

Locating Forest: Shigeo Toya's sculptures in wood

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1. Forest Space

084

Toya Shigeo's *Woods 2015 I*, and *Woods II* [fig.1] in the collection of the Oita Prefectural Art Museum, opened two years ago, are vertically extending cylinders that stand 2.2 meters tall. They are arranged at intervals side by side, and their surfaces are gouged with striations and ridges. The effect overall is as a gate that invites viewers to gaze into and move toward the depth of the installation.

When I saw the installation at the Oita Prefectural Art Museum, it seemed it might actually be the woods of Oita. I realized though that Toya's concept of 'woods' was not related to any specific place and that he had no intention of evoking the image of a real forest. In his words, "I lined trees up vertically but rather than attempting to express the idea of trees or forest, I imagined something like the vertically standing buildings of Tokyo or New York. If those buildings would devolve to ruins, that would be close to what I am producing" ¹

For Toya, 'woods' is a metaphor for the idea of 'surface,' and not a simple natural forest. (see "Concerning *Death of Woods*," 1991, p.238) ² He said, "In Western thinking, a thin membrane, or skin, separates 'inside' and 'outside,' but for me there is no such duality. Inside and outside are intermingled and 'woods' for me is the structure of that 'skin.' (see, *Topos, Ethnos — gendaibijutsu ni okeru bunka no hazama wo megutte*, (Topos Ethos — contemporary art and culture at a crossroads), exh. cat. 1992, pp. 180–181.)

Still, when we see *Woods*, it is difficult to avoid thinking of a particular place. This is because an essential aspect of sculpture is the expression of an object existing in reality.

Thinking about 'woods,' I recalled music critic Hidekazu Yoshida's comment on the set design of the first performance in Japan, in Osaka, in 1977 of Czech composer Leoš Janáček's 1924 opera "The Cunning Little Vixen" as follows ³ :

The woods are presented with undergrowth here and there, as in a Japanese forest. This is different from central European forests of dense towering trees where only a glimpse of blue sky shows through where trees have been cut down, and where grass is scarce and there are instead only shrubs under the trees. (...) Here, the image of a lean and agile fox running across field and dry riverbed in the shadows of a blue moon and white autumn breeze, rather than the erotic charm of its intelligent black eyes and handsome tail in the warmth of a sunny place, is appropriate.

The story revolves around negotiation between the vixen Bystrouska who dwells in the woods, and the game-keeper, and the various characters and creatures, including the game-keeper's wife, the school principal, the pastor, and creatures including male foxes, dogs, owls, chickens, badgers, frogs, and crickets. It is an impressive opera with melodies of clear forest air, vibrant rhythms of forest creatures, and rich human voices.

Rather than simply reflecting the conflict between man and nature, the opera represents the flow of time and the fantasy world connection of humans and forest creatures, despite innate aversions, in the expanse of the forest. At the end of the story, the game-keeper shoots and kills the vixen, and a few years later he encounters the vixen's daughter in a dream — implying the connections and continuity of life.

085

Toya contrasts Christianity, a culture that originates in the desert, to the space of a Japanese forest as the difference between confronting a counterpart head on or obliquely, like the intersecting lines of trees in a woods. ⁴ However, Toya's works seem to be close to the spatio-temporal structure of the deep central European forests where Janáček's opera is set.

In any case, the image of 'forest' differs from person to person, and the idea of forest produces a plethora of images, familiar and otherwise. Recall Hayao Miyazaki's films *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), *Princess Mononoke* (1997). Even those who live in the city far from any forest surely have their particular image of a forest.

Toya sculptures are presented to people with various images of forest. I have an association with a Czech opera, and others may recall unexpected relationships as well. Still, all of such associations result in fascination with Toya's work. Walking in front of and around Toya's works, one can grasp the possibilities of sculpture.

2. Woodland Childhood

What is the meaning of 'woods' for Toya?

He was born on December 24, 1947 in Ogawa village, in the Kamiminochi district of Nagano prefecture, Nagano city to the west, and Hakuba village and Omachi city to the east. Mountain villages in the northern part of the prefecture are closely related to the Togakushi Shrine in Nagano city and numerous sacred shrines and temples house designated cultural assets and Buddhist statues. In Kinasa, Nagano city, touching the north of Ogawa village, there are many works of marble sculptor Shikai Kitamura, active in the Meiji and Taisho periods and son of Kiyomatsu Kitamura, an artisan of architectural carvings for Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines in Nagano and Niigata at the end of the Edo period beginning of the Meiji period.

