Between Fiction and Illusion: Masaya Chiba's Bi-Focal Imagination

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1. Primary Landscape and Artificial Staging

Masaya Chiba is noted for his paintings of haunting landscapes showing desolate places inhabited only by white faceless statues and masks. Strongly suggestive of ruins of a civilization returned to a primitive stage after some catastrophe, the landscapes nevertheless indicate their fictional nature by deliberately showing such artificial props as wooden sticks supporting white statues and masks, or other materials for painting, including the photographs of landscapes resembling the painted ones. Their juxtaposition of opposite elements produces a unique effect surpassing the category of "Surrealism." It conveys the sense of a dream vision suspended on the edge of waking consciousness; it is as if the painting presented an illusion which is perceived as such by the dreamer himself, but nevertheless maintained as a lived reality, due to its actual affect; the same illusion is at once permeated by the mind of an analytical observer who is measuring distance from it, calculating the precise moment to reveal to the spectator its constructed nature.

Take, for example, the following two 2004 paintings, *A friend in the Rocky Mountains 3* and *Mountain Climbing During "Obon"*. In the former, a white faceless figure stands over the view of rocky mountains with an enigmatic gesture of holding out one arm with a fist turned down, while the latter shows a similar white figure in front of another mountain, this time with a visible wooden stick propping it up to reveal its puppet-like status. A slight shift of focus in pictorial representation changes the paintings' functions and effects, from the illusionistic to the meta-fictional, from the magical to the ironic.

The changing degrees of Chiba's ironic distanciation of his illusion are most saliently demonstrated by the series of paintings entitled *Peaceful Village*. Initially painted in 2006, with a group of eight masks and objects standing, like totemic monuments, against a primary wood with a blue lake, its variations in 2007, 2008 and 2011, simultaneously reflect the artist's persistent pursuit of a vision of ruins and his gradual revelation of the artificial process of his creation, with a step-by-step demolition of the illusion: the 2007 version shows a table on which masks and figures stand in front of a yellow desert; in the 2008 version, two tables and a black office chair appear, carrying more objects, together with a small painting, in contrast to the big river flowing into a waterfall; the 2011 version displays, against the red, rocky mountain ridges, more than forty small objects, now neatly set up on the shelves like action figures, posing as "characters" in continuing narratives of the new ice age.

2. Embodiment of Allegory and Interface of Visual Information

Chiba's panting thus vacillates between the allegorical depiction of a primary landscape and its analytical account. His creation has also had dual engines of the tactile and the imaginary. He has made small paper-mache objects which were about 10-to-50-centimeter high, placed them in front of an actual or photographic landscape, to paint a fictive scene. His vacillation between these opposite poles—illusion and analysis, tactile materiality and pure fiction, produced, en route, paintings with completely opposite styles and themes. The polarization is typically embodied by the paintings presented in Chiba's two gallery exhibitions at ShugoArts, "Mitsukyo" in December 2008 to February 2009, and "The Wonderful World I Got to See Because I Was Alive" in January through March in 2011.

Taking over from his early works the basic motif of statuesque figures standing in front of a primitive

landscape, the paintings exhibited in "Mitsukyo" demonstrated increased monumentality and materiality. The representative painting *Mityukyo* consisted of two canvases combined into one large canvas that measured 259 by 330 centimeters, set up on a 70-centimeter pedestal. The painting depicted a primal wood whose plants grew with more density and luxuriance, with the purple and pink palette, the thick application of paint, and large brushstrokes adding an impression of lush growth and tactility to the painted surface; the white figures were painted with a dynamic modeling and lighting that gave an illusion of three-dimensionality, creating an uncanny impression of statues coming to life. The boundary between painting and sculpture was deliberately violated by the exhibition paintings' presentation of pure fictional images with exaggerated tactility and anthropomorphic installation devices. *Crying Face* presented a faceless sculptural head, placed against a large tree with extended branches, shedding what seemed like large drops of tears. While the image indicated a Distopian vision of a defunct robot lamenting for an extinct civilization, the additional details of a wooden table and stick propping up the head and a hose attached to the back of the head suggested that it was an artificial device of running water from a strange fountain head. At the same time, the installation of the painting set up on a pedestal, supported by a wooden frame, making the painting's entire height measure about 160 centimeters, presented the head's image slightly below the eye level of an average adult spectator, eliciting the impression of standing face-to-face with a humanized figure. The painting's physical affect was intensified by the thick application of paint which produced a hard, uneven, texture conveying a rugged, stone-like touch.

