

Between fiction and reality—painting as world map and painting as sensory medium

A conversation with Masaya Chiba

by Midori Matsui

To begin:

The main object of this talk session is to find out what motivates Masaya Chiba to paint; what drives him to keep painting in today's art world environment by no means always favorable to painting, and the meaning of doing so.

Here I would like to explore, with input from Chiba-san, what he has endeavored to achieve in the past, and the directions he hopes to take in future, focusing primarily on interpretations of his latest works—those at this exhibition—and reflecting on the distinctive techniques and themes of his output from around 2005, and the technical revisions and modifications that have occurred every couple of years or so.

As part of this, by viewing individual works and listening to what Chiba-san has to say, I will make some observations on the features that characterize his oeuvre, namely: 1) Frontality, 2) His skill (superlative control of flatness and solidity) in conveying a single worldview via the application of the paint, and 3) The fabrication of “lived fictions” by combining man-made objects, everyday scenes and printed imagery to form fictive landscapes created by the blending of real and artificial, and endowing these landscapes with a sense of vivid realism (in which, even if the viewer does not personally share the experience, they feel, viscerally, a kind of nostalgia, as if gazing on an imagined scene from their mind's eye); and of “simulcra / phantasm” (Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens* [The Logic of Sense]) or organic and deep image (Robert Bly), in which emotions arising from deep in the psyche connect with detectable perceptual effects on the body's surface, such as light, shape, touch, smell and distance, to create original images.

Ultimately, my desire is to confirm the way in which Chiba's paintings serve as powerful embodiments of the fictive (illusory) quality that is the innate character of painting. At the same time, I would like to discuss with him how his latest works, rather than simply maintaining their autonomy within the picture frame, are moving in a “realistic” or “experiential” direction: appealing strongly to the viewer's senses and offering a less quotidian visual experience, to stir the viewer's unconscious and memory not by representations of reality or artificial substitutes, but by this visual experience being an event in itself.

The conversation:

The 2017 solo show, while retaining your previous format of setting up on a stand objects you have prepared, and painting them, appears to mark a major departure from your established style in terms of the size of the paintings, theme and technique, and approach to spatial composition.

In other words, while displaying a compelling compositional cohesion by making thematic links between objects and printed imagery and landscapes, you show the images of these things resonating beyond the inside and outside of the picture frame, and the way in which this gives the impression of the inside and outside of the room, inside and outside of the painterly space, a constant switching between and permeating of each other, has been the distinguishing feature of your painting. In this latest show however, the following characteristics may be noted: 1) Frequent use of partial perspective, 2) Frequent use of text, 3) A shift from the application of paint with a flat, homogeneous, dry texture with a grayish sheen, uniting disparate objects in a single realm, which has defined the texture of your painting to date, to a moister, glossier finish, and 4) The choice of experiential composition in which images of landscape and objects set against each other as separate, individual realities, are not representations / copies of things, but possess a realism in their own right, and have a physical and psychological impact on the viewer.

These features are also characteristics that first appeared at your show in 2016, with the difference I think that this time, you have deliberately chosen to take your expression in this new, experiential, directly physical direction, and are demonstrating this clearly to the viewer as well.

Can you tell us in your own words about this change in direction, as we look at some specific works?

Work 1: *Painting of the Family Story*

Here, you retain your method of taking objects you have made yourself, and things found in your living space, and bringing them together within the frame of the painting to depict a single, coherent world / landscape, yet the look of the painting is very different, the main reasons being:

- 1) Images of each individual thing have greater solidity (brought about by extensive incorporation of partial perspective, so that each individual object appears to stand out, irrespective of the overall cohesion).
- 2) The object behind the figures appears to be glowing of its own accord. A boundless blue expanse reminiscent of seawater or sky, it may be interpreted in a number of ways—as a lightbox, water tank, or another painting within the painterly space.
- 3) Written text has been incorporated significantly as an important part of the painting, the story of the family being written in fine text on a sheet of notepaper in the picture.
- 4) The application of paint has shifted from the dry, planar texture characteristic of your work up to around 2012, to a slightly wetter look, resulting in moister-looking color and light.
- 5) Instead of the white, faceless plaster heads that were the trademark of your work up to about 2012, the figures here wearing robe-like garments are of a sort invariably to be found in homes with grandparents born in the first half of the Showa era, and have faces drawn on.