Toya spent his boyhood in such surroundings, rich in nature, history, culture, and spirituality. His writings give the impression that those childhood memories are the source of and linked to his sculptural expression. It may be that these memories came out after he became a sculptor, but there is no doubt that such memories are contained in his sculptures.

Toya relates a childhood memory as follows: (see, 'meditashon — mahiru no meiso-ten ni yosete.'(mid-afternoon meditation), 1999, p. 133.)

Sometimes as a child, during summer vacation, I would awake from a nap with the strange feeling of not knowing where I was. In my anxiety I was unable to utter a sound. (...) I heard

later from my mother that when I was a baby she would take me with her to the fields, placing me in a straw basket while she worked in the mountainside woods. I was delighted to see the fluttering leaves and, according to my mother, I did not cry at all. I remember a feeling like drifting in a sea of leaves...

Toya further relates:

*I was a shy child, afraid even to go to school. I would run away, trying to avoid encounters, hiding in the back room of our house or in the mountains. I had such a fear of death. (see *Primal Spirit, Ten Contemporary Japanese Sculptors*, exh. cat. 1990, p.97.)*

He also wrote of his fear going in the evening to the outhouse, a toilet structure outside, common in the countryside:

*The huge zelkova trees in front of the house stood like monsters and the blotchy clouds seemed to groan in the background, as if they were alive. I was frightened by the awesome sight of what seemed to be demons and spirits in the mountains and trees. (see *kaze no shuhen* (wind surroundings), 1983. p. 124.)*

These early childhood experiences were significant for Toya, and connected to the structure of his sculptural expression. He wrote of how a child's game led to recognition: "When I was a kid, we played shadow chasing games of tag. (...) The way the light illuminated our bodies and cast shadows was as if creating an absent alter ego. I think the role of sculpture is to regain shadows." (see, 'kage o torimodosu chokoku no yakuwari' (reclaiming shadows as the role of sculpture), *Kage to chokoku* (shadows and sculpture), vol. 1, 2008, p.90–91.

He also wrote about the 'village shape' as relief structure, and said that for him 'sculpture' was superimposed upon this (see, *junken no karada* (Art Program Ome) exh. cat., 2010, p.215):

A settlement spreads on a fan shaped mountain slope, or on flat ground. A stream flows through, and there is a shrine at the foot of the mountain. In the mountains around a shrine, there is some object, a big stone, a tree, or a small waterfall, that the villagers regard as symbolic of god. Beyond a ridge, the woods are dark and terrible, like a drifting spirit, gradually being lost to the neighboring village.

The sentence itself accurately captures a connection to the spatial expanse and depth of sculptural shaping. The power and structure of his words reflect his already present mentality as a sculptor — like a preliminary drawing a sculptor makes for a sculpture.

However, it must be recalled that from the time he was a boy, Toya was enamored with sculpture from many places and periods — including Japan, Europe, Africa. (see, 'chokoku no ima — watashitachi wa ima, doko ni rikkyaku shite chokoku o katariuru no ka?' (sculpture in the present — from what point can we discuss sculpture?), 2006, p.202.) In his view of sculpture, his 'admiration' for classical sculpture from the point of view of art history coexisted with fear of nature, and it was perhaps such 'admiration' that allowed him to take his first steps in the study of sculpture.

3. Wood as Material

In 1962, Toya entered Nagano Technical High School, in the center of Nagano city. He majored in chemistry and worked after graduation. However, he never abandoned his interest in art, particularly sculpture. He quit the company, spent a year in a laboratory and, after having failed entry to Tokyo University of the Arts, entered Aichi Prefectural University of Art in 1969, four years after it was established. The campus was in a lush wooded area of Nagakute village, a suburb of Nagoya.⁵

Toya described his six years of undergraduate and graduate studies as 'doing woodcarving.'⁶ Using various materials such as stone and plaster, aside from wood, his early works could be described as 'mixed media. He was always, though, partial to wood. He had an early interest in the sculpture of Heihachi Hashimoto: "In my second year of college, we were assigned to do a half torso in wood and I was torn between the proportions of European sculpture and those of Hashimoto."⁷ He has been interested in Hashimoto since that time.

