anonymous scribbles. These details are barely contained in the composition of the painting, yet they are spotlighted, standing out as distinctive entities.

The third characteristic is the important role played by language or letters.

And the fourth is the texture or application of paint different from the signature Chiba style. It’s neither thick nor thin, but moist and luminant. There is widespread consensus about a style unique to Masaya Chiba’s painting—the signature “Chiba style,” so to speak. Its colors would regularly be more grayish, and the application of paint more flat and dry. In your recent paintings, paint is applied with a moister texture. Why did you decide to make this change?

**MC:** I divide dark and light canvases in my mind. I prefer lighter scenes; brighter canvases seem purer to me. A brighter, lighter picture plane also suits the way I move my hands, but when bright, glowing parts are central you have to tone things down overall, so from a technical point of view, you must add a certain amount of oil to retain that dark canvas, dark color. So that moist feel also has a technical impact. But I suppose when you look at this sort of disparity amid darkness, when it is dark, your eye has to become active, doesn’t it?

**MM:** Yes, that’s true.

**MC:** Part of me wanted to try that.

**MM:** I see. The light directs the viewers’ attention. There are many paintings here that give the actual impression of “being lit” or having light emanating from them. Why is light so important to you now?

**MC:** I was thinking of the likes of Rothko and Josef Albers when I placed the lightbox here. In certain color-fields too Albers, and especially Rothko, becomes an abstraction containing something that while not a detailed narrative, is in a way Romantic.

**MM:** Yes, Rothko is a perfect example.

**MC:** And I believe there are Rothko-like things in the everyday.

**MM:** That’s wonderful.

**MC:** You think so?

**MM:** Yes. The color-fields in Abstract Expressionism were not just color areas, but the expansion of color creating a space in front of which viewers could stand and meditate. Although Abstract Expressionist painters were opposed to the artistic styles of historical

Romanticism, their spirit was Romantic. In 1948, Barnett Newman, in his essay "The Sublime is Now," declared that rather than adhering to conventional forms of beauty or their memories, painters can make their painting a means to release the sublime element hidden in human senses and feelings. Rothko thought of light and color as elements that awaken people spiritually. In his 1947-48 essay "The Romantics Were Prompted," Rothko asserted that painters can encounter the transcendental by detaching themselves from the false sense of security provided by society, and that his own paintings were expressions of the drama of such a quest, his shapes its performers. To Rothko, a painter's ideas are simply "the doorway" to the miraculous; the painting "a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need." Both Newman and Rothko thought of their painting as an expression of their spirit aspiring to transcend the limits of personal intent, as well as a vehicle to activate the viewers' mind toward the transcendental goal.

In your painting entitled *Painting of the Family Story* (fig. 1), you have the contrast of an apparently familiar, domestic atmosphere created by the writing introducing a family episode and dolls, and the intense light from the lightbox creating an eerie atmosphere. Why are you applying the expression "the Roman(tic)" to a painting that presents a familiar world and its transformation?

**MC:** Somehow we tend to refer to that kind of light as Rothko-style squares, but I actually think those square color fields are all around us in everyday life, and I think taking them and diverting them using the methods and techniques of figurative painting is the way to start.

And when it comes to the lightbox in *Painting of the Family Story*, the space itself is a bright white, and what distinguishes it surely is the presence of this kind of light, and the whole of the gallery space looking like a lightbox. The base also glows. I also wondered if I could work that kind of thing properly into the interior of the painted space. If one thus refers to the space as a lightbox, perhaps the whole thing could then be called a lightbox, as in, I had the idea that maybe the whole of this world could be called a lightbox.

**MM:** So, the paintings with lightbox images represent the blending of the main theme and technique of this exhibition. The light emanating from the lightbox unites the painting's inner space with that of the viewers, through its sensory effects and symbolic connotations. The other important feature of this exhibition is the kind of painting that tries, in more literal ways, to transfer to viewers the physical condition of the action or the scene depicted in the painting. Representative of the latter category are *End of the Primitive Era* (fig. 2) and...

**MC:** *Yatsuzaki Halo?* (fig. 3)

**MM:** Yes. These paintings and *Medusa Whispering*, "WASURETE" (fig. 4) fall into the second group. In *End of the Primitive Era*, an arrow is flying toward its target, the dab of paint smeared on the tip of the arrow suggesting the picture depicts the workings of a painting machine that automatically creates painted traces as the arrow carrying paint hits the target. The distance travelled by the arrow is literally depicted by the length of the rectangular canvas, urging the viewer to physically experience the speed and distance of

the flying arrow.

*Yatsuzaki Halo* shows a situation in which deadly rays are emitted from an object shaped like a ring of light, shattering any object hit by the light. The work consists of two canvases, but it also looks as though one canvas is bent in the middle. The painting is placed on the corner, bent at a right angle and connecting the two walls like a hinge, one half showing the killing rings of light, and the other half shattered objects. The painting thus shows the viewer an extraordinary event in which the hitting of objects by the light distorts the “milieu” of the space, transforming the constitutions of the objects, in a manner reminiscent of a picture-story show, by presenting the scenes “before” and “after” the event. The painting here deviates from the 19th-century sense of Realism, or verisimilitude, making instead gestures that physically reenact an actual event.

In *Medusa Whispering*, “WASURETE” Japanese characters for *wasurete* (forget me) are painted as if issuing from the Greek monster’s mouth. What was your intention in making these paintings?

**MC:** The message “Forget me” is a dynamic one, don’t you think? I’m not really sure myself what I intended there; I think I was wondering about that energy.

**MM:** The characters appearing repeatedly in different sizes indicate the voice uttering the word and its fading echoes with the passage of time. The diminishing size of the characters indicates the dissipation of the voice, embodying the distance between listener and sound. It’s as though you replaced the auditory experience of hearing the voice and its fading echoes with a visual process. It also reminds me of the process of animation production, in which an action is shown through a sequence of animation cels. It’s humorous in presentation, while at the same time being a physical re-enacting of an experience.

These three paintings are not attempting to represent something to the viewers, but urging them to realize the sense of some experience. What do you think?

**MC:** Often when I paint a picture, I start by thinking about the kind of place it is going to be displayed. So I always have this desire to leave the physical experience of the work as feeling.

For instance, in the exhibition space for this show, works are only displayed on the left-hand wall, with nothing on the right. I conceived this with the idea that if the right-hand side was completely bare, the physical sensation component would be transmitted more effectively.

**MM:** Are you saying that setting paintings on both walls of the gallery makes the viewer’s attention dissipate?

**MC:** Well there is that, and I also thought if there were pictures sort of slapped down solely on the left, it would give the exhibition an unbalanced feel. Which in turn would give viewers a bit of a shock I guess. Plus I think you need plenty of time looking at white walls.

**MM:** These three paintings all concern the relationship between distance and time, and

the transformation of things through time. Because of that, the empty white wall enhances the effects of time and distance, to make the world of the paintings perfect.