What has brought about these changes?

Despite the overall partial increase in realism, the riddle of the painting as a whole—the premonition that deep within the images we can perceive the latent meaning—is deepened.

Is there in fact such a “riddle”?

Works 2, 3 and 4: *End of the Primitive Era, Yatsuzaki Halo, Medusa Whispering “WASURETE”*

End of the Primitive Era shows a machine that fires arrows leaving painterly vestiges on the thing it hits, with pigment on the tip, and an object serving as the target. The distance between the two is depicted as an empty space in the center of the long, narrow painting, and the depiction of an “arrow” flying through it serves as an “affective” device to synchronize the event occurring in the painting with the viewer’s sense of distance.

In *Yatsuzaki Halo* too, a similar device allows the viewer to experience the imaginary goings-on in the painting with powerful physical sensation. In this case, the painting portrays a machine that destroys things by directing light at them, and things that have thus been destroyed, but the canvas is shaped, curved in the middle and bent around the right-angled corner of two walls. The distorted form of the painting appears to suggest the occurrence of a distortion of the magnetic field in this space, altering the dimension and origins of the objects.

And in *Medusa Whispering “WASURETE,”* the hiragana characters for “*wasurete*” are rendered so as to appear one on top of the other from a TV screen below the sculpted head, as if to embody the time difference as a voice is heard.

Why did you pursue this kind of expression?

Moreover, the titles of these works are striking: what do they mean? For example, does the “primitive era” end with the birth of painting? How is *Yatsuzaki Halo* related to the Medusa monster of Greek myth that appears in *Medusa Whispering “WASURETE”*?

2. On the 2016 solo show

I pointed out earlier that the paintings in your 2016 solo show displayed a change in technique that connects to this current show. Let us take a look at the individual works.

Work 1: *Pork Park #1, Pork Park #3, Pork Park #4, Pork Park #2*

Looking at these paintings, in this order, one notes that while employing what might be referred to as your signature style—the technique of arranging on a table or stand various objects (some made by you, others everyday items), and rendering them in the painterly space—you have switched from the technique of using a flat, even application of paint to consolidate the space, to employing partial perspective to endow individual objects with a three-dimensional quality, causing these objects to protrude to a much greater extent. #4 in particular—in that although from a distance, the objects strike one as isolated and diffuse, on closer inspection each seems to loom out of the canvas—is close to *Let’s have an adventure #3*, perhaps the culmination of this trend.

On the other hand, in #2 you portray items you have made, set against a real landscape, and by—as in *Mitsukyo*—juxtaposing composed objects and real landscape, and portraying the real landscape as part of an imaginary world, you transform the mundane everyday into a mysterious, ruin-like Romantic space, a technique that results in a totally different effect. Both landscape and objects are more solid and real, yet feel like separate entities, existing independently without intersecting.

Why did you choose this particular way of rendering?

3. Here we shall track changes in your painting style from 2006 to 2015, and by doing so, confirm that these technical alterations did not occur out of the blue, but manifested incrementally over time, from around 2011.

Work 1: *Peaceful Village*, 2006

Starting with this work, landscapes are juxtaposed with objects made by you, and in this work, one may see a discursive, integrated connection between the two. Though employing colors from nature such as blue, green and yellow, in this work everything has a grayish neutral tone that gives a sense of cohesion. Within this, the black of the cloth on which the objects sit draws the picture plane in, the design on the fabric, rendered more distinctly than the landscape, suggesting a reversal of “reality” and “fiction,” of landscape and printed imagery. Overall, it is a work that, while giving the impression of ruins, or a scene from a dream, suggests that somewhere, there lies a “trick.”

