

Masato Kobayashi—The Art of Luminosity

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From: "Masato Kobayashi Bienal de São Paulo, 1996 Japão" Catalogue. Published by The Japan Foundation, 1996

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Today, images are getting cut off from what they have originally represented, becoming autonomous and getting out of our control. In such an age, I wonder if this question still has meaning:

Why is painting needed, or, what does it have to offer us?

Whatever the case, it is in this question that Masato Kobayashi, one of the painters who are producing most significant works in Japan, starts his creations. One would never find himself facing this question as long as he accepts as the definition of painting the straightforward description that it is the total of colors layered upon some kind of support. Even within this simple description, the word "support" needs a more detailed explanation. It is like what the people do not see in "The Emperor's New Clothes." People pretend that they do not see there is anything wrong, until the innocent and cruel eyes of a child discover it and the people suddenly see it too. At the instant some color is placed on something, a support suddenly takes shape. A tabula rasa thus is a suspect concept.

In an interview Masato Kobayashi describes his work in this way:

When there is a support at the start, when I add the pictorial plane by drawing a line, there are two planes, the support and the picture. Then the painting is not really existing on its own, as it has the support behind it. I wanted to create a painting in which only the picture existed, like a page, without the support. It was not the matter of the painting being abstract or figurative. What I wanted was to make a painting take form as an abstract being. In other words, I wanted to create a painting that did not lose anything in taking actual form. (1)

A painting that defies the duality of support / paint and exists as an indivisible entity—this is what Kobayashi tries to create. But as long as we consider the support as a tacitly accepted part of a painting, and as long as we willingly take part in this civilized deception, we cannot begin to see what this artist has in mind. To him, a painting is something that exists with the support but also transcends it to become an independent existence, which floats in space, so to speak, as layers of color that, though very thin in themselves, carry innumerable traces. In the ultimate form, it is a totally dematerialized existence.

Some would say, however, that such a painting can never be more than a concept, that it can

never actually exist on earth. This attitude is in itself a proof that the idea of the support is pervasive. Masato Kobayashi has achieved a remarkable feat in questioning that accepted idea and, instead of building a painting from the *tabula rasa* as is usually done, creating it through making the layers of the support and the colors emerge together and ultimately integrating them into a whole. The fused whole is a painting in the true sense, a painting which exists on its own. It is for this nature of his paintings that they are produced through a unique process: The canvas, at first placed on the floor, is put on stretchers part by part as they are painted, with the finished parts gradually climbing up the wall. The process reminds us in a way of the long history of painting, probably starting in the markings on the ground by fingers or sticks, evolving into cave paintings on rough rock walls, and ending up in its encaging itself within the concept of the plane. In the process that the canvas is painted as I have just described, Kobayashi does not use a brush. As if to commit his whole self to the act, he uses his fingers, the extensions of his brain, mediating between the canvas and the colors. "Let there be light!" He flashes light on the canvas and the colors as a higher being who is pierced by the shaft of light that connects heaven and earth, that is, an artist, making the canvas transparent and lighting up the colors from inside. It was thus not without reason that he insisted for a time that his works were "oil with canvas," not "oil on canvas." A painting is not the colors on the surface of the support. The colors, the artist, and the support—together they create a tension on a level that is far above the material things. This tension can be likened to "air battle," which is the phrase the artist himself once used as the title of one of his solo exhibitions. A painting is not the colors on a support. Instead, the colors and the support are fused into a painting, and are dematerialized, by the almost miraculous mediation of the artist, the messenger of light. The grace and mystery of a painting lies exactly in this transformation.

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Whatever the reason, we come across a painting. But the artist does not necessarily reside in the painting. Instead, the artist is like it me, the passenger that travels across generations, or like the faint sounds from a distant town that lingers in a corner of a room—only a temporary guest. First there is the painting, and then, after an almost unbearable waiting time, there appears the artist.

If the artist is not the central presence in a painting, then what accompanies it, as a partner and a companion, must be the painting itself. In this structure, where the painting is in an ideal relationship with itself, the artist is nothing but an intruder with his limited and flawed existence. The relationship is like that between the real image and the virtual image on either side of the mirror. The real and the virtual—they represent the innumerable differences that are created the instant we think of the law of equivalence ($A=A$).

