

## [My 10 Picks]

### Masato KOBAYASHI

KOBAYASHI says, “I just wanted to paint freely.”

He was born in Tokyo in 1957 and graduated from Tokyo University of the Arts. He has also represented Japan at the Sao Paulo Biennial and moved to Europe in 1997 thanks to an invitation by the curator Jan Hoet. Having sophisticated his artistic practice in Ghent, Belgium, in which he lived and worked until 2006, he returned to Japan and has been producing his art in Tomonoura, Hiroshima.

In this article, I will introduce you to what the painter Masato KOBAYASHI has been and is planning on doing through his comments, interview, and 10 artworks with which the artist has established his own style such as painting while stretching the canvas, painting with his own hands, or placing on the floor.



Photo: Shizuka Kobayashi



*Painting=Sky*

1985-1986, oil, canvas, 195x291cm, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo

“After graduating from university, I started my career as a painter and rented a studio in Kunitachi. This is the first piece I made there. I could not reconcile the gap between this beautiful image of the square in mind and the actual square in reality. I was taken by ambulance to the hospital twice while making this piece. The paramedics, who came into my atelier, mistakenly thought that I was a sign maker, not an artist, and called this painting a signboard. This artwork made me realize that my painting would need the space around it!”



*A son of Painting*  
1992, oil on canvas, 132.5x163.5cm

“I could continue my artistic practice because I made this artwork. ...Painting while stretching the canvas is to paint images with light, which is to ‘paint with light.’ I dive into those images and paint a baby like I’m rolling it around, by putting some paint on my right hand and holding the baby from behind using my left hand so that it won’t fall from the canvas. I paint from the back of the canvas as if I held the whole painting in my arms. I feel like light is shining on the soft grass.” (from *Oil with Canvas that Is Approximately Square, Approximately Flat*, from *Paint of This Planet (vol.1) Under the Tree at Hitotsubashi University*)



*Unnamed #9*

1997, oil, canvas, wooden frame, 147x330x110cm, Installation view of "KOBAYASHI Masato", The Miyagi Museum of Art, Sendai, 2000

“When I was in Ghent, Jan (Jan Hoet, a curator in Belgium) saw the loose frames told me to put my painting on the floor. This is when I started working with paintings on the floor leaning against the wall. I made my art on straw for the first time after I freed myself. Straw is comfortable. Animals give birth to their children in the straw. I was like, ‘Alright, I’m going to give birth to a painting in the straw!’ I got excited about golden straw...I was crazy about it! Straw is not an allegory of Jesus Christ, but it was there in reality...together with humans and animals.”



*Unnamed #18*

2000, oil, canvas, wooden beam, 250x330x250cm, "Gelijk het leven is" Vlaamse Opera, Gent, 2003

Whatever I paint, I think my paintings are spatial; they inevitably interact with the space due to their nature of existence, which is made of paint, canvas and frame. Even if I say “No!, I cannot change the way they exist. They have to be kept inside if you don’t want them to interact with the space. Of course, my paintings looked different depending on where they were exhibited. I really liked it! When it was at my studio in Ghent...in my solo exhibition at SMAK...at Vlaamse Opera in Ghent (photo above)...now at MOT.”

(currently exhibited in part of Special Exhibition: Weavers of Worlds—A Century of Flux in Japanese Modern/Contemporary Art— at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo until June 16)



*Unnamed #15*

1999, oil, canvas, wooden beam, 480x300x230cm

Installation view of "Serendipiteit-Watou,'99", Watou, 1999

“There is a town called Watou in Southern Belgium near the Belgium-France border. Under Jan Hoet’s curation, artists from different countries were coming to this place and making site specific art. It was in the summer of 1999. There was a big ranch where horses and cows were grazing freely, and my exhibition space was in this big barn. There was a beautiful pond in its yard, and I used to take a nap on the boat with random people. I used to go out and eat with everyone there and sleep in the straw. One day, this black cat came into my space and had yellow paint on its forehead when she came out. Well, I realized that a painting can pick up anything when it’s on the floor.

Living and working in Ghent was to go outside my old studio and paint outside! It was not just a matter of being inside or outside the room. I felt like painting outside was to get involved in different art scenes, hang out with other artists, and do other things.



*Unnamed #27*  
2002, oil, canvas, wooden frame  
Photo : Shizuka Watanabe

I created this piece at my studio in Ghent, and it was the last one left there. I have never shown this in public. When it was still in Ghent, many artists came to my studio and saw the painting. I just mentioned that I make spatial paintings, but this one was beyond the spatiality I was dealing with! I could not move this piece...in 2006, right before I came back to Japan, I took it down with Shizuka (Kobayashi's wife) and emptied out the studio.

...I became unable to tell where the painting starts and where it ends. The paint on the wall, the paint on the floor, gloves, underwear, rags, tissue paper...the canvas is still rolled up and 10m long. I didn't call nor consider my art installation back then. I thought, "This is also a painting!" This is when I started thinking of this planet. If you look at this painting as a scenery of this planet or a scene of this planet, you can cut it anywhere. It doesn't matter where it gets cut off!"