This work is clearly in your trademark, signature style (there is a series of works with the same title), **but what made you paint combinations of composed objects and landscapes in the first place?**

Work 2: *Study for Village*, 2008

Here too we have the juxtaposing of composed objects and landscape, except that the antagonism between them is more obvious. The contrast of compact miniature garden look and rugged “natural” landscape serves rather to give the painting a bewitching, hallucinatory quality, as if a vision of majestic nature has interposed itself on the everyday world.

Can you tell us why you composed it this way?

Moreover, why—as in *Peaceful Village* and *Study for Village*—did you choose a word suggestive of tranquil human endeavor, while employing imagery reminiscent of ruins and unreality?

Work 3: *Mitsukyo*, 2008

In your show in that year, you exhibited a large number of pictures in which the heads or top halves of faceless plaster figures, stood on wooden rods and placed in jungle-like settings, were installed on stands, with the pigment extending out onto those stands, a display method that suggested painting drawing physically closer to sculpture. **Why did you display these works in that way? Plus, the juxtaposing of the faceless plaster figures facing each other, or sideways, and the jungle,**

evoked various narratives. Can you tell us about the role, the significance of these images in terms of appealing to the viewer's emotions and memories, quite beyond anything of your own design as the artist?

Works 4, 5, 6, 7: *A sleeping man*, 2009; *A 50-person living room*, 2011; *Lucky hat*, 2011; *Crying face*, 2011

In these works there is a perceptible determination to bring about change by taking the distinctive style established between *Peaceful Village* and *Mitsukyo*, and pushing it in two contrasting directions. On the one hand, we have various objects placed on a table, images drawn on postcards and images of objects resonating with one another, with vast scenes from nature painted on little postcards emphasizing that in comparison, the objects are ordinary and commonplace. On the other hand we have a crying plaster head contrasted with landscapes, the application of paint for the plaster head more solid, the landscapes flat like backdrops, or with brushstrokes stressed like an abstract painting, to suggest a fictive quality.

Works 8, 9: *Snakey*, 2011; *Fairy #2*, 2011

Here, objects with curved forms, and curved lines, link different things (largely the same in the two paintings), with you drawing a distinction between three-dimensional things and two-dimensional traces, object in the former, and drawing in the latter.

Here, especially in the 2011 technique, you experiment with two directions—making your paintings flatter in composition, with a more deliberate fictive quality; and amplifying the material realism of a single striking image and presenting it like an object—in the end, in 2012's *Turtle's Life #2* choosing the former method.

Can you tell us about the process of trial and error that went into this, about your search for direction?

Also, *Turtle's Life #2* strikes me as the work in which you perfected the technique of using printed imagery on the likes of postcards, photos and T-shirts to demonstrate the potential for resonance and mutual permeation with the world "outside" while depicting a small, independent world indoors, with greater complexity of composition than ever before, and more elaborate technique. Here, the case containing the turtle and the space around it are drawn separately, to present two layers of "indoors," but even so, the work avoids a closed look. **Can you tell us about the motivation behind this work, and any tricks or devices you came up with?**

4. From 2012 onward your painting seemed to integrate various devices developed up to that time, with added variations, to produce canvases of new and greater substance each time (*A Sporty Planet*, 2013's *Sound of Ohiii Into the Moon and the Sun*, and *Re-visiting*). 2015's *Peaceful Village* is an accumulation of such devices, and also, in my view, the culmination of the task—ongoing since 2006—of building hallucinatory fictive landscapes via the juxtaposing of plaster objects and landscapes.

Why did you call this work, *Peaceful Village*? And, having earned a stable reputation and popularity as a painter between 2012 and 2015, why did you embark on new experiments like those apparent in your 2016 works?

5. In 2015 you produced *Self-Portrait #4*, in which you painted your own face on that of an acquaintance, then after having the person perform some act characteristic of them, pressed that face onto canvas like a rubbing. I think this act shows your approach to the genre of the “self-portrait” as someone who, in his paintings up to then, had depicted people’s feet and hands, and gloves, plaster figures and so on, but never the entire figure of a person, or a self-portrait.

