

The Paintings by Naofumi Maruyama

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In producing the catalogue for this exhibition, I sorted out the works (acrylic on cotton) Maruyama has done in the past 20 or so years, surveyed, and compiled them in a *raisonné* in the latter part of this catalogue. Over 500 records obtained through the above-mentioned process were spread over the floor and I had a precious opportunity to hear about the background and ideas regarding the works from Maruyama himself. Here, I shall write what I found out about each one of the over 500 works I traced with the artist in chronological order.

Starting from a Period When “Painting Had Already Come to an End”

Naofumi Maruyama, who was born and grew up in Nagaoka, Niigata, was fond of painting from when he was a young boy. When he finished senior high school in 1982, being unaware of the existence of art universities, he went to Tokyo and entered a fashion collage as that was where he knew he would be able to study the visual arts. However, the painting he was taught there was no more than illustration, which he was dissatisfied with. He happened to hear about the B Seminar¹⁾ from a senior where he was working part-time and began going there. He learnt contemporary art for the first time from lectures such as Noriyuki Haraguchi, Kazumi Nakamura, and Kenjiro Okazaki and began to frequent contemporary art galleries and the Seibu Museum of Art.

It was a time when one had to start creating a work presuming “painting had already come to an end”. Maruyama had an interest in the conceptual direction and produced not paintings but installation works. With a canvas depicting the sky as the base, he would arrange houses or towers. The “concept” was that what ought to be standing steadfastly on the ground was built on top of nothing. Later on, he tried out “sky paintings” as purely nothing by removing what was being supported. There were close to all-over color field paintings. However, even with those paintings included, the atmosphere was that “painting had already come to an end”. Consequently, in order to move forward, Maruyama decided to incorporate form. Yet, by bringing form into painting, there was a risk of rousing known images. Therefore, he could not paint. As he could not paint, he decided to alter the form of the painting. Through trial and error, he reached *untitled* (R-5). This is the only painting employing a deformed support that Maruyama ever submitted to an exhibition.

The World in the Microscope (1989-1992 – Gallery B, 2nd Floor)

Looking back, from the very start, Maruyama seems to have accepted that a painting possesses a representational space in a very natural way. Having accepted that, what was most important to him was

how the space within a painting could be made into a space possible precisely because it is a painting. In order to produce that space, in those days, Maruyama began timidly by incorporating form in the painting. The forms were not to arouse known images. If they did, the representational space would resemble a space in reality. He did not want to depict a preexisting form that was waiting to be represented. He wanted to portray a form that came into being just by being painted. By drawing repeatedly, he tried to find out what kind of forms could be created through the bodily movement of drawing. What appeared through this process was an organic form like a “broad bean”. He managed to produce a painting possessing a world of ambiguous figures, which seemed familiar and yet unfamiliar.

Six months after taking part in his first group exhibition, in his second group exhibition *HB Show* (1989), all the characteristics of Maruyama’s early paintings were already present. There is a world of microscopic life forms floating between the known and the unknown. The composition is not defined by institutional aesthetics. The space is not concluded within the picture but spreads beyond. He employs the colors straight from the tube without mixing them as he believes the higher the situation the stronger the “explosiveness”. His purple and red have a pure brightness. They are all-over paintings in which the artist places more emphasis on “experiencing” than “viewing”. They measure over 160 by 100cms. So that it is impossible to grasp the entirety at a glance. His staining technique²⁾ began by chance. He happened to run out of canvas and tried painting with acrylic on a piece of cotton that he had bought when he was studying at the fashion college. Incidentally, the subtitle of his exhibition, “The front in the Bach”³⁾, is taken from the title of four works Maruyama submitted to the B Seminar Exhibition held three months later.