087

Toya's professors of sculpture were Toyochi Yamamoto, retired from the Tokyo University of the Arts, and Kyo Horikawa and Minoru Kojima. In 1968 Kazuo Nonomura, who was active in the Nitten exhibition, also became his professor but Yamamoto, Horikawa, and Kojima were all members of the Kokuga-kai sculpture division. Yamamoto encouraged Toya when he was a third year student to enter the Kokuga-kai exhibition, and his work was accepted. The Kokuga-kai sculpture division was founded in 1963 when it merged with the SAS sculpture group formed by Takezo Shinkai, Yuichi Sakurai, and Toyochi Yamamoto following the dissolution of the Japan Art Institute (*nihon bijutsu in*) in 1961 due to internal conflicts.

Toyochi Yamamoto was born in 1899. He studied under Kogan Tobari and also with Aristide Maillol in France from 1924–1928 under the auspices of the Japan Art Institute. After returning to Japan, Yamamoto became deeply interested in ancient Buddhist statues, particularly the dry lacquer techniques of the Nara period.

Heihachi Hashimoto, who had a profound influence on Toya, was two years older than Yamamoto and also a member of the Japan Art Institute. He was born in Ise, Mie prefecture and studied in his late teens at Ujijamada with sculptor Masanao Miyake. He went to Tokyo in 1919 and studied under Chozan Sato and was selected to exhibit in the Japan Art Institute exhibition for the first time in 1922. He returned to Ise in 1926 and produced many works there, but died at the age of 39 in 1935.

In other words, when Toya enrolled in the Aichi Prefectural University of the Arts, he by chance directly tapped into and inherited the genealogy of the Japan Art Institute sculpture department, an important landmark in the history of modern Japanese sculpture.

It is interesting that Toya is linked at various points in this way to the historical timeline of sculptural expression. Morie Ogihara (Rokuzan), who studied directly with Auguste Rodin in France at the beginning of the 20th century was born in Azumino, and Tsuruzo Ishii for 40 years, from the end of the Taisho period, taught a sculpture workshop in Ueda, Nagano. Without exaggeration, it is safe to say that Nagano prefecture, Toya's birthplace, was the cradle of the great tide of modern Japanese sculpture.

Further, Kinasa village, near Ogawa village, where Toya was born, still houses works by Shikai and Kiyomatsu Kitamura, mentioned above. In the Suwa district, located between Nagano and Nagoya, the group of Osumi style and Tatekawa style artisans of architectural

carvings for Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines were active during the Edo period. Takashi Shimizu who formed the foundation of Musashino Art University's sculpture department and Naoya Takei, both of whom had studied under Antoine Bourdelle, were both born in Suwa, and the topography of Suwa is a motif in Toya's works. Heihachi Hashimoto was based in Mie, near Nagoya where Toya studied sculpture. He was deeply interested in the Buddhist sculptures done by the priest Enku in the Edo period as expressions of faith.

In summary, Toya was, up to the time he was a student of sculpture, surrounded by the rugged mountainous region and thick forests of the Chubu and Tokai sections of Japan, and from there traversed from Tokyo to Nagoya and Osaka, on a diagonal axis across Japan from east to west — that can be regarded as a single trajectory.

Considering the origins of his viewpoint, his later activity in Tokyo was not simply a move from the 'regional' to the 'center.' The fact that he built his studio in Chichibu in 1998, when he was already in his 50s, and made works referencing the terrain of that area is strongly related to his particular viewpoint.

088

4. Interaction with History

The environment of his university, surrounded by nature, was perfect for Toya as a student immersed in wood sculpture. In 1975, when he completed his graduate studies, he installed two event-like works on campus. *Stone Axes* [fig.2] is composed of stones discarded from a stone quarry that he bundled up into poles, and *Bamboo Grove II* [fig.3], consisting of a rope he stretched among, but not touching, the trees in a nearby bamboo grove.

He said that the former work was related by a round trip unraveling of the rope from stone to axe, and then from axe to stone. He also said that the relationship was similar to the relationship between front and back, and inside and outside. (see, "Bijutsu, watashi no baai — gyakuten suru sekai-kan wo hyogen" (my idea of art: expressing an inverted worldview), 1993, pp.66–68.).

Describing *Bamboo Grove*, Toya said, "I walked among the bamboo, passing the trees one by one all over the grove, leaving traces of rope as I went, and creating intersections of the countless angles of the bamboo, making a single universe. This was the beginning of the idea for my *Woods* series."