Why is it that in your works you often include parts of the body (especially in 2016’s *Pork Park #5*) and things to do with the body, but never a whole body?

6. 2016’s *Pork Park #3* and *Let’s have an adventure* are major works that truly embody your new direction. In them, as well as individual items being depicted with a three-dimensional feel, the flat and the printed—text, drawings, pictures on postcards etc.—are rendered with the appropriate planar quality and texture. That is to say, while objects are differentiated with greater precision than ever, they maintain a precarious balance in the painterly space, making it barely work as a cohesive painting. In *Let’s have an adventure* the balance of that painterly autonomy is starting to break down, the painterly space even starting to look a little cluttered and chaotic. On closer inspection though, the different rendering of the solidity of the objects and the texture of the flat text, drawings, and printed images is stark, and the process of studying the differences between them really does become a visual “adventure.” **How did you move from this, to expressing solidity, texture, and light on smallish canvases as in this show?**

The expression of the glowing object in *Painting of the Family Story* can also be seen in paintings like *Painting of the Potholder with the Instruction; Bathing/Peeping; Sagamihara Stone Burger; and Walking Snake*. And in *Man Drinking Oolong Tea*, the light dropped into the landscape, and the surface of the oolong tea in the foreground, give off the same color of light, resonating with each other. Can you tell us why you have expressed light in this way?

7. This latest exhibition is notable for affective, experiential expression, as in *Feeling of Wanting to Kiss*, where the face is merged with the canvas, but the lips stick out, the desire to kiss embodied by these protruding lips.

Unlike your paintings up to 2015, which were underpinned by meta-fictional references to autonomy, flatness, and fictionality, as if to flaunt the fictive quality of painting, this exhibition appears to be moving in an experiential direction; like an object or performance that offers the viewer a certain type of physical and sensory experience, causing them to awaken of their own accord to a certain psychological effect.

Though this risks repeating the previous question, can you tell us why you are now heading in this direction?

8. I believe that painting is fundamentally a “fiction” in which a person takes inspiration and stimulation acquired from the real world, and transposes it on their own personal system of interpretation. That is the condition for the production of paintings, whether figurative or abstract. In his 1940 essay “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” Clement Greenberg rejected fiction and illusion leading to the imitation of the novel by painting, asserting that emphasizing the materiality of painting was a return to its innate nature. The addition of this condition of Modernist painting—the assertion that emphasis on materiality equals purity in painting—in my view added a powerful self-referentiality and criticality to the act of painting a picture. At the same time, a potentially confusing critical thesis also arose of confrontation between fictionality and the purity of painting, or between the materiality of painting and the experiential quality of artworks.

Your works are rendered in a manner that integrates materiality and fictionality (allegory), and simultaneously creates, as mentioned earlier, compositions that emphasize painting’s frontal character, and painterly spaces with a vivid dreamlike sensation in which man-made and real materials are cleverly combined, so that printed imagery and reality mingle and interchange. This speaks eloquently of how your works, as well as being faithful to painting’s innate way of being, transcend the fiction/materiality conflict introduced by the defining of Modernist painting, in an embodiment of the will to be painting.

What are your views on this?

Here for example we have the words of sociologist Georg Simmel, whose career extended from the late 19th into the early part of the 20th century, and Robert Bly, who in the 1960s called for a return to the deep and organic image arising from within the spirit in order to free poetry from the curse of “objectivism” in Modernist verse. What is your response to what each has to say?

Georg Simmel:

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.]

Robert Bly:

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 is alone on the core 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.]

*Salvadore Quasimodo, the 20th-century Italian experimental poet who won the 1959 Nobel Prize for his lyrical poetry, which, combining classical resonances and contemporary thought, sometimes bitterly resisted the tragedy wrought by Fascism, war and social inequality, and other times serenely captured the fullness of life, by appreciating its simple joys.



Talk Show "Masaya Chiba x Midori Matsui"
Dates: October 20 Fri
Venue: ShugoArts

Masaya CHIBA solo exhibition
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 Fri - November 18 Sat, 2017
Venue: ShugoArts