We have only to refer to the artist’s chronology to understand how unique, threatening, and eye-catching such paintings by Maruyama were in those days. Starting with his first one-man exhibition at Aoyama Gallery in 1990, he had five more shows at INAX Gallery (Ginza) and Muramatsu Gallery (Ginza) in 1991, and Satani Gallery (Ginza), Gallery Towaaru (Fukuoka), and Koshotei (Ginza) in 1992. As for group exhibitions, his works were included in *A Perspective on Contemporary Art: Among the Figures*, which took place at The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo and The National Museum of Art, Osaka in 1992. Furthermore, within just three years from 1990, he submitted works to 15 exhibitions. This shows how a fledgling young artist became a standard bearer of contemporary art with exceptional speed.

Yet, it was not as if he was always confident of his work. The work included in the one-man exhibition at INAX Gallery in 1991 was strong in texture and the layers of paint had become thick. Maruyama felt that he had become too Expressionistic. Consequently, at the one-man exhibition held at Muramatsu Gallery later that year, he consciously painted works such as *leek 1* (R-77), in which the texture was not emphasized. Regarding the world of ambiguous forms or forms less than figures, the artist wavered between works such as *CAL* (R-93) and *MAS* (R-94), in which forms are created positively as a basis, and

works such as *morphogen* (R-103, 104), in which the painting is established without creating forms.

The Beginning of Figurative Painting (1992-1994 – 2nd Floor Lobby)

Maruyama recalls, “The four years between 1992 after my one-man exhibition at Satani Gallery ended and 1996, when I had another one-man exhibition at the same gallery, was the period I suffered most.” What he had been depicting until then was a world of figures “murky” as if inside a microscopic world, with form and yet without, and suggestive of something yet not. It was a world in a floating state that could not be defined clearly. However, even such a situation suspended in midair seemed to be no more than an act to prolong the life of painting that had already come to an end. Moreover, those figures were created by means of the movement of his own hands, i.e. his own inner world. He felt that, after all, he was confined within himself. He wanted to get out himself. Therefore, even if it was a three-dimensional world existing in reality, he felt he should start from something outside himself.

Amidst such worries, while continuing to produce works as an exhibition of what he had accomplished until then, in 1993, Maruyama began consciously experimenting with subjects outside himself as his motif. What he relied on first were works by the German Romantic artist Otto Philipp Otto Runge, who painted flora symbolically. One of Runge’s best-known works is a series of four decorative paintings of plants entitled *The Times of Day*. Maruyama realized, “Even something that you can tell what it is immediately can be portrayed like this”. In a series entitled *time*, he depicted plants as decorative patterns. In the *life* series, he made the contours of the plants ambiguous so that there was hardly any difference in light and shade. He then did numerous works depicting plants like shadow pictures. However, the plants were no more than motifs. Having realized that, he then began painting with the view outside his studio as his motif and later, as the *room* series, the space inside his studio as his motif.

Each one of these works is more or less monochrome. The form is obscure so that it is hard to tell what is depicted at a glance. By removing color and making the form ambiguous, there was a risk that the painting would simply resemble reality. However, by trying that hard to incorporate a concrete matter into his painting, Maruyama was able to achieve something. There is a potential for a space that does not exist in reality and only occurs inside the painting brought about by the two poles of what can be named and what cannot. Even if the form is something “unidentified”, which I shall call “abstract”, a certain kind of plane spreads out there. However, the moment something “identified”, which I shall call “figurative”, is sensed, the way that picture is viewed changes decisively. The moment you sense something figurative in what seemed abstract, the picture which was flat until then suddenly acquires depth. By altering the viewpoint, what appeared figurative can return to being abstract. Accordingly, the depth disappears. Wavering between the figurative and the abstract, what is produced in the viewer’s mind is a phenomenon of a space that cannot be real as it “possesses depth” and, at the same time “does not have depth”, a

phenomenon that could occur only in a painting Maruyama discovered that such a state of floating could be created only inside a painting. If “the world in the microscope” was an attempt to place the figure itself in a state of flotation, the works dating from this period were very difficult attempts to create a state of flotation in which both the figurative and the abstract coexisted within a single figure.