A painting struggles to become one with itself, and failing in this, reexamines itself and then struggles again: As it does this, it is "an art whose primary interest lies in its own history and its own problems of form, space, and color."⁽²⁾ This is the most absolute and strict concept of painting, and when a painting exists in this way, it is immune to all outer influences and is totally free.

But this is an ideal, and a painting cannot achieve the ideal state instantly. As a precondition, it is required a certain relinquishment, or rather, a severing. As long as a painting tries to be itself and to realize the law of equivalence, it needs to relinquish the outside world as something to be represented and also to sever itself from the conventional and uneducated illusions about painting that reside within itself. When this is achieved, and only then, it becomes possible to practice the self-criticism of Modernism as described by Greenberg. He defines Modernism as "the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant."⁽³⁾ This definition inevitably involves *la modernité* as described by Baudelaire, which is temporary and accidental but at the same time eternal and unchanging. Greenberg emphasizes the flatness of painting as a characteristic that ensures its autonomy from sculpture, which is three-dimensional representation, but he never denies its continuity with earlier art because he recognizes in the continuity the modernity in Baudelaire's sense.

The true significance of Greenberg's theory of modernist painting, however, does not lie in this quite well-known fact. It is, instead, in his establishing a new view of the creative process through considering it as a process of thorough self-criticism. The self-criticism involved, he believes, differentiates Modernism from the earlier attitude of the Enlightenment: While criticism in the Enlightenment came only from the outside, and thus was easy enough to acknowledge, "Modernism criticizes from the inside, through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticized."⁽⁴⁾ This is a form of self-reference, and we can see in it a seed of Deconstructionism, which was so popular some years ago. Modernist painting is in this way innately self-critical, and is destined to question itself endlessly. In the very act of establishing itself as a work of art, a modernist painting questions the basis of all painting. In short, modernist painting is truest to itself when it relentlessly pursues the question of what is a painting.

Since a modernist painting poses a question on itself, it is inevitably unstable, and is always fluctuating vertically in relation to the time axis that runs through the past, the present, and the future, sometimes precariously perched at the end of a jutting reaching into emptiness, but always remaining somewhere between incompleteness and completion. Please note that this is not a flaw. For example, the incompleteness of the Mont Sainte-Victoire paintings from Cezanne's late years is well-known. But when we see that they are fully realized as paintings,

we know that incompleteness can have meaning.

So we ask, is there a way to keep a painting in flux forever, together with its incompleteness and innumerable differences within itself, in some special space, in a kind of sanctuary? To this question, Ad Reinhardt, the absolutist painter who advocated that painting must be totally cut off from the outside world or the community, answered thus: "Art is art-as-art and everything else is everything else. Art-as-art is nothing but art. Art is not what is not art."(5) In saying this, he is going nowhere. Yet, the small world he sets apart, a microcosmos, is very lively. In the same line, Frank Stella has given us this sentence, which sounds like a maxim: "What you see is what you see."(6) Nothing more, nothing less. This might be the most effective defense against the coarse world for the pure microcosmos of painting. He also says the painting's title does not need to suggest its theme, as "the title seems to me the way the painting looks"(?) as an assemblage of materials.

After all, painting, or modernist painting, is a fabric woven of innumerable traces of questions on itself, and I see it as the most intimate expression of the stern fact that human beings are limited existences within the three-dimensional space where death is death and nothing else. The twentieth-century Italian poet Quasimodo has said: "And death is/a space within the heart" (*Ed è morte / uno spazio nel cuore*). The flatness of the painting, or the two-dimensionality of mentally visualized space, casts upon the everyday world the shadow of that sense of death which vaguely occupies a certain space within our heart. When a person dies at a certain time, on a certain day, and at a certain place, it simply means that the death that he has been carrying inside is realized. Our existence in the real world is only temporary, and contains within it the seed of death. We casually look at portraits of deceased people, but in doing so, we are actually confirming the fated connection, or even a bond, between painting and death. When a painter is working on a portrait of a person, the transparent darkness of death is already over that person, and the resulting shadow, which is his copy, takes form as the painting. Because of their mortality humans are painted; and because of the very same they paint.