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fig. 1) *Painting of the Family Story*, 2017  
oil on canvas, 61×73cm

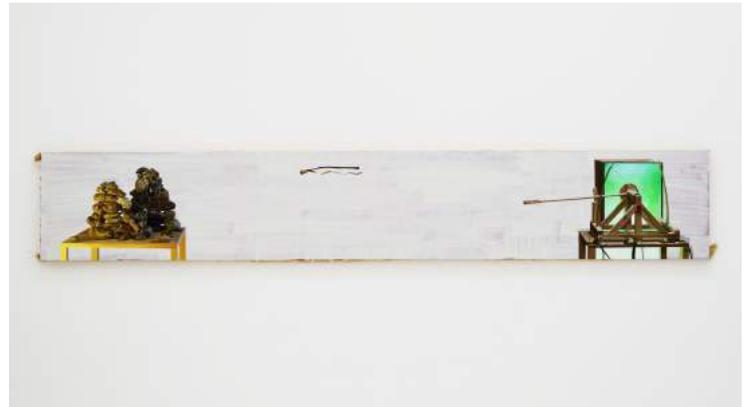


fig. 2) *End of the Primitive Era*, 2017, oil on canvas, 47.5×290cm



Fig. 3) *Yatsuzaki Halo*, 2017, oil on canvas  
Left: 22.1×29.2cm Right: 22.1×33.4cm



fig. 4) *Medusa Whispering, "WASURETE,"* 2017  
oil on canvas, 30.3×30.2cm

### III. The Affective Space of Painting That Connects Here (Now) and There (Then)—Changes in the 2017 Paintings (2)

**MM:** Could I ask you to talk about *Man Drinking Oolong Tea*? (fig. 5) When I first looked at this painting, I was rather perplexed, finding the composition combining landscape and objects so different from your previous works.

**MC:** Very different indeed, yes. Up to now I've tended to treat landscapes half like electronic or photographic imagery, but in this picture I get the feeling you can walk right into the world at the back; that is, the theme is one of the sense of being able to go from here to there, and from there to here as well, so the handling of landscape, space and so on is totally different.

In reality, there would be more telephone poles, power lines and so on. That's a risk whenever you try to depict a landscape, the world, isn't it? But in this picture, I could go on forever, the task could take decades, who knows. Although I gave up at just the right point, I think.

**MM:** In your previous paintings, the actual landscape is integrated into the entire vision of the painting, which is a fictive landscape consisting of imaginary and "real" elements. But in this painting, the "realistic space" is painted with a kind of perspective and distance that mimics the actual sense of looking at the landscape. Isn't it a "copy" or a verisimilitude of nature, as in 19th-century Realist painting, which Modernist painting rejected? If you think the reclaiming of realism is important now in the 21st century, that must have some significance.

**MC:** I think so, yes. Which is why I tried taking an ordinary scene, one you really might see every day when you stepped out the door in a residential neighborhood like this, rendering it in fine detail.

**MM:** This painting does still have a certain strangeness or eccentricity to it, though. In spite of the title *Man Drinking Oolong Tea*, it doesn't ostensibly show the "man." That seems pretty important. Perhaps the "man" is intended to be in the position of the viewer; the viewer is the "he." I have identified frontality as one of the main characteristics of your painting methods. In this painting, too, the painted world is seen from the viewpoint of a person who is not painted in the picture. So, when a viewer stands in front of the painting, the viewer feels as though he or she



fig. 5) *Man Drinking Oolong Tea*, 2017  
oil on canvas, 65.2×53.7cm

is the origin of the vision of the world. The experience itself seems close to the experience prompted by traditional perspective: giving the viewer the experience of an illusory space whose “logical unity” is pure fiction. But in this painting, there is little sense of fabrication or convention; rather, there is even somewhat too-straight, too-unfiltered empathy with the phenomenological world. Can you explain why “oolong tea” is important here?

**MC:** Flavor. I wanted the viewer to be reminded of the taste of oolong tea, I suppose. Hopefully the painting does that. When I envisage someone looking at this painting, seeing it was called “Man Drinking Oolong Tea” with a small figure drinking oolong tea right at the back of the picture, and an image just of oolong tea, and the person looking then picking up a cup and gulping some oolong tea, I can taste oolong tea.

**MM:** In this painting, the surface of the oolong tea is glistening, just like the object that the painted camera tries to capture is. The light connects the distant and nearby objects. In a similar way, through the memory of the taste of oolong tea, evoked by the color of its painted image, the inner experience contained by this painting is united with the memory of the viewer outside. In a sense, the inside and outside of the painting, individual and other, past and present are connected through the image of oolong tea—is this the effect you wanted to create with this picture?

**MC:** Yes. Key there too was assigning that role not to the oolong tea in a plastic bottle familiar from shops or advertising, but oolong tea as a clear, brown liquid in a cup.

**MM:** Let’s look at the images of the paintings from your solo show at ShugoArts in 2016. In this exhibition we see the first appearance of the characteristics presented in the current show, with a clear authorial intention. Here is the painting entitled *Pork Park #2* (fig. 6). This painting seems to have a similar method to *Man Drinking Oolong Tea*.

**MC:** Really?

**MM:** Perhaps it’s a relative difference, as this painting still contains remnants of the signature Chiba style, but there are signs of subtle changes. I feel that with this painting, as well as with the show in 2016, you took a step toward a painting horizon different from the familiar. What do you think?

**MC:** If I may go into some depth here, with this exhibition, when attempting to show things in the paintings, when I assumed there were limits also to what one might call the rules in painting, I think I made the paintings assuming these limits existed. So when it came to what to arrange there and what kind of thing to say, I think these were the outcome—in terms of the technical side, that is—of thinking that there

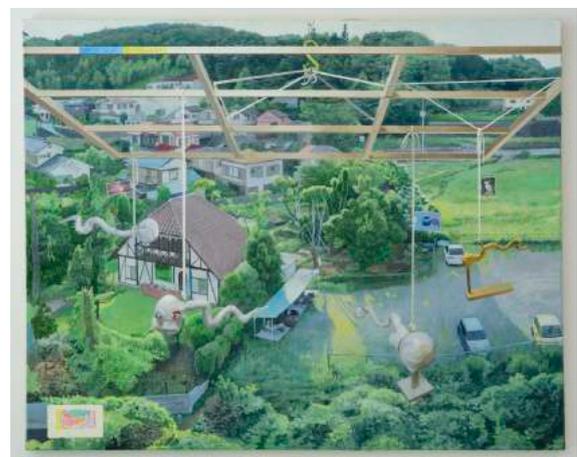


fig. 6) *Pork Park #2*, 2016, oil on canvas, 130×162cm

is some upper limit if you like, an end to the variations, in short, a limit to “how to put it together.”

Thus if I made the positioning—this being a series of five pictures altogether—like that, I thought I could show this fatefulness of a sort, an inability to leave, a space with that kind of restriction.

