

A Luminous Place of Rich Abundance - The Paintings of Kobayashi Masato WADA Koichi

(1)

It may be that few recall the time 15 years ago when two paintings by Kobayashi Masato were exhibited at The Miyagi Museum of Art (*1). However, those who do almost certainly will recall that they found a unique aspect to his works. The two paintings were *Painting = Sky* of 1985-86 (The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo) and *Painter and Model* of 1986. Not only were these two paintings different from the works of any of the other artists on display, for me there was also something unsettling about them.

When I say unsettling, I don't mean it in a negative way. Certainly some may have found them disturbingly hard to understand. For example, as one might deduce from the title, *Painting = Sky* seemed to depict a portion of a clear blue sky, but there were also shapes that could in no way be interpreted as portraying part of the sky. As a result, what appeared to be clouds may in fact not have actually been. In this way, it was surely a work that would be perplexing to anyone seeking to identify images of actual things in the picture plane.

The unsettling nature of the paintings that I just mentioned is not related to whether or not the images are representational. You might say that it was an unsettling nature rooted in the very fundamental aspects of "painting" itself. It was the kind of puzzlement one feels when faced with something one has never seen before, but the feeling it conveyed was one of freshness and it seemed to be important in the way it evoked the promise of some sort of rich abundance within.

As the years go by, the works of Kobayashi Masato convey this sense ever more strongly. His paintings in recent years have gained in intensity and give a clear sense that he is proceeding with certainty toward the art he envisions. In these times when we are flooded with an endless dissemination of painted images, these works of Kobayashi seem to offer us an important alternative point of perspective. It is a perspective that returns to the origins of painting. This is exactly why a show of Kobayashi's work is so relevant at this time and why we hope that his approach to art and his working method will provide clues for understanding the art that is to come.

Here, I would like to say something about the artist's thoughts about his

own work. In doing this I would like to discuss some specific works particularly from his early period, while also keeping in mind the artist's most recent work.

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Kobayashi Masato was born in Tokyo in 1957. After graduating from the Oil Painting Department of the Tokyo University of the Arts in 1984, he had a solo exhibition of his work at the Kamakura Gallery. After that he had several solo exhibitions at the Satani Gallery. In the meantime, he showed in numerous group exhibitions, including The Miyagi Museum of Art's "A Scene of Contemporary Japanese Art 3: The New Generation" (1986), The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo's "A Perspective on Contemporary Art: Color and/or Monochrome" (1989) and "A Perspective on Contemporary Art: Painting - Singular Object" (1995) and the Sezon Museum of Art's "Allegory of Seeing, Painting and Sculpture in Contemporary Japan." (1995). Since 1997, Kobayashi has made Gent, Belgium the center of his continuing art activities.

The artist says that when he set out to paint his graduation work at the Tokyo University of the Arts, he found that when facing a stretched white canvas he could hardly find a starting point to begin painting from. The painting that resulted is the earliest work in this exhibition, *Angel = Painting* from 1984, and we can see that before applying any paint the artist had repeatedly drawn in charcoal and erased the results to draw again. Although a "white canvas" has become a cliché for the promise of creative freedom, that wasn't the case at all for Kobayashi. What was the significance of this paradox?

Perhaps the most unique thing about Kobayashi's working process is that he does not stretch the canvas from the beginning, and even as the painting proceeds he still works on the loose canvas. When the painting reaches a certain stage he begins to stretch the canvas a little at a time, but there are some works in recent years where even after the painting is finished the canvas remains partially unstretched. In any event, this can certainly be seen as an unprecedented method for oil painting. And, though it must certainly be difficult to work this way from a purely technical standpoint as well, that fact that he continues to use this method to this day is only explained by the following words by the artist himself.

"If I have to paint "on top of" a canvas that is already stretched on a wood frame, it inevitably adds an extra layer to the work. I want my works to be

one entity that includes the painting surface." (*2)

"If I think to begin painting while standing in front of a stretched canvas, it is already too late. The painting already has to be done by the time I stretch it."
(*3)

Kobayashi's working method is to get right in against a loosely hung canvas and work the paint into the surface with a gloved hand. To the observer it often seems that the artist is doing battle with the canvas, and the expression "body painting," which was used jokingly in the past to describe his technique (*4), may actually not be too far off the mark. It establishes a quality of paint layered directly on paint that cannot be achieved by painting with a brush. However, what is even more important here is surely the artist's strong desire to draw the canvas into his own space and work it thoroughly from beginning to end.

(3)

The artist refers to the creative process as "making an invisible spiritual entity visible to the eye, in other words embodying it," (* 5) and says that a work is "something that does not degrade that spiritual content through its existence in any way." (* 6) Here it is clear that he looks at art as a spiritual entity and distinguishes it from the work of art which is an object.

