

Masato Kobayashi 1996-2001 Ghent

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When I first looked at the white canvas

I said to her: I won't be a painter. – Masato Kobayashi

In 1996 Masato Kobayashi presented two works at the exhibition *De Rode Poort*: a vertical yellowish orange sea of flames and a monumental, intense red landscape. After the exhibition he changed Tokyo for Ghent. For Kobayashi Ghent is the city of the Mystic Lamb, the central panel of the Ghent Altarpiece, of the Van Eyck brothers, or even of the place where painting could have been born - though, of course, painting has lain in many a cradle. It is the city where for the first time he lets his works stand directly onto the floor, leaning against the wall.

Apart from a real European debut, the current exhibition in the S.M.A.K. is also an occasion to become acquainted with a self-willed view on the medium painting, and an equally self-willed relationship with it. Kobayashi's work is an active, fundamental inquiry into the premises and conditions of the pictorial act. Kobayashi does not paint, but (re)defines the art of painting. It is as if the artist settles scores with a certain orthodox approach of painting. Now that for the umpteenth time the end of painting is being announced, Kobayashi seems to search for the moment of time preceding the birth of painting.

Between the moment Kobayashi finished the Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music in 1984 and his most recent work, the leitmotif of his artistic practice hardly seems to have changed. In 1993 the artist stated: 'If I think to begin painting while standing in front of the stretched canvas, it is already too late. The painting already has to be done by the time I stretch it.' In other words: 'The white canvas is already a painting. For better or worse, it already fulfils the necessary conditions of painting. it is painting.'

In Kobayashi's view the essence of painting lies consequently not in the tension of the surface or the stretcher, nor in the pictorial layering and/or transparency, nor in drawing upon the white canvas: painting is an act which takes place before the canvas has been stretched. A large part of the developments in twentieth-century painting are therefore a lie or a fraud. Many works seek to pass as paintings, while actually ignoring an accurate (re)definition of painting, i.e. a lot of painters accept the hierarchic triad of paint, canvas and stretcher, while in Kobayashi's view the mere act of stretching the canvas on the stretcher means a loss of

pictorial possibilities and their exclusion.

Painting is paint plus canvas plus wood. Or wood plus paint plus canvas. Not: paint on canvas on a stretcher. The only hierarchy Kobayashi discovers between these elements is variable and gives itself away through the physical and spatial articulation of the work. Paint cannot 'sponge' on the canvas or stretcher; it can only acquire and explore a real significance through a symbiotic relationship and interaction with the other parts of the whole. Painting as gestalt, painting as environment.

Not unlike Ilya Kabakov, who has introduced the concept of the 'total installation', Kobayashi refers to 'total painting'. A painting is neither a window onto the world, nor an autonomous, concrete fact. Kobayashi's work evolves globally, in and for a specific space. The work absorbs space, experiences it and expands like a sculpture into space. As a sculpture, it can be read like a painting. And vice versa: as a painting the work is situated somewhere in a twilight zone between the pictorial environment and/or spatial installation.

Kobayashi's work(process) becomes painting, moment, trace and memory. The canvas hangs down from the place where he has left it, the wooden beams have been nailed together in a makeshift way, the paint - often tending towards a monochrome red or yellow - tries to find the way the artist has plotted all by itself. As if any moment the works will stop breathing, existing.

For Kobayashi, painting is more about an attitude or a method to plot 'pictorial constellations', than about the definite and concrete finishing of an 'oil on canvas'. The pictorial surface is a pretext to break through space and light. It becomes a reminiscence of the act of painting and of the choice to paint. The paint becomes a balm to heal the wound of painting. The wood becomes the crutch with which Kobayashi will carry the work into space.

The geology of a painting becomes the morphology and geology of a crystal. Kobayashi denies and negates the classical geology, restraint and challenge imposed by the painting. The act of painting becomes an invitation to encompass physically and pictorially space and light. With his hands and his whole body Kobayashi forces, pushes, squeezes the paint, wood and canvas into space, away from the two-dimensional surface, as if he destroys the painting to reinvent the art of painting in general and his in particular.

Visiting the Louvre, Kobayashi wondered how much more expressive Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* would be, if only it did not present itself as a classical painting, but would

reveal itself through the simultaneous and processlike development of his method

When racing at full speed formula one racers sometimes lose the ability to experience images and colours: everything turns white and empty. As if an image becomes colour. As if speed contains emptiness, or the endlessness of the white surface/canvas. Fortunately, Kobayashi has not yet reached this speed with his paintings.

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