**MM:** Is it important for you to be “unable to leave” the painted world?

**MC:** Yes.

**MM:** And you tried to depict such a space?

**MC:** Yes. Meaning I referenced the actual technique of the Golden Ratio.

**MM:** In this five-painting series, entitled *Pork Park*, the individual paintings have some significant stylistic differences. For example, while *Pork Park #1* (fig. 7) emphasizes unity of the pictorial plane by drawing curvy lines across it, over various objects, *Pork Park #2* presents its background and foreground as two completely different domains—the former dominated by a perspective, the latter having individual objects stand out as discrete entities. Connecting the painted space with that of the viewer, however, the painting also retains some gestures of meta-fiction, including an image painted in the corner of the picture plane that resembles the artist seals found on Nihonga. In short, there are two opposite vectors in this painting: one being an aspiration to imitate a real space and the other a desire to engage in a meta-fictional play, pulling the viewer in different directions. Does this sort of contradiction reflect the playing with the “limits” of painting you’ve talked about?

**MC:** Those limits of painting are merely what I set myself. Plus in this series, the idea was to tie in a kind of fatalism to tell the story. Among the five pictures, the structural contradictions you mention are particularly obvious in this one. It’s just that in this picture, I find that interesting. I suppose you could call that playing.



fig. 7) *Pork Park #1*, 2016, oil on canvas, 130×162cm

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#### IV. Disjunctive Space Learned From Animation—Changes in the 2017 Paintings (3)

**MM:** I feel that the painting entitled *Let’s have an adventure #3* (2016) (fig. 8) integrates and advances the experiments carried out in the paintings of the 2016 show. In this

painting, the texture and dimension of every image are minutely differentiated.

Although its effects are considerably understated in the slides, when we stand close to it the actual painting provides us a real adventure of visual experience. In this painting what is supposed to be “flat” is presented with flatness; what is supposed to be “three-dimensional” is endowed with material roundness, and what is supposed to be a “drawing” is executed with a light, casual touch. The drawing is not your own, but an imitation of someone else’s. The differences in texture, flatness, roundness and other characteristics of the individual objects are painted distinctively, with great care and skill. This precision even makes the immediate impression of the entire painting a little diffused. In its pictorial field, the perspective is applied in several different places, so that there are multiple centers, which makes the viewer’s vision unfocused, even dissipated. But standing close to the painted surface, the viewer realizes how every image stands out, feels that every different part of this picture has its unique presence, and every image becomes the center of a singular perceptual experience. The viewer feels invited by the artist to “enter this world of multiple visual experiences, and have a visual adventure.”

I find it wonderful. But at the same time, I felt that you were taking an unusual approach. Contemporary painting since Modernism usually emphasizes the autonomy of painting—the sense of organic totality found at the first glance at a painting is so important. But here you are adopting an unusual way of making the viewer’s participation the completion of the painting’s visual, or even physical, totality. What do you think?

**MC:** This picture feels like parts and parts only. It quotes lots of adventure comic-type text, like from manga and the lyrics of Bob Dylan. On my mind when assembling this canvas were visuals akin to that jolt you get when you open a manga comic like *Jump*. The visuals for the manga *ONE PIECE* are particularly close to this I think. The perspective in this painting is also odd, and there are these doors all over the canvas with lots of tags like hints or notes attached. Thomas Pynchon’s novel *Mason & Dixon* also felt like this: endless annotations inserted, so the story never progressed. Here you have a similar sensation to reading that.

**MM:** Being drowned in details?

**MC:** That’s right. I devised it to fit that notion. I also had the idea of doing something like the visuals you find in a newspaper.

**MM:** In that sense this painting is subtly responsive to the viewer. Unless the viewer stands close to the painting and really focuses on its details and appreciates their effects, its total significance as a painting could be overlooked. You



fig. 8) *Let's have an adventure #3*, 2017, oil on canvas, 181.8×259cm

established the unique quality of this painting by taking the risk of diffusing its vision.

**MC:** That dark maze-like picture from earlier (*Pork Park #4*) (fig. 9) has a slightly more holistic look.

**MM:** Yes, I agree. *Let's have an adventure #3* is a painting that pushed your experiment in creating multiple visual experiences very far. Other works, despite their deliberately confusing devices, still communicate the autonomy of a painted space, which is a fiction. This picture gives an impression of chaos, as it obscures any sense of center and makes individual parts cry out for attention. But such care and concentration is given to each detail that the viewer understands that the artist is attempting to create an unconventional type of artificiality in a visual field, by inducing the viewer's action or attention. As you previously pointed out, this painting has many entries to its inner space, inviting the viewer to enter by any favorite point to experience its fictive space to the full.



fig. 9) *Pork Park #4*, 2016, oil on canvas, 130×162cm

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## V. Paintings That Retrieve the Stolen Landscape—From *Peaceful Village* to *Mitsukyo*

**MM:** Could you please talk about the painting series *Peaceful Village*?

**MC:** I'm getting a little tired of this parade of my own paintings; it makes me feel like I'm painting them all over again (laughs).

**MM:** Sorry about that. But one of the purposes of today's talk is to hear your candid thoughts on the transformations in your painting styles and methods since 2016. And for that purpose, a survey of your former painting styles is important, in order to observe how the unique features that define what we understand as the signature Chiba style of painting have developed.

This work, entitled *Peaceful Village* (2006) (fig. 10), may be considered one of the paintings that led to your recognition as a powerful contemporary painter. In the foreground are painted pieces of sculpture



fig. 10) *Peaceful Village*, 2006, oil on canvas, 126.5×188.2cm

placed on a table, while the background shows a forest-like landscape. The two parts seem to belong to completely different worlds, but are nevertheless united. Surreal seems too easy a word to explain the strange appearance of this painting, which has a milieu of ruins, or an entrance to an exotic lost culture. The gray and cool pastel color tones, flat (planar and matte) paint application, and combination of landscape and artificial or fictional objects, as featured in this painting, seem to define what we understand as the signature Chiba style.

One of the features I like best in this painting is the depiction of a black cloth spread over a table, pulling together the painting's total impression with the strong assertion of its dominating color. On the cloth are painted trees, which look similar to the trees in the background. While the "trees" are shown as either printed or dyed patterns, they are painted much more vividly than the "real" landscape. There is a reversal in the sense of "reality" between the "natural" and "artificial" categories, rendering a vision of the world in which such a reversal easily takes place. This sort of ambiguity is very alluring. Why did you decide to paint like this?

**MC:** I don't think it was as clear as it is now, and also, I suspect I was painting very intuitively. I made a trip to Vietnam when I was about twenty, and there was a place there like a desert, similar I suppose to the Tottori Sand Dunes, an incredible piece of scenery. It struck me as resembling a calendar: I had the sensation of a real landscape like that already having been stolen. My first thought was that I wanted to access that place, to retrieve it; my desire was to restore what had been stolen.

**MM:** When you look at an actual landscape and feel it to be "stolen," because you are familiar with the view from a calendar, is that because what you saw first was not the real landscape but its copy?

**MC:** I'm pretty sure it is, yes.

**MM:** Almost everyone living in today's world experiences to a greater or lesser extent the loss of reality through the proliferation of copies, but the acuteness with which you feel the loss as a concrete experience may be a reflection of the fact that you grew up in the world after the 1980s.

**MC:** I have this idea, a fear if you like, that electronic imagery steals images from things like that, and can't help feeling that in today's world, forces like this are on the move everywhere.

