

Painting Released from Gravity:

Masato Kobayashi: The Paint of the Planet

Reviewed by Mika Kuraya

The venue is a smallish museum in western Okayama Prefecture designed by Tadao Ando. The galleries have irregularly shaped rooms or limited wall space and are not the easiest to hang paintings in. However, with features like a high-ceilinged atrium that lets in natural light, the space brings out the distinctive qualities of Kobayashi's work like no other.

The museum is in Nariwa, hometown of the Yōga (Japanese Western-style) painter Torajiro Kojima, and many of his paintings are exhibited on the second floor. Like many other painters of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Kojima was very focused on light. There is actually nothing lighter or brighter than plain white primed canvas, but painters of Kojima's generation made light rendered in yellow or orange look even brighter than white by placing dark or complementary colors alongside it to heighten chromatic contrast.

How does this compare to a Kobayashi piece like *Starry Model #4*, exhibited in the atrium? Yellow and flesh tones are smeared on a canvas that is largely white. In some places there are substantial clumps of paint, and the canvas is stretched in an intentionally rumpled manner, emphasizing the physicality of the oil, canvas, and wooden frame. At the same time, you may suddenly notice that a blob of yellow paint illuminated by natural light seems to glow from within. Paint is a material with only one purpose – to reflect light and emit color – but here the lump of paint, a physical substance without any designated shape or position in the composition, fulfills in the purest manner the function of “being illuminated and reflecting back light of a wavelength we perceive as yellow.” It is not made relatively brighter by contrasting it with other colors, as in the traditional technique, it is simply light and color that glows all by itself brighter than the white background.

This luminosity transforms the entire work. The same is true of many of the floor-placed works feature nudes on trapezoidal canvases, the lower halves of the figures lying along the floor and heads raised, broader at one end than the other, the bodies also trapezoidal in shape. All have the effect of pulling the pictorial space upward. Kobayashi often uses the word “transformation,” and here we see materials – oil, canvas, wooden frame – transformed into the immaterial, released from gravity, by the action of various factors like the luminosity of paint and this upward-directed force.

In this show, the early work *Angel on White Paint* is hung in a very high place (angels have no substance), followed by the weighty, massive *Unnamed #9*, which crawls along and surges up from the floor. Then the works ascend toward the heavens again. In *To the Planet*,

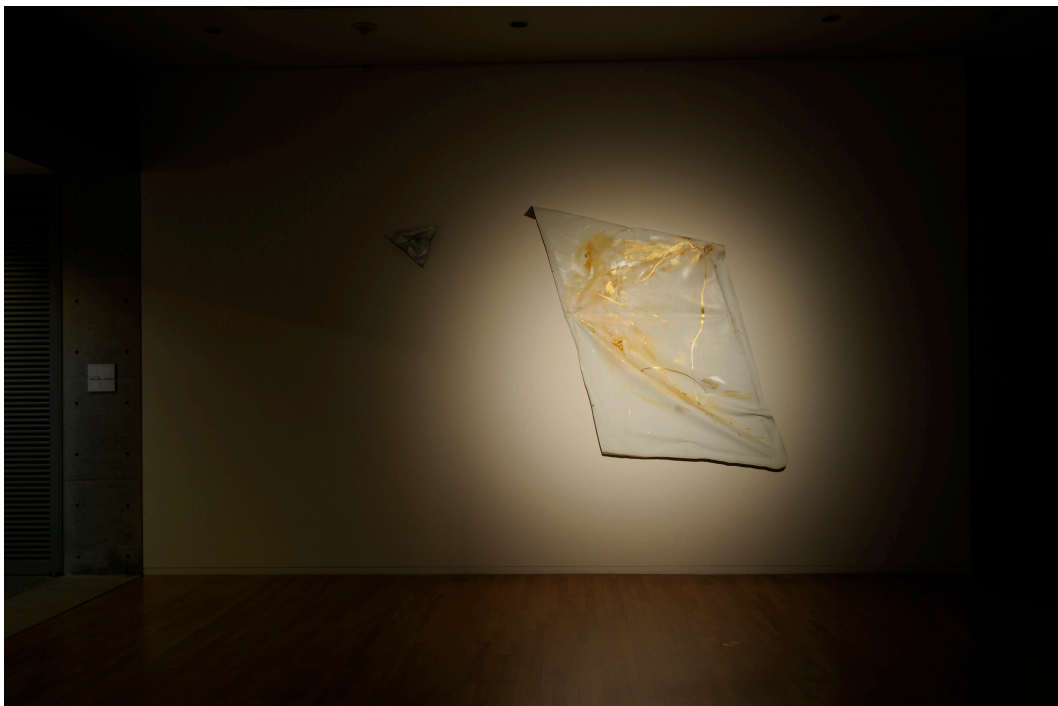
depicting the light of the moon, we see an attempt to “transform” the actual distance between two canvases, large and small, from minimal to infinite.

Paintings are unquestionably made of physical material, but painting achieves its aims by transforming the material into something that transcends it. This exhibition is a great opportunity to see and think about the trajectory of Kobayashi’s practice, which examines from many different angles, just as Renaissance artists may have done, this great mission of painting. Kobayashi examines painting’s great mission from many different angles. This included religious painting of the Renaissance, which set out to transform the material substance of paint and canvas into a celestial being. This exhibition is an ideal opportunity to see and consider this unique trajectory of Kobayashi’s practice.

Translated by Christopher Stephens

First appeared in the Bijutsu Techo, October 2009

*Reproduction is prohibited.



To the planet, 2009, oil, acrylic, canvas, wood, 210x237x16cm , 35x47x7cm



Starry Model #2, 2008, oil, acrylic, canvas, wood, 60x110x12cm



Starry Model #4, 2009, oil, acrylic, canvas, wood, 185x310x50cm



Angel on White Paint, 1984, oil, paint, canvas, 200x130cm

MASATO KOBAYASHI: The Paint of the Planet

July 18 Sat, September 23 Wed, 2009

Nariwa Museum, Okayama