The paintings in "The Wonderful World I Got to See Because I Was Alive," in contrast, projected a composed indoor milieu, which was enhanced by smooth application of paint and an imagery emphasizing the pastiche character of Chiba's creative process that interfaces various images from diverse sources to construct artificial visions of wilderness. In *Snakey,* the objects that had appeared in Chiba's former paintings are presented as small ornamental figures, individually positioned on the sofa, side tables, and other interior items, together with small photographs showing landscapes evocative of those that had formed his paintings' backgrounds. While a paper snake festooning the sofa reinforced a back-stage milieu, undermining any indication of menace, each picture functioned as an allusive window to wild nature, indicating heterogeneous layers of existence underlying quotidian reality. The juxtaposition of the magical and the ironic was achieved with a subtle balance in *A 50-Person Living Room*, which showed the interior of the artist's room filled with paper-mache objects and photographs, as well as large and small paintings-in-progress; the flat equalizing light endowed each object an air of allegorical significance, as in a Northern-Renaissance painting. Some of the paintings, photographs, statues, gloves, and bowls are arranged in a way that suggested the outlines of two human figures reclining in chairs, soberly implying that human identities are constituted with diverse pieces of information. The presence of ipod, a computer, a CD, books and videotapes ensured this impression. The ubiquity of possible meanings suggested by each object signified both the expansion of an associative universe and the loss of meaning in the cacophony of obscure symbols. This destabilization of quotidian reality and its suspension between factuality and spirituality by shedding an oblique allegorical light on every banal object confirmed Chiba's paintings' participation in the category of magical realism. It resembled a kind most notably attained by the New-Matter-of-Fact paintings of the Weimer Republic, which was described by one art critic as "a realism that depicts banal everyday objects but make them emerge in the 'metaphysical and chimerical space' by shedding an otherworldly light on them."1

3. Art History and Its Discontents

The vacillation between allegory and irony in Chiba's paintings points to the dilemma and merit of a late modern painter struggling to attain originality against the burdens of art history. His use of "picture frames within the picture" indicates his debt to the preexisting works of art and abundant visual sources surrounding him, admitting his recycling of such visual materials. In spite of their professed artificiality, however, Chiba's images do not diminish their deep psychological appeal. One of the reasons is that his repeated construction of a vision alluding to the ruins、suggesting a state between an end of one civilization and the beginning of another, communicates a strong yearning for the regeneration of creative power, shedding off unnecessary cultural memories.

In his simultaneous application of preexisting images and yearning to a cultural *tabula rasa*, Chiba joins Mamma Andersson, the excellent contemporary Swedish painter who also incorporates small picture frames, which frequently contain past masterpieces, into her own paintings. At the same time, she suggests the dissolution of familiar reality taking place especially in such archives of cultural memory as libraries and museums, by rendering human figures and landscapes in shimmering optical patterns, which cause a vertiginous effect, while literally demonstrating the melting down of figurative images into dots and folds. In Anderson's 2005 painting, *Touched by Gods*, for example, a library floor is invaded by ghostly figures of people emerging from an overflow of dissolved images, which turn out to be the lost content of the painting on the room's central wall, while small panels on the side wall refer to the paintings of Edvard Munch, Peter Doig, and Andersson herself. The body of one visitor looking into a display case begins to disappear, indicating that ghosts and human being exist on the same dimension, or that simulacra take over a real life. In Chiba's *50-Person Living Room*, the human figure is also replaced by materials for his painting, indicating the disappearance of humanity in the heap of visual information. At the same time, the 2011 version of *Peaceful Village* visualizes an invasion of wild nature into the artist's studio; in spite of its apparent back-stage milieu, the glaring light cast on the mountain ridges communicates their hard, rugged texture, emphasizing the psychological reality of an illusion, making it a hallucination with an undeniable physical affect.

4. Deep Image and Simulacra

Chiba's images of primal nature that conveys its affective reality is a species of a poetic image that can be called "Deep Image." Defined and cultivated by contemporary American modernist poets, such as Robert Bly and James Wright, in the 1960s, "Deep Image" is a prototypical image which captures the unconscious patterns of perception through which the individual psyche establishes links with external phenomenon and living organisms, beyond the boundary of an individual ego. 2 Concrete details found in everyday scenes and landscapes are accumulated by the poet, who metaphorically transforms and condenses them into a simple but multivalent image, according to the drives arising from the depths of the psyche. 3

Many of Chiba's images qualify as "Deep Image," because they are created through the juxtaposition and accumulation of hand-made objects, real landscapes and images from printed or painted materials, and because such a simple image as a solitary figure of a white faceless statue visiting wilderness elicits many interpretations, functioning especially as a contemporary variation of *vanitas,* providing an allegory of human frailty. But an early example of the "Deep Image" is found in his 2006 painting, *Pretty M.* The painting shows a building with a pair of large eyes painted on the upper wall of its façade emerge in the dusk, in the unpopulated countryside, lit up by the fire burning in three individual cans. Immediately reminiscent of the episode of an eye doctor's signboard in *The Great Gatsby*, the image nevertheless evokes religious, emotional, or science-fiction contexts, expanding its field of association according to the spectator's

memory. Chiba created a base of this surreal picture by actually painting the eyes on the upper front of the Fukutake House building situated in the countryside of Niigata Prefecture; combining other details, such as fire, extracted from different occasions, he constructed an image that best translated his internal vision.4