When there is a painting, whether it depicts a person, an object, a landscape, or something without a name, it thus inevitably carries in it the presence of death, which is another to us but already part of our lives. Concerning this, the too conventional division of figurative/abstract is totally meaningless. Even a most realistic painter cannot capture on the canvas what he, in reality, is facing. He is painting nothing more than his vision, where death is already lurking, not as a reeking reality but as an Idea. In saying this, am I proposing something preposterous? But think of the black squares of Reinhardt, the black stripes of Stella, and the cosmic blue of Klein. These are nothing more than simple color fields. Why do they have the power to move the viewer deeply? Perhaps the magic is in the colors: Black has

been the symbol of death from the ancient times, and blue is probably the most spiritual color. But is that all? What if that the power lies in the vague monochrome expanses, which somehow take on a presence, and even a reality. It would be simple if I could call them the metaphor of death, but I will I be missing some important points if I give in to this simple scheme.

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Masato Kobayashi is a monochrome painter before anything else. All his works, with only a few exceptions, are in the form of expanses, and nuances, of a certain color such as blue, yellow, and reddish brown. This is so evident that it tends to be overlooked, but nevertheless it is an important fact. Why does he paint in monochrome? In an interview, Kobayashi answered this question as follows, in a very casual manner but deftly capturing the abyss that lurks in our superficial daily lives, which is, in other words, the other side of the familiar landscape, or the sudden vertical crack that shatters our comfortable reality:

I enjoy running in motorcycle races. While you run at a normal speed, you see the landscape. When you accelerate, the landscape becomes blurry. The colors start to mingle. Then at an even greater speed, the mingled colors turn into a monochrome. At a high speed, there is no color. And when you go even faster, there is a whiteness, a pure, bright light. That is what I believe. If I actually see the light, I will be dead. So I can't see it while I am alive. But I know there is this state beyond, where there is no form, no color. I want to paint that state. (8)

When he speeds on the motorcycle, he sees far ahead a shining aperture. He feels that, when he reach there, he will see the home of all existing things. We can discern this intuition of his, working as a visionary impulse, in his works. It reminds me of a few lines of verse by Pierre Reverdy, one of the most important French poet in the twentieth century, which are very simple and are almost like floating particles of light:

Le vent est arrivé
Le monde se retire
L'autre côté.

[Here comes a wind.
All things retreat
To the other side.]

Perhaps I am going too far by using the words "all things" for Reverdy's "le monde." But in

any way, these lines capture how, when a wind passes, things flicker and become transparent to show the pure sky beyond, which is always fresh and startling to the eye. Painting, in essence, tries to reproduce that experience. When Masato Kobayashi started to paint some ten years ago, he intuitively chose to pursue this kind of painting, the painting that is far above the common reality and absolute in its loftiness.

As I look back, I realize that this was what was becoming a new goal and a new hope to painting in general, which had become worn out from endlessly repeating color and form. Kobayashi's *Painting=Sky* (Collection of The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo), produced over 1985 and 1986, moved the viewer, especially the serious viewer, by its visionary perfection.

This painting, *Painting=Sky*, is such a striking work. The blue sky is monumental, and beautiful enough to break our heart. What lies at the base of this purity and sadness, that is, the pure sadness? This question actually concerns the fundamental artistic principle of this unparackleled thinker in painting. At the time he was working on this painting, Kobayashi was preoccupied with the concept of painting as an accumulation of innumerable brushstrokes that are applied and then wiped out. The painting was erased as it was painted, or conversely was painted as it was erased, to embody the absence of images. This somewhat negative approach gives it an atmosphere that innumerable lives and deaths, or innumerable sacrifices, enable it to hold shape. Or you can put it this way: This is a blue sky that simply is, indifferent to all the hubbub on earth. This blue sky, with its absolute loftiness, evidently also has the power to lift up all painting with its will for vertical motion. I remember a line from Emile Zola's *The Work* which depicts an unhappy painter and his unfinished work and became the cause of the novelist's breaking of his long friendship with Cezanne: "An incessant rain had made the August air depressing, but with the appearance of the blue sky, the will for creation returned to him"(9). Let us visualize a skylight in high summer, brimming with blueness. Kobayashi's painting is like that: We always look up to it.

The work *Painting=Sky* is an Idea of painting in the Platonic sense, produced over a long period and in principle without similar pieces. We can see that this is a special work in the barely recognizable spaces of light in the picture, which I believe is what Heidegger, the philosopher of existence, calls "Lichtung" (clearing). Heidegger has said, "At the center of all beings, an open spot is at work. It is a clearing." (In mitten des Seienden im Ganzen westeine offene Stelle. Eine Lichtung ist.) Such clearings, light spots in the forest, are surrounded and hidden by existing things, yet they also surround all existing beings just like "the nothingness which we can hardly understand." In short, the hidden subtly surrounds the hiding things. This painting has also made the poet Koichi Tanokura utter: "Those circles of light, floating in radiant clouds, so perfect and beautiful that we feel they can never be reproduced anywhere else." He recognized that the clearings in the picture, only half visible in the perfect blue, were

the home of all existences.