Art and the work of art are not the same. Art may be thought of as something existing at the half-way point between ourselves and the work of art. And, although there may be rare cases where a work is so outstanding that it can almost be seen as one with art, still it is a different entity. Therefore, there is no reason to take the square stretched canvas as a working premise. This is because it is best for the spiritual entity to appear independent of the work as a separate entity.

In the case of Kobayashi Masato, art is perceived from beginning to end as a spiritual entity. And, in order to make it appear before the eyes (embody it), it is probably necessary to draw it into the world of the artist's existence for a while, to make it familiar to the hand and digest it thoroughly before standing it on its own. A work is born through a process of gauging it in the context of the environment that surrounds it at different times. For that reason, the canvas, too, must be adaptable to different sizes and shapes in different situations. It must be something that he can literally take in his bare hands. All of this is his means of making sure that none of the spiritual essence is lost; in other words, so that the existence of the work does not degrade that essence in any way. For the artist, a

painting is not something that he "wants to paint somewhere" but something that he wants to "give birth to with its own inherent nature intact."

This is probably the reason that many of his works are titled "A Son of Painting," and for the analogy to the birth of Christ. Also, given the process we have mentioned above, it is only a natural result that the shape of the final work should be an undefined one.

In Kobayashi Masato's case, attention inevitably focuses on the unique character of the painting surface we have just described (*7). However, the more important thing is the concept of a painting as a single entity that he tries to realize through this unique way of handling the painting support surface and the man Kobayashi himself who attempts that realization from such a radical approach.

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The paintings of Kobayashi Masato born in this way are no longer windows that open up unto the world. He does not, of course, rely on a traditional perspective method for his view point, and we can see that the direction of his approach is not one of creating a pictorial composition in the conventional sense.

In a conventional pictorial composition (painting), an independent value system is created within the picture plane. In this accepted hierarchy the various elements generally converge (and find unity) toward the inner areas of the picture plane (canvas). Since works composed in this way achieve completion internally, as a rule they can exist as valid compositions no matter where they are taken. The basis for such a composition is the picture plane, and since in the case of Kobayashi the boundaries of that plane are not defined, composition itself loses its basis for realization. The result is that individual elements do not converge into a unified composition but remain as separate, scattered points, which paves the way for the composition to open out into the surrounding space and brings into play the position of the work in its surrounding space as an important factor.

How about the work *Painting = Sky* as an example? This work was created over a period spanning 1985 and '86. This was still in the period before he began taking the canvas off its wood frame, but we can already see the artist trying in very clever ways to avoid falling into the patterns of conventional pictorial composition. We are told that Kobayashi worked on this painting for more than a

year after graduating from the university, and it can probably be assumed that it took such a long time to complete because he had not yet adopted his above-mentioned habit of taking the canvas off the frame.

Most of the canvas in this work is covered with a clear sky blue, but there are also faint gradations of light and dark spreading throughout the surface, resulting from the fact that for a long time he repeatedly painted new layers and then stripped them away again. The central portion of the picture plane is dominated by this type of expanse of paint and there is almost nothing for our eyes to fix on. There are only two faint ring-like elements located one in the left-central portion of the surface and the other in the lower right, but these two have no interrelationship and there is something lacking in their substance for them to become actual compositional elements in the picture plane. What they are lacking is a living space surrounding the work.

In such elements as the absence of a center, the absence of modulation, lack of clarity and causing elements to proliferate in the space surrounding the picture plane, we clearly see the intention of the artist to break away from composition as a constructional dynamic and, in doing so, conventional pictorial creation is avoided.

(5)

Another important element in the paintings of Kobayashi Masato is "brightness," or luminosity. The fact that this is something different from simple light can be ascertained from the following words by the artist.

"Brightness is not something you will find lying about, no matter how hard you look.

In short, there is light falling all over the floor and ceiling of the studio, but it is not brightness. (Borders have no relation at all)

It is not to be found at such extremities.

It is much closer to the center. The place is perhaps an "empty lot."

It is a place of a "certain level (height)" where ideas gather.

Brightness is an idea of painting that can only be seen by the eyes at that place, it is a gathering that seeks to become painting. " (*8)

There are things that exist at a certain "level" or height where ideas converge and can only be seen when they are at that place. This alone remains unclear, and it cannot be denied that it in some aspects it is too existential. In any case, it is the same as "the brightness of a single entity that reaches pure completion"(*9) we

heard of above, and the important thing is that it is not something belonging to the real world like the light that shines in from outside. Rather, it belongs to the realm of the invisible, generating of itself from within. Here, too, it is the spiritual aspect that is important, and this is surely the reason why Kobayashi's statements must always have a certain romanticism to them.