Chiba's paintings also embody the idea of simulacra defined by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. He described Simulacra as an "event of perception," a psychic formation released from logical causality or personal emotion, which realizes "a cosmic, impersonal, and pre-individualistic singularitie."5 Comparing two definitions of simulacra presented by ancient philosophy, Deleuze emphasizes that, in contrast to the Platonic definition of simulacra as a copy, the Epicurean simulacra refers to a pure mental construct rooted in the singularities of existing phenomena. At the early state of manifestation, the Epicurean simulacra combine physical affects coming from the body's depth, like sounds, smells, tastes, and temperature, and the visual determination of the surface like colors and forms, to produce an image detached from the original object; at the more advanced stage, they form autonomous images as "phantasms" completely independent of their original source, which are like "dream visions" created by choosing and condensing details suitable to the dreamer's inner drives ("supplying the *animus* with the visions that pertain to their own right").6

Chiba's image seems to be situated between the early and advanced stages of the Epicurean simulacra. The fact that his creation is supported by the two polar drives of the imaginary and the tactile testifies to this. While composing his images through the accumulation of diverse visual sources, Chiba has always included the tactile process of making his objects by hand; placing them in front of actual landscapes or photographs, and feeling their presence and distance, he had painted an imaginary picture with physical affects. In other words, tactility, or a sense of physical presence, sustains the reality of Chiba's dream vision. It is just as in a real dream, original experiences are transformed into strange situations, which still maintain a vivid sense of actual occurrence, affecting the dreamer's psyche as truly lived events. This seems particularly true in Chiba's treatment of an image of a burning house, which has been present in his painting since 2003. In order to paint this image, he created a small model of a house, and burnt it, in order to "impress on his mind the feelretrieve the impact of a burning fire, which had been romanticized by the representation of Hollywood films."7 The image of a burning fire has entered many of his paintings, sometimes giving the picture symbolic overtones (*Pretty M*, 2006), sometimes endowing a still life image with an eely and naturalistic sense of tactility (*Jungle*, 2006), and at other times combining symbolic and physical effects (*Untitled*, 2007).

Chiba's creation of "Deep Image" finds its contemporary predecessors in the methods and attitudes of such contemporary masters of individualistic painterly innovation as Mamma Andersson and Peter Doig. Both share with Chiba the magical realist milieu and a persistent vision of the dissolution of a familiar world. The "dissolution" is not only thematically addressed, but physically conveyed, by rendering human and other figures in dots and fold–like patterns, and producing glaring or flickering optical effects that make the spectator experience the decentering of vision. In Doig's 1995 painting, *Figure in Mountain Landscape (I love you big bunny),* a fooded figure's face also melted in folds, as if to correspond with the surrounding landscape that also is replaced by waterly and shimmering patterns. Doig also creates his enigmatic images by condensing visual information collected from various photographic materials found in books, album sleeves, films and advertisements, according to his deeper inner needs. His images are frequently described as possessing a deep psychological appeal that can be shared by his spectators. In his own manner, Chiba also makes his painting a medium for a perceptual experience.8 His various devices in the Mitsukyo paintings, to give his paintings three-dimensional illusions and sense of materiality, including

the thick application of paint, the stretching of the edges of a canvas off the frame, and the installation of the painting on a pedestal, embodied his effort to release painting from its imprisonment in a two-dimensional illusion. His "Wonderful World" paintings, on the other hand, represented his return, from the literalist approach, to the cultivation of painting's metaphorical ability to evoke the spectator's philosophical meditation on the equal "reality" and interdependence of external phenomena and internal occurrences of the artist's mind.

5. Eternity and Finitude—A Turtle's Dream

It can be assumed that Chiba explores the possibilities of maintaining a painterly practice as a contemporary art in the face of the overwhelming weight of visual culture and crisis of creativity. The fact that he adopts a figurative, almost realistic, representation of an internal vision, rather than inventing a new style of painting, indicates that he resolutely accepts his latecomer's position in art history, refraining from the modern game of "overcoming" his predecessors, and searching, instead, for a sense of reality and relevance for his contemporary viewers. The contemporary appeal of Chiba's painting is unmistakable in three points: 1) his bi-focal presentation that combines narrative illusion and ironic distancing of its allegorical content; 2) his dialectical application of tactile and imaginative elements, producing simulacra as pure phantasm by modifying mental constructs developed from the interfacing of diverse visual resources by physical affects preserved from actual contact with reality, and 3) his cultivation of visions of primary nature, civilization's ruins, and an in-between state of a world waiting for the regeneration of a new culture.