Toya's experiences as a student were never routine. Although he entered the Kokuga-kai in 1971, he had doubts about it and withdrew in 1974, the time of its 48th exhibition. He said that the other graduate school students shunned him for his ties to it. ⁸

During 1969–1975, the time Toya was a student, Japan experienced many social turning points: student unrest and in 1970 the World Exposition Osaka, the 1973 oil shock and the end of post-war high economic growth. In the art world, too, the advent of Mono-ha at the end of the 1960s, the *Between Man and Matter* exhibition in 1970, that Toya saw, there were many happenings that shook conventional concepts of art. The participation of many avant-garde artists in Osaka World Expo may have calmed things down a bit but the 1970s became a time to seek out new ways.

Toya's activity as a sculptor began under conditions that forged and deepened his thought. In 1973, philosopher and critic Takaaki Yoshimoto, who had a great influence on Toya and

other young people at the time, published an essay titled *Unknown Sculpture* in the book *Zokei*, a supplementary volume of the series *Selected works of Kotaro Takamura*, issued by Shunju Publications. Yoshimoto's argument in this essay on consciousness in the making of reliefs⁹ became central to Toya's thought on sculptural expression.

In September 1974, Toya's first solo exhibition, *Pompeii · 79*, inspired by the volcanic eruption that destroyed the city of Pompeii in CE 79, was held at the Tokiwa Gallery in Tokyo. It marked a fresh start for him, following his withdrawal from the Kokuga-kai. Seeing photos of human shapes created by plaster poured into cavities left by bodies buried in volcanic ash, he sensed surface boundary reversibility. He said that he tried to express this simply. (see, "Bijutsu, watashi no baai — gyakuten suru sekai-kan o hyogen" (my idea of art: expressing an inverted worldview), 1993, p. 66.).

089

Pompeii · 79 is a work consisting of waves of rubber belt extended over concrete blocks with raised surfaces of inverted images placed directly on the floor. Scattered in the corner of the exhibition space were pieces of transparent acrylic, iron, wood, glass, and cement.¹⁰ Toya's consciousness of his materials and their presence, and his delicate sensitivity can be discerned in the exhibition photos.

The full-scale excavation of the ruins of Pompeii, begun in 1763, had a profound influence on the flourishing of neo-Classicism that was spreading in Europe, especially Italy at the time. Toya, however, was not interested in ancient ideals. Rather he was concerned with the more fundamental issues of human life and death, the relationship between the body as a substance and the space it occupies.

Since the early 2000s, Toya has used the term 'minimal baroque' he coined to describe his works carved with multiple folds on the surface of wooden spheres, cubes, and other shapes. This baroque tendency was already present in the work of his first exhibition. His strongly articulated baroque elements, theatrically dynamic and aggressive folds that deny the idealized 'quiet' of neo-Classicism, however, were a fierce attempt since the 1970s to overturn the calm contemporary art scene. (see, 'chokoku no asu wa dotchi da' (what is the future of sculpture), 2000, p. 267.)

In this respect, Hashimoto Heihachi, who Toya admired, had tried to incorporate what could be called baroque-type elements in his time, prior to World War II, when classicism was favored, and he expressed the internal, or invisible ('Sen': the world of solitary hermits). Toya attention was taken with Hashimoto's *About the Stone* (1928) [fig.4] a sculpture in wood in precisely the shape of a stone. He also noted the flower petals and butterflies — objects from the outside world — engraved on the surface of a girl's image in *Celestial Nymphs Playing in a Flower Garden* (1930) [fig.5]. Another way of describing this is that "the outside world is folded in, like an origami, on the surface of the girl's figure". (see, 'Ri Ufan to Hashimoto Heihachi no ishi ni tsuite' (Lee U-Fan and Heihachi Hashimoto's about the stone), 2002, p. 211.)

The connection of Toya's sculpture with Hashimoto can be seen in, for example Hashimoto's *A Girl on One Day* (1934) [fig.6], where the girl, hands in front of her face, worshipping, is represented as a single whole with many overlapping layers of clothes. There is historical import in the space between the volume of the figure and its space that is also characteristic of the sculpture of Toya.

5. Standing Points

When sculpting a material, something inherent is gouged out and what appears is the fundamental primitive state of humans and nature. Color sometimes applied as liquid or ash, emerges as the thought and memory of the artist. While such liquid drips down, the burner fire is raised, causing upward black traces on the surface. For Toya, who in 1983 burned much of his work on a sandy beach,¹¹ fire is also a type of medium that has the power of regenerate material.

Toya's *Death of Woods* [fig.7], for example, produced in 1989 when he was 41 years old, is a square pillar standing 2.3 meters high and connected to a series of walls around 5 meters in length and 62 centimeters thick, cut with a chainsaw in many vertical slashes. He likens the hole that can be seen at the extremity of the 5 meter length to the birth canal and related being born as another state of 'death.'¹² The act of carving wood produces a world where life and death are juxtaposed and sometimes reversed.