**MM:** The phenomenon you describe is precisely the condition of a globalized world infiltrated with representations that the French critic Guy Debord explained with the word "spectacle" in the 1960s, and which the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard rephrased as "simulacra" in the 1980s. These terms refer to the world (age) in which artificially constructed images replace actual things, so that it becomes more and more difficult for everyone to sense the real.

**MC:** When I was nineteen, my mother received some money from her employer to

take a holiday, a kind of reward for long service. I was in between high school and university at the time, so the two of us went to the Louvre in France. There I saw hordes of people crowded around the *Mona Lisa*, all taking photos, the flashes going off all day.

Unlike all the other paintings, the *Mona Lisa* was in a glass case, and on seeing it, I got quite a shock. If having people endlessly congregating from around the world to take pictures of the *Mona Lisa* meant the spirit of the *Mona Lisa*, its tiny little spirit, would be stolen, then theoretically, the *Mona Lisa* would have been emptied out a long time ago. Yet that *Mona Lisa* in the glass case felt to me almost as if this very emptying had been envisaged, as if the painting had been created as a device allowing the continual theft of its soul by visitors, which was strangely creepy. This is why, I suspect now for me, if I am going to do a painting, I feel I ought to know the structure before I start.

**MM:** That is to say, you try not to create empty images.

The next painting is titled *Study for Village* (2008) (fig. 11). It is painted using a similar method to *Peaceful Village*, but has a much more placid look, perhaps because of the contrast between white and gray tones. What did you feel painting this picture? Why did you continue to use the word “village” for the title?

**MC:** If you view the landscape not as something like your own room, but a sort of community more or less within reach, then you end up with the image of a “village.” A place not entirely separate from others, on which a handful of people can interpose. I suppose the image of a “village” would be a place where up to 100 or so people can live together.

**MM:** Yes, but the background landscape looks sublime, having an austerity that defies an easy access.

**MC:** I envisaged a structure that felt like following this way, only to find yourself going that way.

**MM:** When I looked at this painting, I thought of the poems by the Metaphysical Poets: the school of English poets such as John Donne and Andrew Marvel who were active in the 17th century. Their poems contained the special poetic metaphor called “conceit” that connected far-fetched images with sudden and eccentric leaps of rhetoric. For example, an intimate conversation between lovers in their bedroom is abruptly invaded by the image of the ocean and ships sailing on it, as well as the roundness of the earth traveled by the ships and the two legs of a compass that part and meet again as it finishes drawing a circle, presented as a metaphor for the lovers who part and reunite. This painting has the similar impact of a sudden eruption of a larger world into a closed, intimate space.

**MC:** Kafka wrote a short story “Before



fig. 11) *Study for Village*, 2008, oil on canvas, 130.3×162cm

the Law” plus essays and journals, all of which I like, but among his words therein are the lines “You do not need to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. [...] The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked, it has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet.” Which struck me as very true; perhaps nature is something we don’t need to purposely go outdoors to observe. That quote from Kafka underpins this painting to a large extent, perhaps with a “Metaphysical” link.

**MM:** The nickname “Metaphysical Poets” was given to these poets in order to make fun of their rhetorical flare and deviant logic. But in fact, their poems might have had a “metaphysical” dimension. With their bold splitting of logic and its forceful unification, they tried to show that the physical and the metaphysical, the material and the spiritual were not separate but the one and same nature. It’s like Kafka’s novels, where absurd situations invaded the everyday world as if this were normal.

This painting, *Mitsukyo*, was painted in 2008 (fig. 12); although only two years after *Peaceful Village*, the painting’s outlook seems rather different. *Mitsukyo* can be seen as the pinnacle of your earlier paintings, including in its tactile presentation that gives a physical impression of sculptures standing in an actual space. What do you think?

**MC:** *Mitsukyo* was also the title of the exhibition, and being my first solo exhibition, there was a powerful sense of wanting, to some degree, to make a statement: this is how I handle what I paint. That is, I wanted to show “what had been painted” as objects. In my keenness to stress that paintings are objects, coated in paint and pigment, made into something only found there, I experimented with making a pedestal as well. That pedestal also has color, right? And it’s a little like earth.

**MM:** Smears of paint are on the pedestal.

**MC:** That’s actually dirt from in front of my house. I thinned it down with *nikawa* glue; used materials like that, made the pedestal look like a gravestone.

**MM:** Yes, the image looks like a stone monument for a famous deceased person or a number of dead.

**MC:** That was the image I had in mind.

**MM:** What really amused me about this painting is that its title, *Mitsukyo*, is taken from the name of a station on the Sotetsu Line, a private railway running in the western suburbs of Kanagawa Prefecture. The painting depicts two



fig. 12) *Mitsukyo*, 2008, oil on canvas, wood, 259×330×70cm

sculpted figures on a stone pedestal, carrying a garland. The mysterious scene presents as the drama's stage and inspiration what is actually a banal suburban part of Yokohama. Your choice of an obscure town to describe this magical kingdom demonstrates a bold sense of humor. Moreover, the commonplace suburban town of Mitsukyo is depicted as a jungle, just as the lush trees painted in the background are also exaggerated versions of the trees in your neighborhood. It's so funny. Against this fake "jungle" not-so-large sculpted figures made by you stand solemnly in the ruins, as if bearing witness to a vanished civilization.

**MC:** Mitsukyo really is a desolate place, a cultural desert, and my experience of it was one of chilling violence and lots of terrible things happening. This was compounded by the horror of a friend committing suicide while I was there. Yet I grew up in a dead-end suburban neighborhood like that, and could relate to it as part of my own identity. I still do. That's how I feel about the place mood-wise, hence the painting's grayish look.

**MM:** I do not sense the "curse of banality" in this painting but rather a philosophical atmosphere reminiscent of Romantic ruins, conjuring up a scene in which the survivors of a lost civilization are conversing with each other in the interlude before the dawn of a new civilization. The sculpted figures are infused with the sense of vitality.

**MC:** That kind of hope might be the whole meaning of doing something amid the banal, in a gray space. The paintings of sky toward the back of the exhibition space (*Sky Painting with Reliefs*) (fig. 13) only show sky, but I actually looked at the sky to paint them, to capture that sky. I took the canvas outside, gazed up at the sky, and painted the sky as if it were a still life. Two paintings, one each for evening and night.

**MM:** That's interesting. *Mitsukyo* is a highly artificial piece, in a positive sense. It transforms a banal suburb into a landscape resembling a Romantic ruin, creating a poetic milieu by making artistic objects naturally blend into a transformed landscape. In the exhibition, you installed such fictive paintings with others that were more direct depictions of nature. That choice indicated the double aspects, or two different directions of your painting.

**MC:** I suppose you're right.



fig. 13) *Sky painting with Reliefs*, 2008  
oil on canvas, 157×137cm, 164.5×134.5cm (a set of 2)

## VI. Numerous Devices—Painterly Experiments from 2011 to 2015

**MM:** The year 2011 saw you tackle many different painting techniques. About this time, your style fluctuates between two extremes. The first is the one that uses plaster heads you created, where in order to intensify the material impression of a mass, you adopted an extremely thick application of paint. This group is represented by such paintings as *Crying Face* #12 (fig. 14) and *Lucky Hat* #7 (fig. 15). The other group emphasizes the fictive character of painting by depicting intimate spaces layered with numerous objects—sculpted figures, everyday products, printed images—which suggest a constant communication and inversion between the private room and the worlds outside it. In order to emphasize the fictive, almost map-like nature of the painting, paint is applied extremely flatly and evenly, and the color tones limited to the gray scale. Paintings such as *Snakey* (fig. 16) and *Fairy* #2 (fig. 17) fall into this category. In the latter group, printed images function as windows, suggesting that there are worlds outside the pictorial space. These two styles represent your paintings in 2011. What sort of search or struggle urged you to paint in two completely different manners, within the same year?