The Portrait Series (1995-2002 – Gallery C, 2nd Floor)

In 1995, Maruyama happened to make a painting based on a photograph taken when he went on a trip with his colleagues at his part-time job. *hakone 2* (R-214) “Perhaps it was because they were people I knew, I felt I was saved by portraying people. Then, quite naturally I became able to use colors.” Maruyama was happy to be able to use colors.

The Portrait Series began with the *face* series in 1995. To begin with, they were ghost-like obscure and faintly stained works that were hard to identify as a person’s face. They gradually became “portraits” in which the model could be identified. Maruyama’s motifs changed from plants, outdoor landscapes, interior views, to his friend’s face. In the Portrait Series, he became able to use colors again.

A portrait is generally composed of a head or the full figure of a person in the center of the image. Regarding the composition, as this genre of painting is not based on perspective, we tend to be put under an illusion that “the picture lies down”. Therefore, if we were to focus on the composition alone, these portraits are quite similar to “the world in the microscope”, which also pursues flatness. On the other hand, it is very clear what a portrait indicates (or, in this case, “what sort of a person the model is”). In that sense, it is extremely figurative. It is that figurativeness that all at once provides depth to the compositionally flat image within the viewer’s mind. The more figurative it becomes, the more depth it acquires and more the viewer is invited into a different space that cannot exist in reality. This is how Maruyama rediscovered the meaning of figurativeness.

Even so, Maruyama still was not confident about the theme of being figurative and, at the same time, abstract. Besides the objective excuse that it was an art historical experiment, he wanted a subjective reason that would make him feel he had to do it. Still vexed, he decided to go to Berlin from November 1996 to November 1997.

“For six months or so, I didn’t paint. Instead, while studying at a language school, I visited museums and took photographs. I rented a studio in what used to be East Berlin. An old Japanese man was renting it and I spent the summer there while he went back to Japan. German children came to play there every day. They loved the old man. As I was lonely, I enjoyed playing with the children every day. A German friend gave me *Pipi Longstocking* and *Grimms’ Fairy Tales* so that I could study the language. As I had read them both as a child, I recalled my childhood days and felt strange. The works I produced in Berlin were painter telling myself I could paint just the way I feel”.⁴⁾

Even after returning to Japan, the feeling he experienced in Berlin was the key to his work. The views in deep green forests presented at Maruyama's one-man exhibition, *The Temperature of Time*, at Satani Gallery in 1998 were strongly narrative. Most of these works were painted after the artist's return to Japan.

Maruyama went to Berlin again from October 1998 to November 1999. During the latter part of this stay, he resumed making portraits. (Even after returning to Japan, for a while, he was absorbed in portraiture.) He created series such as *Light of Shadow*, *Splinter of Mirror*, and *Water of Tokyo*. The characteristic of these portraits was that instead of employing the staining method, the background was painted over thickly. As a result, "The background became stronger and what used to be the ground seemed to step forward and the background seemed to disappear". In other words, the figure and ground were competing against each other and the picture became all the more flat. At the same time, as regards the content of the picture, "there was a sense of loneliness having lost the background and the pictorial subject and the narrative subject seemed to get involved with each other".

In 2002, Maruyama took part in the Taipei Biennial presenting both types of works. *bathing* (R-381) had a solidly painted background and *Kinder* (R-314) was done in the staining method. He displayed both works in the gallery. He felt that the background painted thickly was a method for the sake of a method. For his one-man exhibition held at ShugoArts the following year in 2003, Maruyama decided to concentrate on staining.

An Interest in Water, Mirrors, and Strong Shadows (2003 – 1st Floor Entrance Lobby; Gallery A, 2nd Floor)

To Maruyama, from the very beginning, staining was not a technique to expose the borders, colors, and forms to coincidence. He employed it to avoid assertive expressions. He wanted to avoid affirmation and speak indistinctly. It was not as if he was mumbling because he did not know what he wanted to say. He would falter because he was trying to say two contradictory things at the same time. It was because he was trying to "depict" and "erase" at the same time.