090

On the wall-like surface are four white circles in a vertical row, said to represent smoke from a crematorium Toya saw as a child. This is an important element of this work, the expression of a sign also engraved in the work as a relief. While the drawing of a circle is a very direct and simple operation, it is also quite complicated because it reflects the classical geometric form onto the material of wood.

Perhaps an artist's pursuit of expression has some aspect of trial and error. When I started this essay, I reviewed images of Toya's work from the beginning to the present and I strongly sensed the fresh youthfulness of his pursuit.

Toya's creativity developed through reference to art history. He was impressed as an undergraduate by Heihachi Hashimoto and Pompeii as a graduate student, and then shocked by prehistoric paintings of the Lascaux cave in France in the mid-1990s, and following that a deep interest in Baroque. His inquiries and broad perspective reach beyond 'sculpture.'

Toya's perspective leads us to review the history of sculpture to understand his ideas and the works he produced. For example, it would be interesting to think about Toya's early works along with the 'walking' series of his contemporary, British sculptor Richard Long, or to consider Toya in relation to historian of Japanese art Tadashi Inoue's theory in the 1980s that sculptural carving in wood brings forth spirits embodied in trees.

Aside from influential relationships, resonances of the period also have to be taken into account. Toya felt that interest in the baroque was a trend and he said, 'The situation of contemporary art is something beyond me. It seems to be going in the direction ultra-baroque.' (see, 'what is the future of sculpture?,' 2000, p.270). He termed his vision and exploration of the nature of this flow as 'minimalbaroque.'

In 1986, Toya stated the following (gendai chokoku no hatsugen — 1 (remarks on sculpture — 1) 1986, p. 139):

I do not think young people are very deeply thinking about the intellectual history of sculpture. Therefore I think there will from now be a more free use of clay, stone, wood. In that sense, this is a good time for sculpture and I feel it is also gradually releasing me. But all of that is useless if it is unconscious.

He contends though that he is particular about history. In order to avoid misunderstanding, he

clarifies that it is intrinsic to the essence of expression in his sculpture. So, he sees what can be called 'sculpture of historicism' as an important and highly plausible trend of contemporary sculpture.

Hirotake Kurokawa, Toya's colleague at the sculpture department of Musashino Art University, and five years his junior, told me that he was from a young age strongly impressed by the richness of Toya's sculpture and the possibilities it suggests.

Toya is a sculptor whose work is carving a place in the current direction of sculpture, as well as its history.

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- 1 ShigeoToya interview, Special project of the 50th anniversary, Aichi Prefectural University of the Arts, <http://www.aichi-fam-u.ac.jp/info-art-music/tags-art/item/1563-50.html>; site no longer available, accessed August 6, 2016.
 - 2 Quotations are from Shigeo Toya's writing, unless otherwise noted; see Uraka Hijikata and Yoko Mori, ed., *Shigeo Toya chokoku to kotoba 1974–2013* (explorations in sculpting: works and words of Shigeo Toya 1974–2013), Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum, 2014.
 - 3 Hidekazu Yoshida, opera 'Megitsune' — osaka (the opera 'the cunning little vixen' at Osaka), *Asahi Shimbun*, Nov. 18, 1977; Yoshida Hidekazu zenshu 19 (Hidekazu Yoshida complete works, vol. 19, Hakusui-sha, 2002, pp. 351–352.
 - 4 See leaflet from *Producing/Discussing/Looking at/Hearing Sculptures*, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, 2017 (exhibition planned by Shogo Otani).
 - 5 See, Aichi Prefectural University of the Arts 40th anniversary commemorative edition, 1966–2006, 2006.
 - 6 'Dialogue between Shigeo Toya and Toshikatsu Endo, *Geijutsu hihyo REAR*, #19, August 2008, p. 2.
 - 7 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
 - 8 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
 - 9 Takaaki Yoshimoto, *chokoku no wakaranasa* (unknown sculpture), Takaaki Yoshimoto complete works, vol. 8, Keiso Shobo, 1973, p. 335 was published one month before Zokei.
 - 10 Uraka Hijikata, in *Works and Words* (see note 2 above), p. 294.
 - 11 *Ibid.*, p. 297.
 - 12 Artist talk at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, June 5, 2011. See also, the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo May 27–November 5, 2017 exhibition *Producing/Discussing/Looking at/Hearing Sculpture*.