Chiba's pursuit of primal nature and physicality finds a close analogy in the physical and collectivist practices of contemporary Japanese artists. For example, the artist Hiraku Suzuki, who makes a gigantic drawing piece consisting of small fragmentary images, and the dance group Contact Gonzo, who improvise new dance movement in random corners of a public space, look for the yet unrealized means of communication outside the legitimate language system and individualistic authorship, either by collecting linguistic gestures from anonymous graffiti to make a composite sign system, or by producing new moves in spontaneous responses to sudden attacks, in the manner of a wrestling or street fighting. Chiba's paintings may look a little more conservative than their art. But his method of using masks and statues with predetermined roles repeatedly and revealing to the spectators the fictive nature of the scene, only to make them experience the presented vision as a simulacra with actuality reinstates the production of a "waking dream" achieved by a Noh play which convinces the audience of the true presence of the apparition, even after a hundred times of its staging by conjuring up a non-existing time and space through the subtle interplay of Noh masks, dance and gestures, whose functions and meanings are rigorously determined.

Chiba's aspiration to capture a perceptual and imaginary experience beyond artificial production, while flaunting its fictive nature is reflected in a modest but enigmatic painting entitled *A Turtle's Life*, shown in the "Wonderful World" exhibition. The picture presents a sideway view of the interior of a transparent plastic case containing a turtle and a small female statue; the three sides of the case are surrounded by a piece of paper on which the images of photographs and picture frames containing portraits of black female figures are painted or pasted; a fluorescent lamp horizontally set above the case sheds a neutralizing light on everything, making the distance of images from the case seem ambiguous. This arrangement may suggest the artist's never-ending desire to reach beyond the confines of individual consciousness for the unification of meanings existing on different levels of life. As if to encourage more allegorical reading, a turtle tilts its head toward the statue, as if to respond to the statue's emphatic gesture of holding the fisted right hand in front of its chest. Could the picture be suggesting the frailty of human representation against

the eternity of the natural processes? But the meaning is kept obscure, with all the possible allusions suspended in disconnection, as signs and symbols mean nothing to a turtle that has its own unique realm of perception. The painting may be alluding to the world of things as they are, which exist beyond the human, signifying perspective, but fuse figurative forms never cease to incite the viewer's desire to interpret. The turtle thus also evokes the episode of Zeno's paradox, in which a tortoise's walk that can never be overtaken by Achilles functions as a metaphor of infinity. With this association, the painting implies the unconquerable distance between the spectator and the painter. Although the painter shows all of his devices for his painting, providing the spectator with the materials to suppose the next step or course of his painterly exploration, he always walks a little ahead of the spectator's expectation, finding new, startling ways to combine familiar figures to demonstrate a finite world's endless capacity for change.

Notes

1 Suehiro Tanemura, *Magical Realism:The Art of Melancholy* (Tokyo: Parco Publishing, 1988), p. 10.
2 "Deep Image" was first theorized by the American poet Robert Kelly in his 1961 article, "Notes on the Poetry of Deep Image" in *Trober 2*. But it was Robert Bly's redevelopment throughout the 1960s, in such essays as "A Wrong Turning in American Poetry," published in *Choice 3* (1963) and "Dear World and Wrong World," published in *Sixties 8* (1966), as well as his own poetic practice, that made "Deep Image" an influential poetic category and theoretical idea. Bly's theory of "Deep Image" was influenced by the psychology of Carl Jung, as well as the poems of such European poets of surrealistic tendency as Cesar Vallejo, Pabro Neruda, and Georg Trakl, as well as Rainer Maria Rilke; the most influential American practitioner of the "Deep Image " poetry was Bly and his friend, James Wright; see James E. B. Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945-1965* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 183.
3 Ibid., p. 179; cf. "At the prelogical and primordial levels of his psyche the poet experiences the interdependency of all life, participating in an energy he shares with the natural world, with other human beings, and thus with the readers"(179)
4 Chiba painted the images on the building of Fukutake House, and showed *Pretty M* inside it, on the occasion of the 3rd Echgo-Tsumari Triennial, held in 2006.
5 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester, with Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 273-4; Deleuze's original French edition, *Logique du sense*, was first published in 1969.
6 Ibid., p.p. 275-6.
7 Chiba's own statement made in an email to the author in February, 2011.
8 Matthew Higgs, "Peter Doig" in *Artforum* (May, 2003), n. ,; Higgs described the effect of Doig's images as "uncannily familiar."