The sense of flotation in Maruyama's works is not a result of not yet being differentiated but the dynamic state of rest, i.e. a true sense of flotation, incessantly oscillating between two contradictory poles. It is not a conflict between the figurative and the abstract as is. The flatness brought about by abstraction is betrayed by the depth brought about by figurativeness. This contradictory relationship produces the sense of flotation.

For example, in *garden* (R-410, 411, 414), *island of mirror* (R-412), *path* (R-428, 429, 454, 458), and *harvest* (R-450, 451), the picture first appears in front of us as a plane of undulating curves. However, the moment we discover the tiny figures depicted there, that is to say, the moment a line becomes a path between the rice fields and the section surround by lines becomes water, we discover figurativeness and

the picture acquires depth. Yet, the horizon disappears in the distance so that there is no sense of perspective depth. What we find there is an upright space with multilayered depth, which could not exist in reality. The stronger the figurativeness becomes, as if to counterbalance that, the stronger the abstractness or flatness of the picture becomes. Via a period of “portraits”, figurativeness becomes prominent. At the same time, the artist avoids depth with a sense of perspective all the more. How to make “the picture which tends to lie down” “stand up” becomes another significant issue in heading towards figurativeness.

Amidst such circumstances, around the time Maruyama was working on *river 1* (R-405), in 2003, he became aware of the surface of the water as a mirror surface. Both the virtual image reflected on the water surface and the real image existing in reality were painted in a single picture. Just as the centripetal force disappeared by making the figure in the foreground compete with the ground in the background in his “portraits”, here, the image changed into a multi-focused space in which the center fell apart. The real image and the virtual image themselves express perspective depth. Yet, by being juxtaposed, the image becomes flat. Rather than relying on the method of reversing figure and ground, here, the flatness is attained by means of composition. Especially in *color of river* (R-409), which is a set of two paintings of identical composition, there is a real image and virtual image reflected on the water surface in both pictures. One is placed upside down below the other. Two images compete with each other within a single picture and then as if the two pictures reflect each other, the flatness become even more intricate.

With the deep green forest as his motif, the existence of shadow is also closed up on as a factor capable of competing with the real image. The shadow is placed on top of the substance as a flat layer. However, by making that shadow come forward as if were a substance, while the picture becomes flat, there is also a sense of depth heading into the multilayered picture.

The Front in the Back

By removing the staining texture as much as possible and emphasizing the image, in a sense, Maruyama’s works from his one-man show held at ShugoArts in 2003 onwards became “cinematic”. However, when he painted *path 4* (R-458), he recalls, “I felt I wanted to paint taking more care about the texture of the staining, the texture of the paint, and the bodily movement of my arm”. Indeed, the relationship between the texture of stained paint and that of the paint placed on the canvas by means of a method other than staining seems to be one of Maruyama’s themes in his current work.

Maruyama’s intent is strongly felt in *two evenings* (R-464). Although it is painted with minimal elements, there is a sense of abundance. A blurred dot and a dot without blurs, whether it is an abstract color dot or a figurative boat, whether it is light reflected on the water surface or the water wavering, what exists in reality and which is a shadow, what is in the background and what is in the front --- nothing is

clear. Contradictory factors both abstract and figurative melt into each other and become a shallow yet rich painting.

As mentioned above, the subtitle of this exhibition, “The Front in the Back”, was taken from the title Naofumi Maruyama chose for a series of early works. “*Ushiro no shomen* [the front in the back]” reminds most people of the Japanese children’s song “*Kagome kagome*” and how we played the game as a child. It is a sweet nostalgic world in our memory, in which the colors, planes, and lines melt into each other and the place and time and vague. There is a sense of that floating situation on such occasions in Maruyama’s paintings.