The artist often speaks of Madam (Marie) Curie. In the kind of apt analogy that is typical of Kobayashi, the artist finds something of himself in this well-known researcher famous for the discovery of radium. The single-minded purity of Marie--as she and her husband Pierre encouraged each other in their research, saying, "it will be nice if what we discover is beautiful"--eventually led to the discovery (isolation) of the element unique for the faint light it gives off. Here the element radium, possessed of its own luminosity becomes another symbol of "something whose existence does not degrade the spiritual essence in any way."

The work that established this moment of birth is *A Son of Painting*. The composition includes an easel in the upper left, a bucket in the lower left and to the right we see the left-hand portion of a canvas placed on cement blocks. It depicts a corner of the artist's studio and is a theme that is repeated time and again in his work. In the case of this painting, the imposing presence of the yellow paint seems to make the work give off a luminosity of its own.

There are surely many who find the richness of his colors reminiscent of the Baroque painters like Peter Paul Rubens. It is not at all difficult to argue that the view point (perspective focal point) adopted by Kobayashi in his paintings is similar to the Baroque view point. (*10) It is said that the word baroque comes from a Portuguese term for a pearl with strange and irregular distortions. The kind of accentuation of colors, distortion of shapes, lack of conformity to rules and the excessively intellectual aspect that are implied by this name can also be cited as characteristics of the paintings of Kobayashi Masato.

Of course, we must resist the temptation to make simplistic comparisons of Kobayashi's works with the stylistic characteristics of Baroque art, which was originally defined in contrast to Renaissance art. However, considering the fact that Kobayashi himself cites Caravaggio, Rubens and Rembrandt as artists to whom he feels the greatest affinity also suggests that such comparisons are not entirely unfounded. Recent works painted in Gent show even more distinct Baroque characteristics. Taking all these points into consideration, we are

increasingly aware of the need to direct attention to the contemporary aspects of the unique view point Kobayashi Masato creates in his art and to its difference from what is normally referred to as painting.

Curator, The Miyagi Museum of Art

(Translation by Robert Reed)

* All Japanese names in this text are given in the Japanese order with family name first.

Notes

- 1: "A Scene of Contemporary Japanese Art 3: The New Generation" (Part 1) held at The Miyagi Museum of Art, Oct. 1 ~ Nov. 9, 1986
- 2: At the Height of Pure Painting (Junsui Kaiga no Takasa de). Kobayashi Masato, ACRYLART issue #22, --- 1994
- 3: "Statement for the Solo Exhibition" Satani Gallery, March 1993
- 4: From a conversation with Jan Hoet, April 2000
- 5: From a conversation with the artist, April 2000
- 6: Kobayashi Masato, op. cit.
- 7: Because the separation of the canvas and the wood frame in Kobayashi's works since moving to Gent has become especially prominent, it is not really fitting to refer to the similarities with "Supports / Surfaces." This is because, unlike the politically-oriented criticism of the institution of painting in which the contact of supports/surfaces is seen as an analogy to labor, Kobayashi is dealing with this purely as a personal question. The fact that Kobayashi doesn't hesitate to use canvas and oil paints, despite the fact that they bear numerous stains of history, as long as they provide the best means of bringing color to life, makes the peculiarities of his working style (with unstretched canvas) even more notable.
- 8: "Unpublished Notes" Kobayashi Masato, ("Kobayashi Masato - About Brightness" by MOTOE Kunio for the Biennial de São Paulo Catalogue 1996, The Japan Foundation)
- 9: "Statement for the Solo Exhibition" Satani Gallery, March 1993
- 10: Frank Stella notes this baroque view point while emphasizing the role of Caravaggio's work, as read in the Japanese translation of Frank Stella "Working Space" (1986, Harvard University Press) translated by TSUJI Seiji and ONO

Masaharu (1989, Fukutake Shoten). After being interpreted as a Minimalist in the 1950s for his work in stripped paintings generally categorized as "black painting" Stella changed his style and began producing colorful relief paintings in the 1970s and '80s. The key to this change was the "Illusionism" seen in Caravaggio's paintings the created the illusion of movement out from the picture plane toward the viewer. Stella identified this as the kind of space he was seeking. In his book "Miru Koto No Itsuraku" (1995, Hakusui Sha) TANIKAWA Atsushi seeks to identify this as a Baroque element. Meanwhile, in the postscript to the Japanese translation of Working Space, Ono Masaharu writes about the potential danger in such a materialized pictorial space created by Stella's "real illusion," suggesting that it can become an art form lacking in re-creative potential. And, it should perhaps be recognized that the works of Kobayashi Masato in recent years also harbor this same type of danger.