**MC:** I suppose I was exploring things; this was about the second time I'd put gray at the back, and I wanted to see if the picture would still come together without a background. Why, I've no idea. I guess I was tired of doing backgrounds. Perhaps I thought I had to let go of that sensation of the artist entranced by the act of passionately slapping pigment on when applying paint thickly.

**MM:** The 2012 painting titled *Turtle's Life* #2 *be valiant and strong as lion* (fig. 18) shows that you eventually chose the aloof fictitious style with flat application of paint, which suggests the multilayered character of a living space by accumulating disparate objects.



fig. 14) *Crying Face* #12, 2011  
oil on canvas, 54×50cm



fig. 15) *Lucky Hat* #7, 2011  
oil on canvas, wood, 145.5×140.5cm  
(canvas: 145.5×106cm)

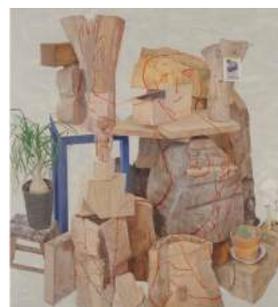


fig. 17) *Fairy* #2, 2011  
oil on canvas, 150×135cm



fig. 16) *Snakey*, 2011, oil on canvas, 175×240cm

**MC:** Indeed. *Turtle's Life #2* was painted on the premise of making a picture of showing photos and video to my pet turtle. The idea was to forcibly show these things to the turtle, pressing human ideas on another living thing in a violent way, in a sense, playing with the turtle's life by setting up all these different scenarios. It worked I suppose in a similar fashion to that scene in *A Clockwork Orange*, where the guy is shown films with his eyes forcibly propped open, and I made it so the turtle's gaze and the gaze of the photo we are looking at intersect, as if we are watching that scene.

**MM:** It certainly feels like the turtle is looking at the image of a lion. At the same time, the sculpted figure here seems to be confronting the viewer. There is a suggestion of a crossing of perspectives, which leads to the presentation in your recent paintings.

**MC:** There is a mirror right in the middle there, with the words "You are not a lion" written on the reflected image of the figure, and that is directed at the viewer.

**MM:** You are making metafictional gestures, that is, nudging the viewer in many different ways. Just when they are about to be absorbed in the fictive world of your painting, some feature in the painting always cautions them, as if to say, "Wait a minute, this is fiction!"

**MC:** That's right.

**MM:** In *Turtle's Life #2*, the indoor space is depicted as having multiple layers or skins; within the artist's room, there is a turtle's room with a transparent roof. At the same time, the external space is always indicated through the interplay between images existing in different media. For example, the image of a lion is repeatedly shown on the T-shirt, and in paintings.

**MC:** There are actually more lions: the sticker on the potted plant at bottom left is a New Japan Pro-Wrestling sticker, which also features a lion.

**MM:** When you look at this painting, you realize how the details resonate with each other, giving the impression that the room's space is expanding inward. That effect suggests the transcendent character of fiction, demonstrating that the meaning of a painting is not limited to its literal level, but always contains the viewer's responses. In other words, if the uniqueness of painting resides in its fictional ability to make an autonomous space emerge within a picture frame, with the help of metafictional clues, the painter allows viewers to transcend the physical limits of a



fig. 18) *Turtle's Life #2 be valiant and strong as lion*  
2012, oil on canvas, 175×135cm

painting—its flatness or verisimilitude—by making them conscious of the painter’s devices, urging them to give free rein to their imaginations, and knowing that this experience of going beyond the painting through the painting is a completely unique experience of their own. That must be the effect of the message “You Are Not a Lion,” as you pointed out earlier.

This painting also has a very specific use of light.

**MC:** Yes, the plastic greenhouse is reflecting light. There was quite a trick to this. And for the beige space in the background, I aimed for a sort of gold screen effect. Even though like that gold space, it’s not anywhere in particular. Transparent things are hard to paint, because they have to be see-through. That was tough.

**MM:** Since this painting, you have endeavored to develop various styles incorporating changes subtle and drastic. The variety of styles presented by such paintings as *A Sporty Planet* (2012) (fig. 19) and *Powerful Young Boy at 2013* (2013) (fig. 20) embodies your versatility and strong determination not to fall into self-repetition.

**MC:** It feels like I was experimenting. Or rather, what I guess you might call experimenting: the sensation of undertaking an experiment as I completed each individual painting. *A Sporty Planet* was produced as a flier for a performance at blanClass. I was curious to see what a painting serving as a piece of graphic design would look like, while wondering what I was doing trying to attract people with this, even though it was a painting. I was trying to enjoy, as it were, bringing someone all brains and no action to the street and making them fight an aikido expert there, and taking a painting to that fight, well, practice doing so anyway.



fig. 19) *A Sporty Planet*, 2012  
oil on canvas, 180×240cm

**MM:** The frequent use of text is a new device?

**MC:** Yes, it is.

**MM:** As exemplified by *Painting of a Human Body* (2014) (fig. 21), your paintings rarely show the whole of the human body; in one case, body parts are painted, but the head is hidden; in another case, in spite of the accumulation of objects that belong to and suggest body parts, such as headphones, sunglasses, gloves, there is no physical body. Why is this?

**MC:** Good question. I’m not really sure, to be honest. Like I mentioned earlier, the psychologist



fig. 20) *Powerful Young Boy at 2013*, 2013  
oil on canvas, 274×225cm

Hisao Nakai wrote a book in which he talks about “Yasunaga’s Phantom-Space Theory.” I found this really fascinating. It describes something called vehicle width theory, in which when you ride on the right-hand side of a vehicle and make a left turn, the position of the left side mirror is felt as a clear physical sensation as if it was your own hand. I suppose it is that feeling of your body extending quite naturally. Like touching something in virtual reality and really feeling the sensation of contact. That vehicle width space is known as “phantom space,” and apparently there are medical treatments performed that access that space. I cannot genuinely make use of that theory, but I think it’s where the appearance of hands and other body parts in my paintings comes from. That way of projecting, you could say. If I had to explain it, I suppose that’s what it means.



fig. 21) *Painting of a Human Body*, 2014  
oil on canvas, 80.2×100.2cm

**MM:** Perhaps the human body is not as integrated as we think; only with specific perceptions do we comprehend the singularity of our individual body.

The next painting is titled *Peaceful Village* (2015) (fig. 22), repeating the title of the painting in 2008.

**MC:** With the “Peaceful Village” series, I decided from the start that I would do a series, starting with the first of the images back there, and continuing with a fixed-point observation format. Here I am really painting something that increases the more I make. If I look at that structure from a moment ago with all the annotations, really look at my past works and compare them, I wouldn’t know which annotation applied to what: they’d apply to everything.