At the same time, many people are probably bewildered by phrase “the front in the back” as they become confused about which is the “front” and which is the “back”. In fact, I asked Maruyama why he chose this phrase and his answer was follows. “Using the staining method, even the back of the cloth is dyed. I was once looking at the back of the canvas and began to feel that the back was the front. It was a strange feeling”. As we have seen so far, the state of floating by means of incessant oscillation between contradictory factors is something that Maruyama has been dealing with consistently in his paintings. “The front in the back” also implies his quest in the history of painting.

Maruyama does not paint simply to “express” a vague sense of flotation. Neither is he trying to develop a “new method” simply in belief of progress in the history of painting. Here too, he is constantly oscillating between the two poles.

It seems that what exists first in Maruyama is his awareness of the floating state. Be it the content or the format, he has done his best to create paintings that do not betray that sensation. “The front in the back” is a subtitle that tries to represent his multifaceted ambivalent attempts.

Maruyama is working on three new paintings for his one-man exhibition at Meguro Museum of Art, Tokyo. Two are large pictures, one vertical and the other horizontal. The third work is small horizontal painting. When considering a new work, Maruyama ponders which element should be emphasized, “line”, “dot”, or “plane”. He also considers how reproductive it should be. Of course, that is not all in creating a picture.

As I am writing this now, the vertical painting *one evening* (R-501) has actually already been completed. It is a strongly linear work. Many of Maruyama’s works so far were symmetrical, but here, the picture is divided into two at the middle. The right half is composed of strong lines like a sheer cliff. In the left half, the water surface and the mountain sky are connected obscurely in horizontal lines. The large picture measuring 291cms. in length and 181.8cms. in width is boldly divided in the middle. As soon as Maruyama returned from Berlin in 1998, he painted *on the rock* (R-275). In 2003, he produced *big rock* (R-

403), which depicts a sheer cliff. In 2008, in a work entitled *meltwater* (R-497, 498), he depicts a strongly abstract mountain. The cliff in his latest work seems to be halfway between his first realistic cliff or rock and his recent strongly abstract mountain. In that sense, the new work created for this exhibition may give us an impression that the artist has returned to rather figurative works.

About a year ago, Maruyama commented as follows. “In a sense, I feel I have made a round. Beginning with the early rather abstract works, via portraits and landscapes, through gradually, I feel I am heading again towards abstract works. Having said I have made a round, my awareness is quite different. The figurative element won’t disappear immediately. Even if I depict something figurative, you wouldn’t be able to tell what it is. Perhaps abstract and figurative will be mixed all the more”.⁵⁾

Maruyama has said that he need not necessarily employ staining and that he would like to do paintings other than stained works. He does not want to rely solely on the staining technique. However, the new works in the current exhibition are produced with thorough pride in staining.

Going through a stack of cards of the works he has created so far, Maruyama murmured, “I do everything I have in my mind. I’m not satisfied unless I do. For better or worse, I’ve always had exhibitions and regret having shown works that I needn’t have presented in public”. The current exhibition is precious opportunity to trace the past 20 years of Naofumi Maruyama’s paintings for the first time.

(Curator, Meguro Museum of Art, Tokyo)

[Translated by Kikuko Ogawa]

Notes:

- 1) A school founded in Yokohama in 1967, at a time when there were hardly any places in Japan where one could study contemporary art in full.
- 2) A technique in which the paint is allowed to directly stain a canvas without applying an undercoat.
- 3) Of the 4 works entitled *The Front in the Back*, which were submitted to the B Seminar Exhibition held in 1989, Maruyama himself later changed the titles of three to °C (R-20), '89-1 (R-22), and cal (R-23).
- 4) Interview by Tamayo Iemura, *PILIERS*, no.23,24, Meguro Museum of Art, 2007, p.6.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p.8.

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