When we remember that all things on earth come, respectively, from one special place, be it a homeland or some kind of parental body, we can understand why this almost miraculous work, Painting=Sky, occupies a privileged place in Kobayashi's inner world. It is a painting that has ascended into the sky by the power of its color, the spiritual blue, and at the same time is a sky that has descended into a painting. With an ordinary painter, he would have produced the ultimate painting in such a work, and it would have marked the end of his creative career. But Masato Kobayashi was not ordinary in any sense. With him, everything started with Painting=Sky, from the absolute top of painting.

[4]

As for Kobayashi's work since Painting=Sky, the mother of all paintings, the most notable quality is their newness. This might sound too grand, but in his work, a great cycle of painting has been completed and a new one is starting. Such a moment can be called a continuum of discontinuities or the differences themselves. Whatever you call it, transformations of every kind is at work at such a moment, and Kobayashi's pictorial space is one of the most radical and aggressive ones we have ever seen.

In June 1992, Masato Kobayashi's solo show titled "Son of Painting" was held at Satani Gallery. On the gallery walls were paintings each presenting a vague figure, barely recognizable as a child or a nude woman, with a round, luminescent head. In an unpublished memo from this period, the artist writes: "Son of painting is the child of Painting=Sky that materialized within the space of pure art. and they are made of luminosity." Then, some lines later, he stresses that "this luminosity is not light itself." It is impossible to strictly differentiate what he calls luminosity from what he calls light. Both his view is very engaging. He says that "light is basically close to humans despite its sublimeness," as "light touches things." And the artist himself who "is a thing, lives within light, breathes light, and receive from light perhaps most of his energy to eat and create." Luminosity is of course related to light, yet it is something else:

But luminosity is prettier.

Luminosity does not let things in.

It does not gather where things are, and do not exist naturally.

You can examine around you carefully, but you will never find it.

Though you can find light lying casually on the studio floor or the ceiling,

You cannot find luminosity.

(It's not the matter of borders.)

It is not in the periphery.

It is at the center, that is probably the clearing.

That is the place of "certain height" where Ideas gather.

Luminosity is the Idea of painting that is on the verge of becoming visible, and a body of gathering that is turning in to a painting.

In his pursuit of luminosity, which is prettier than light, Kobayashi's new series of painting was launched. These paintings, whether they present a figure or a studio scene, are to be called, as a group, as "son of painting," and are radically different from his earlier works in the process they are created. Just as a luminosity takes form as a clearing within uniform space of light, one of these paintings starts as a piece of canvas spread on the floor, and as the artist struggles with it, gradually take form as a painting. Because of this process, all of Kobayashi's recent works are uneven and distorted, sometimes to a horrible degree.

I want to repeat again: The paintings of Masato Kobayashi start in a canvas spread on a plain floor. The canvas on the floor reminds us of the all-over paintings of Pollock, but we have never heard of a Pollock painting climbing the wall as it realized itself as a pictorial surface, as Kobayashi's paintings do. This working style might at first look very strange. But please try to imagine how the earliest pictures by human beings were drawn. Our ancestors probably squatted down to draw on the ground with a stick or something. The picture was at first on the uneven surface of the ground, and then on rock walls and sacred spaces at the deep end of a cave, and then eventually on a canvas, framed and hung on a vertical wall. This is the history of painting itself. In other words, it is logical in a way that Kobayashi's works start in a canvas on the floor and gradually rise up as more and more parts of them are put on support. As the canvas is not mounted on the frame in a single step, it inevitably has some slack parts in the end. Because of this, Kobayashi always starts with a canvas one size larger than the planned work. In the ancient times, pictures were not painted on flat surfaces, and never on conceptualized, ideal flat surfaces; they were painted on uneven surfaces of actual objects which served as the support. And it is not very long since painters started to use the brush; fingers and palms might be better tools even today.