**MM:** Is it like a map of your painted world?

**MC:** Yes. So I started out intending to keep doing things like that, and initially was painting them every year.

**MM:** There’s an impression that you are presenting new tendencies with each exhibition every year. But even though there are constant modifications, you are retaining your past devices as sources of the present?

**MC:** That’s the intention. If the paintings just keep increasing in that fixed-point observation manner, indefinitely, then I think, for example, that I’ll start to need some really big paintings. I wanted to get a taste of that too.



fig. 22) *Peaceful Village*, 2015, oil on canvas, 210×290cm

Though not quite the same as what I was saying about the *Mona Lisa*, it's like taking an object whose image is swiftly plagiarized, and turning it into a kind of sculpture. To sculpt is to carve, to etch. So I was looking to achieve that object sort of state, to carve the items placed in the frame with "plagiarism of the image," a chisel by another name.

**MM:** One feels a flat image suddenly attain a sculpture-like solidity in *Pork Park #3* (fig. 23). The intrusive image of a bar placed diagonally in the center of this painting, with its three-dimensional solidity, catches the eye. The sense of a schism in an apparently well-composed painting is just like a "Metaphysical" poem.

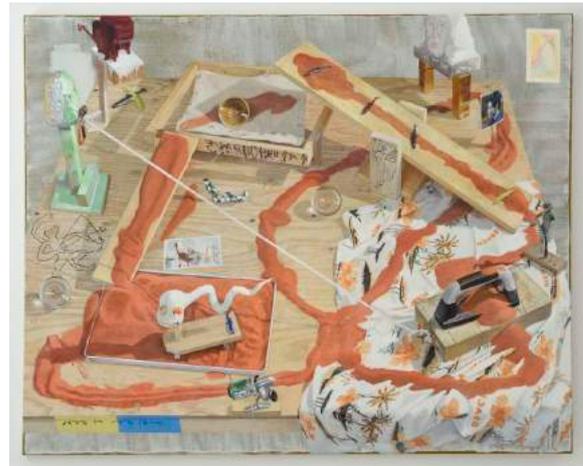


fig. 23) *Pork Park #3*, 2016, oil on canvas, 130×162cm

**MC:** I think it works by rendering the fine details while forcing the forceful things.

**MM:** The image of a snake starts to appear frequently in your painting from 2011. There was even a painting entitled *Snakey* (fig. 16). In the current exhibition, there's also a painting titled *Walking Snake* (2017) (fig. 24). Do snakes have any specific meaning for you?

**MC:** The most important thing about snakes, I suppose, is their long thin bodies (laughs). After all there's the story of Adam and Eve, too. In psychoanalysis the snake is said to be a kind of surreptitious proxy for sex. Plus I think its a very relatable character, not to mention quite adorable, don't you think? I can really see how one could have enticed Adam and Eve.

**MM:** It's human.

**MC:** That's right.

**MM:** The "Self-Portrait" series (fig. 25-1, 25-2) is video documentation of a process in which you paint your self-portrait through instructed actions. In these actions you paint your own face on the face of your friend and ask him to continue doing his everyday tasks, and after that is over, you place a piece of cloth on his face to copy the image by pressing. What was the reason for this project?

**MC:** Self-portraiture is a major genre of painting, after all, and I wanted to have a go at it. Pondering how to do that, I hit on the idea of painting on someone's face, the reason being that the usual set-up with



fig. 24) *Walking Snake*, 2017  
oil on canvas, 45.5×33.5cm

self-portraiture involves an object, the painting you are doing, and you yourself, with you the painter moving positions and making other modifications as you proceed. Ultimately it's like taking an image of yourself, compressing and crushing it.

Perhaps the idea was that if I put another person into this construction, I wouldn't be crushed.



fig. 25-1) *Self-Portrait #4*, 2015

face paint printed on paper, two paper sheets, DVD: 6 min. 52 sec



fig. 25-2) *Self-Portrait #4* (detail)

face paint printed on paper, 28×35.5cm

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## VII. Bitter Humor: A Signpost for the 2017 Paintings

**MM:** Let's get back to the works of 2017. This painting, *Painting of the Potholder with the Instruction* (fig. 26) was hilarious—I couldn't help laughing.

**MC:** Why was that?

**MM:** Because you literally provide, with images, examples of using a potholder in unusual ways—apart from its everyday function.

**MC:** Indeed I do. The potholder can function as an item for grasping hot things, and as a puppet. That really is all there is to it. Like I'm thinking of it



fig. 26) *Painting of the Potholder with the Instruction*, 2017, oil on canvas, 45.5×45.5cm

as a metaphor for something. Analogous to a sort of system, perhaps. I thought it obvious that an object would have instructions. Sculptures however don't usually come with a manual. Maybe part of me wanted to do that.

**MM:** Every suggested use is a bag of sorts: a hood, a bag for scissors, a case for an umbrella, etc. It invites the viewer to make all sorts of associations. Here is another painting that seems full of half-spoken intention.

**MC:** This is a picture of bathing. Cezanne also painted bathing, and it's been a common motif for artists since ancient times. Sneaking a peek at bathing is a matter of "libido" I guess. The title *Bathing/Peeping* (fig. 27) references this.

**MM:** Your imagination is indeed unique. Who else would call this painting "Bathing"? This is a fish tank, isn't it? And this woman in the tank has someone else's hands pushing her shoulders into the water. One fears she may be on the verge of being drowned. It doesn't look like a bathing scene, and your imagination must be quite extraordinary to connect this ominous scene from a possible murder case with the theme of bathing in a Cezanne painting. In this painting, where...

**MC:** Is that *Walking Snake* (fig. 24)?

**MM:** Where is the snake?

**MC:** Right in the middle, drawn in outline.

**MM:** This is a symbol for a snake, rather than its image. This picture has a very vivid image of pineapple halves shining like gold—like an omen of some miraculous apparition. Our attention is caught by the light. But you, with your title, are trying to draw the viewer's attention to the very thin drawing of a line-as-snake between the luminous pineapple halves. It's as though you give the viewer something gorgeous or precious, only to bring it down, with your ironic devices.

**MC:** I suppose that's my sense of humor, which tends toward the sarcastic.

**MM:** An ironic attitude that pours cold water on people's joy.

**MC:** I guess it's a habit of mine. It's as if the snake drawn is walking. Drawing and light move in sync, splitting an object wide open as they pass through: that was what I had in mind.

**MM:** Your experience of watching a lot of animations makes such perceptions palpable for you. You are adopting and



fig. 27) *Bathing/Peeping*, 2017, oil on canvas, 65.7×91cm

refining ideas extracted from animations and SFX action films.

The title of this painting *Feeling of Wanting to Kiss* (fig. 28) suggests a dramatic work with a realistically depicted situation, but instead shows merely a protruding mouth reflecting the desire to kiss. Such a direct connection of thought with a literal action or thing reminds me of the ways children comprehend the world around them through the effects—such as cold, hot, distant, near—on their senses, which often present amazingly original, condensed metaphors.

**MC:** When aiming for a painting that appeals physically to those who see it, my imagination turns to things that everyone's body has in common. I suspect that at such times, partly at least I am basing my ideas on something akin to the physical sensations of a child. "Condensed metaphor" is also a very interesting term, isn't it?



fig. 28) *Feeling of Wanting to Kiss*, 2017  
oil on canvas, 38.5×46cm

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### Living Paintings, Fiction for Living—The Autonomy and Transcendence of Painting

**MM:** For the final part of this talk, I'd like to go back to the topic of the fictional nature of painting. As indicated in the beginning, in the Modernist theory of art, "fiction" is rejected as a falsifying element. Clement Greenberg argued, in his 1940 essay "Towards a Newer Laocoon," that the imitation of reality by modern Realist painting is not a presentation of the real, but a man-made copy of an existing thing, in short, fiction and illusion. He emphasized that in order to maintain the pure nature of painting as such, an emphasis on its materiality was necessary, including colors, shapes, intensity of brushstrokes, and flatness of the picture plane. But his theory created sources of confusion: materiality and fiction were set in opposition to each other, and an emphasis on materiality became proof of a painting's "autonomy" and "purity." But one wonders if the antagonism is really valid.

Masaya's painting attempts to unite materiality and fiction, and this shows in his solid skill in paint application, as well as his unique use of images. The way he connects details resembles how images connect in dreams. In dream rhetoric, apparently disparate things are connected through associative analogies, so that reality and fiction, the inside and outside of a room are easily connected and infiltrate each other. For that reason, Masaya Chiba's painting is not an imitation of a real world, but produces a simulacrum in the Epicurean sense; a fiction endowed with emotional and perceptual reality comparable to the actual experience. In that sense, his painting tries to maintain the fundamental character of painting as an "imitation" of reality in the Aristotelian sense—presenting a unique counterpart possessing an equally "real" quality to the original. He moreover attempts to produce painting that goes beyond the opposition between materiality and fiction.

Today I have brought two quotations from two different texts. One is “The Picture Frame: An Aesthetic Study” (*Der Bildrahmen. Ein Ästhetischer Versuch*) (1902) by Georg Simmel, and the other, “A Wrong Turning in American Poetry” (1963) by Robert Bly. I hope Masaya will comment on them. Could you please read us Simmel’s text? I will do Bly’s.

**MC:**

Distance and unity, antithesis to us and synthesis in itself; the two prime qualities of a work of art—its inner unity and the fact that it is in a sphere removed from all immediate life—are one and the same, only viewed from two different sides. And only if and because the work of art possesses this self-sufficiency does it have so much to give us; that existence for itself is the preparatory stepping back with which the work penetrates us that much more deeply and fully. The feeling of an undeserved gift with which it delights us originates from the pride of this self-sufficient closure, with which it now nevertheless becomes our own.

The qualities of the picture frame reveal themselves to be those of assisting and giving meaning to this inner unity of the picture.

[Georg Simmel, “The Picture Frame: An Aesthetic Study,” trans. Mark Ritter, *Theory, Culture & Society* 11, no. 1 (1902; Feb. 1994), p. 12.]

**MM:** Can you comment on this writing?

**MC:** I can very much relate to it, I mean where he talks about the picture frame. It strikes me as close to what I was saying earlier about the frame being emphasized when watching a 3D movie.

**MM:** This essay was written in 1902. We can interpret the meaning of what Simmel refers to as “picture frame” as the formal limits of a painting. The difference between painting and sculpture is that the former creates an autonomous space within the picture frame. The Minimalist artist Donald Judd, for example, sought a more actual artistic expression than painting by turning to sculpture. But Simmel here points to “distance and synthesis” as the two main properties of painting, although they are of opposite natures. He even argues that painting’s internal unification and existence in a domain separate from direct life point to the same state. He also suggests that because painting has self-sufficiency, that is, autonomy, painting enters our inner life much more deeply and thoroughly than any other art form. What do you think of this view?

**MC:** He’s saying that because painting at first hangs back slightly, it comes charging into our space like an athlete’s run up.

**MM:** Yes. Painting and poetry communicate their meaning in roundabout ways, unlike actual experience. Owing to that deferral, painting stimulates the human imagination. Because of the “constraint” there is a more intensified experience of the painting, sharpening our awareness of its effects. The experience of “light emanating” to which you referred earlier signifies the importance of imagining the experience of light prompted by painting, as opposed to being given the physical sensation of light by 3D media. When reflecting on the reasons for the strong appeal of your painting to viewers, it seems

important to consider its “fictional character.”

The quotation from Robert Bly’s 1963 essay, “A Wrong Turning in American Poetry” goes like this.

Under the influence of objectivism and abstraction, not only does our poetry become mediocre but our criticism also. When the senses die, the sense within us that delights in poetry dies also. And it is this sense of delight that tells us whether a given group of words contains genuine poetry or not. A great poet and a great critic are like the mule who can smell fresh water ten miles away. There is a sense that tells us where the water of poetry is, abroad or at home, West or East, even under the earth. [ . . . ]

A human body, just dead, is very like a living body except that it no longer contains something which was invisible anyway. In a poem, as in a human body, what is invisible makes all the difference. The presence of poetry in words is extremely mysterious. As we know from the Japanese experience of haiku, as well as from the experience of many brief poems in the western tradition, poetry can be present in fifteen words, or in ten words. [ . . . ]

*Everyone stands alone on the midpoint of the earth  
pierced by a ray of sunlight;  
and suddenly it’s evening.*

This poem of Quasimodo’s manages to slip suddenly inward. [ . . . ]

The imagination out of its own resources creates a poem as strong as the world which it faces. Rilke speaks of “die Befreiung der dichterischen Figur,” which may be translated as “the liberation of the poetic image,” “the releasing of the image from jail.” The poet is thinking of a poem in which the image is released from imprisonment among objects. The domination of the imagination is established over the entire poem. When this happens the poem enters the unconscious naturally.

[Robert Bly, *American Poetry: Wildness and Domesticity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 32–33.]

I brought along this quotation thinking it might be helpful to think of contemporary painting in analogy with modern poetry.

Robert Bly (b. 1926) is an American poet who argued for the significance of imagery in modern American poetry in the 1960s, against the rigid formalism dominating the academic literary world.

For Bly, poetic “image” meant not just a picture or a sign, but a deep image that emerges from the depth of the mind to affect people’s feelings or perceptions of everyday life. Bly had a solid knowledge of modern and contemporary poetry in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Scandinavia, and translated into English some of the best European modern poems. He was critical of the postwar application of the theories of Modernist poetry established before the Second World War. The leaders of academic literary circles pushed the “objectivist” tendency, which urged concentration on the facts in the external world, avoiding reflection of the poet’s personal feelings, in order to construct a poem as a verbal object from a completely impersonal standpoint. The “objectivist” theory itself had validity

when Modernism was being established in the 1910s and 1920s, as a means of criticizing the excessive sentimentalism of late 19th-century poetry by creating a new clean but condensed poetic form suited to the complexities of the machine age. But the emphasis on the materiality of verbal expression was pushed too far in the postwar literary scene, becoming a dogma in itself, Bly felt. He thought this situation indicated the death of poetry, and argued for the revival or reinvigoration of image as an emotional, psychological, and sensory compound.