I have seen a photograph of one of Kobayashi's paintings still under work and only half risen from the floor. My first impression was that it looked like a rough wall of rock. But it would turn, through the intervention of the artist, into a painting. Indeed, a painting is that which realizes itself as a painting. In the process of realization, and as the paint is applied, the presence of the artist is woven into the painting as an almost weightless existence like a spirit.

This approach is of course new, and almost totally original. But please remember that such newness, with its new possibilities, has been gained through once returning to the very origin of painting.

In Kobayashi's paintings, which have been created by allowing them to gradually take form, all images remain in flux. Even the most basic scheme in painting, that of the figure against the ground, is not clear in them. But his paintings are not simply ambiguous.

They remind us of that mysterious and colloidal sea of Solaris which freely changes shape to reproduce images retrieved from the depths of men's subconscious: They are totally devoid of demarcations, whether as the perspective or as existence (things) and emptiness (space). This needs to be explained in a little more detail.

Let us suppose that we see a red flower. According to modern thinking based on the view of Aristotle, the flower has the attribute of redness, with the flower being the subject and the color red being the predicate. But if we use the concept of " $\chi \acute{\omega} \rho \alpha$." (field) from Plato's theory of Ideas, we can consider that a field exists first and the red flower is a form assumed by a part of that field.

Then the red color and the flowers are both independent elements which happen to coexist. When we have this approach in mind, we see the red flower in a totally different way.(10) When the red color and the flower, which belong to different dimensions, coexist as a red flower, there is a dimensional discrepancy and a fluctuation. And when an attempt is made to make the difference and the fluctuation visible, that is, I believe, the beginning of painting, the kind of painting that exists outside the depressingly material schemings of humans.

But perhaps light is even freer from human schemings. When Masato Kobayashi makes his paintings rise out of the paint and the canvas, he is actually tackling with light, which is ubiquitous but forever slipping through human hands. A mysterious substance that is both waves and particles, light passes through the field of coexistences in the true sense, if only in a short moment. Light is believed to be born at the beginning of the Universe, and is basically in different to humans. Sometimes it is harsh to them. Yet, when light passes, an area, a clearing, is momentarily created where suddenly all things float a little from the ground as if they have grown wings. And the luminosity that Kobayashi talks about in describing his "son of painting" is the very trace the light leaves as it passes through the material world, that is, the residue of light. As Kobayashi himself says, luminosity is not light itself; it is rather the child of light.

A very clear and pure representation of this luminosity can be found in A Son of Painting(1994; Collection of The Dai-ichi Mutual Life Insurance Company), which presents a corner of the artist's studio, or, in which the canvas has transformed itself into that particular corner. Looking at this rich, yellow sea of images, which forms a fertile field, one might discern

an easel in back left or a paint can in front left, and wonder what is meant by this strong vertical line that is reminiscent of Barnett Newman. That is certainly worthwhile, as each detail is the result of that part of the image field taking form. But the most notable feature of this painting is the forceful light that pervades the picture and looks ready to corrode the objects. And at the center, at a certain height, a mysterious luminosity is being born. This luminosity, I believe, is created as the result of the struggle between the human artist and the light that comes from an absolute height; it is the future of painting, and also, ultimately, its hope.

Notes

- 1) Masato Kobayashi, in ACRYLART, no. 22, 1994, p. 1.
- 2) Rolf-Gunter Dienst, "Absolute Malerei. Zu einer Kunst der Reduktion und Differenzierung," *Das Kunstwerk*, vol.34, no.4, 1981, p.3. The original German reads: " ... eine Kunst, deren Hauptinteresse ihre eigene Geschichte, ihre eigenen Form-, Raum- und Farbprobleme sind."
- 3) C. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Art and Literature*, no. 4 (spring 1965), repr. in Frascina and Harrison (ed.), *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, Harper & Row, 1982, p.5.
- 4) Greenberg, *ibid.*
- 5) Ad Reinhardt, "ART-AS-ART," *Art International*, December 1962, repr. In B. Rose (ed.), *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, Univ. of California Press, 1991, p.53.
- 6) W. S. Rubin, *Frank Stella*, New York: MOMA, 1970, p.44.
- 7) Quoted in Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art*, 1968, p. 158.
- 8) CAPTAIN PEDIA, March 1990, p.63.
- 9) Emile Zola, *L'OEuvre*, Le Livre de Poche, 1985, p.105.
- 10) This aspect of Plato's Idea theory is discussed in detail in Norio Fujisawa, *Ideas and the World* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1980).