The poetic image Bly advocates is not limited to the image of a single object. It can contain a situation and its milieu, being as it is a sum result of the situation in which the human mind is infused with a special—poetic—perception. Bly quotes from modern Italian poet Salvatore Quasimodo's poem, "And Suddenly It's Evening" (*Ed è subito sera*):

*Everyone stands alone on the midpoint of the earth  
pierced by a ray of sunlight;  
and suddenly it's evening.*

This three-line poem compressed time, space, and experience. Bly says: "A human body, just dead, is very like a living body except that it no longer contains something which was invisible anyway. In a poem, as in a human body, what is invisible makes all the difference. The presence of poetry in words is extremely mysterious. As we know from the Japanese experience of haiku, as well as from the experience of many brief poems in the western tradition, poetry can be present in fifteen words, or in ten words. Length or meter or rhyme have nothing to do with it." He tries to communicate that the inner truth of an experience cannot be captured except by the image, however the "image" is not an explanation of the facts, but a condensation of a larger experience, a situation in which disparate factors are drawn together, or a duration of time captured in a short poem.

**MC:** Yes, it does feel that way.

**MM:** Bly also says, "A poem is something that penetrates for an instant into the unconscious." The image he advocated is frequently referred to by critics as "deep image," and I want to use that category as an analogical model to understand the very specific nature of Masaya Chiba's painted images.

Because Clement Greenberg's theories of modern painting are influenced by the theories of modernist poetry, the theories have many points in common. The emphasis on objective matter, associative chain of images, structure of sounds and rhythm, rejection of a straight-forward narrative find their counterparts in the emphasis on the composition of shapes and colors, and the rejection of three-dimensional modeling and figurative motifs in modern painting. In both cases, the poem or painting exists as a self-contained artwork separate from the creator's personality. But Bly felt that if you continued avoiding personal feelings and perceptions, constructing poems like mechanical objects, what is being produced ceases to be poetry. He urged that the poet—the artist—should recognize that a living human being is writing the poem, and the images emanate from the inner depth, finding their vessels in specific phenomena occurring in the natural world. What do you think about the images in your paintings?

**MC:** After Bly's name came up when I spoke with you some time ago, I read some of his poetry. It felt to me that when one says "the glass was here" the sense is not that of taking a quick glance and saying "it was." As if by extending the time spent taking a glance, something pops in there. Like a still life. Robert Bly's voice is like that of a young man on the street. His attitude is that in fact, people like that are speaking the truth.

**MM:** His opinions are totally intelligent, although he doesn't pose as an intellectual.

**MC:** That's similar to a something I aspire to a little. I mean the use of words and use of painting; that way of thinking, that preference struck me as similar.

**MM:** In current contemporary art, socially engaged art and social intervention have a very strong presence, and many painters feel that painting does not get so much attention. In contrast, between 2005 and 2009, figurative painting was much sought after. Now, the fever seems to have abated slightly. What do you feel about continuing to paint in the shifting conditions of contemporary art?

**MC:** I doubt anyone thinks painting is going to disappear anytime soon, considering it has experienced so many other hard times over the years. Very few people would genuinely believe painting is finished, that it's going to vanish.

**MM:** But don't you feel there have been so many artistic styles explored and refined by many painters, that there's nothing left to try?

**MC:** Well, maybe. Which is why I also believe there are limits to manipulating the actual composition of painting. Innovation in that area is sure to slow down. But I also think the behaviors of other forms of art have their limits.

**MM:** That's really true.

**MC:** There's growing recognition of the idea that artworks can undergo renewal slowly, that this doesn't need to be that fast.

**MM:** So, what do you feel about your current exhibition?

**MC:** I'm pretty pleased with it. As we've come to the end here I'd just like to say to the audience today: you'll get more out of the show emotionally if you take your time to look at it all, look at it as consisting of elements plucked out of the past, like the flashbacks I was talking of earlier.

**MM:** Thank you very much for devoting your valuable time to such a long session.

**MC:** Not at all. (Applause)

## Q&A

If the guests today want to ask questions to Mr. Chiba, please don't hesitate.

### 1. Do you actually make the objects?

MC: I do, yes.

—Don't you ever think of exhibiting them?

MC: As I mentioned earlier, to me it feels like I'm doing what I do as one option for the existence of the object. So the sense of painting the objects as a means of bringing them into existence is very strong, so there's actually no need for me to actually make them exist, I guess you'd say, no need to put them out there.

—Do you destroy each lot afterward?

MC: No, I leave them around, and occasionally put them in a painting, like one of those a while back with lots in it. They just sort of sit and age in the studio.

### 2. Were you born in Sagamihara?

MC: Not in Sagamihara, but close by.

—Is it important to you to pursue your practice in the place you grew up?

MC: It is, but I also like to go to different places, and the qualities of places like Sagamihara and Mitsukyo are in the end just locationality of sorts, not an actual place. So you can go overseas and find the same sort of places, in fact I think it's better to actively live in different worlds with those shared qualities of place. Somehow though I do find myself wanting to be in places that share that kind of locationality.

### 3. I heard that when you paint a picture, you read a book on one hand and paint on the other, is that true?

MC: It is. When I'm doing drawings and such. With oil paintings I use both hands so can't, but I do listen to the radio and so on. When I'm drawing I keep a kind of mobile book stand next to the table, and occasionally snap it open and pull it out, to read a book as I draw. (Laughs)

—So do you remember what you've read?

MC: Hmm, yes I do, in fact reading while drawing is quite simple; not meaning easy to do,

but that I can manage it. I'm not saying there's any need to perform this kind of juggling act, but there is part of me that endeavors to make something while consciously in an undisciplined state.

**MM:** Is it that if you start by deciding, "Right, I'm going to draw" you will end up impressing your thoughts on the picture, but by forgetting yourself for a while, or taking a moment to "not be yourself" you value what slips in from outside your self-awareness?

**MC:** I suppose you could say I'm rejecting the moment where I lose myself; the state of listening to the radio's babble, or reading, is to me a normal state. I see that distracted state as my usual state, so I ought to work in that state. I also feel that an artist has to maintain a calm state of mind.

**MM:** Talking with you, the widespread image of the artist—that of someone intellectual, or fanatical—starts to crumble conspicuously. I can't imagine you, for example, donning a hairband to do your painting. But I see we've run out of time, so I'm afraid we'll have to leave it there.

**MC:** Thank you very much. (Applause)

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This conversation was translated and adapted from documentation of the following event

**Talk Show "Masaya Chiba x Midori Matsui"**

Date: October 20, 2017

Venue: ShugoArts

Held in conjunction with the solo exhibition

**Masaya Chiba "What to Do With Memories by Utilizing Things Such as Indirect Lighting in Light Box Style, Yatsuzaki Halo, Feeling of Wanting to Kiss, Family Story, Sagamihara Stone Burger, Forget Medusa, and Element 50m Ahead"**

Dates: October 20 – November 18, 2017

Venue: ShugoArts

Translated from the Japanese by Midori Matsui and Pamela Miki

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