*Unnamed 2003 (#3)*  
2003, oil, canvas, wooden frame, 173x300x40cm

“I paint with ‘the paint of this planet!’ This is my first nude painting.

‘Painting this planet with the paint of this planet!’ is a feeling that you can have once in a lifetime.

This was the year when Shizuka, my future wife, moved to Ghent and we started living together.”





POLAND  
"MEDIATIONS BIENNALE beyond mediations"  
ZAMEK, Poznan, 2010



HIROSHIMA  
"Memory/Memorial HIROSHIMA-POLAND"  
Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art Hiroshima, 2010

“This is from POLAND – HIROSHIMA: A pair of artworks, exhibited separately=LOVE, in which I showed a pair separately in two different countries.

In September, 2010, I participated in a biennial titled Beyond Mediation in Poznan, Poland. They go beyond mediation, beyond arbitration, beyond indirect... and they come together far away. Or maybe, they will never come together... The exhibition had connections to many different things and thoughts, and it still is influencing the pair piece that I am working on right now.

...I exhibited one of the pair titled Model of This Planet in a room in Zamek in Poznan, an old building that contains Hitler's office, which has been kept untouched since he was still alive. The other pair was exhibited at the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art. At both locations, the viewers could see each missing pair through live videos on the screen. The other pair is not here, but it's somewhere on this planet! 'I wanted to express love.' Something we call love...Words don't really matter...What we call love is the inevitable distance between one and others...maybe it exists with the sense of distance that appears and disappears like stars...by the way, you cannot purchase both of my pairs. The way my pairs exist is related to the way they are owned."



*A model of this planet #35*  
2016, oil, canvas, wood, 18x14x4cm



*A model of this planet #40*  
2016, oil, canvas, wood, 18x14x4cm



*A model of this planet #33*  
2016, oil, canvas, wood, 18x14x4cm



*A model of this planet #19*  
2016, oil, canvas, wood, 18x14x4cm



*A model of this planet #41*  
2016, oil, canvas, wood, 18x14x4cm



Installation view of "Thrice Upon A Time", ShugoArts, 2016  
Photo: Shigeo Muto



*A model of this planet (Cow girl taking the glove off)*  
2018, oil, acrylic, canvas, wood, 120x97x8cm

“This is the series I have been working on since the exhibition titled LOVE, more awful! but more beautiful, because painting is all for love. I cannot choose one from this series. Nothing is good or bad, and I just needed to have this exhibition. These are all parts of the family of the planet painting including abject and beautiful paintings...

When I start saying love, I have to paint beautiful paintings more and more. I want to paint those paintings! The concept of beauty fluctuates. So does its criteria. The framework keeps expanding. This is a magic spell for myself who thinks he knows the answer for ‘what in the world is a beautiful painting?!’”



Installation view of "All Living Things", Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum, 2016



*Nameless Horse*  
2014, oil, acrylic, canvas, wood, 215x323cm

"That's why it's a fine line. My utopia is around the border. I feel like everyone looks like they are part of the family of the planet painting and living together. They are on the wall or laid out on the floor. Paintings of the sky, of the child, the nude and the star fragment...are part

of...FAMILY...even though they don't share the same blood... There was a hut of the painting family on the border between the beautiful and the abject...and there was a horse in its meadow. The horse is probably my self-portrait." My admiration for the ideal! A horse standing up straight with a paintbrush in its mouth...a naked horse having nothing except the paintbrush, without its name, just a horse.

In 2007, I built my studio in Tomonoura, Hiroshima and started living there. ...I think the location of my studio is very important. My atelier in Kunitachi, Ghent and now in Tomonoura...It's not my style at all but I'm making art on my land for the first time. When I was in Ghent, Jan laughed at me, saying, 'You don't get homesick at all!' I told him, 'My home is not in Japan nor Ghent. It's in the canvas I'm working on!' I had been seriously sleeping on the backside of canvas...My current house in Tomonoura may be just an extension of its backside."

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## Interview

"I just wanted to paint freely. I just wanted to paint whatever I wanted to paint. To do that, I needed to change the way my painting was made without any restriction." That was KOBAYASHI's answer when I asked for his real intention of his painting with which he seems to be updating the very definition of painting itself. He incorporates his unique gestures such as painting while stretching the canvas on unfinished wood frame, painting with his own hands or putting it on the floor. He added, "When I thought about painting without restriction, a ready-made square flat surface seemed constricting. I wanted to have a space where I can be more free. That's why I made it by myself. The space I can paint freely."

Having graduated from Tokyo University of the Arts, KOBAYASHI rented his studio in Kunitachi. One day, he felt, "It's too late to paint after stretching the canvas," and he came up with his signature style in which he "paints with his own hands while stretching the canvas simultaneously." When Jan Hoet invited him to live and work in Ghent, he gave birth to "paintings on the floor." KOBAYASHI has been trying to expand "a place for painting" from inside the canvas to its outside, from the wall to the space around it. It might be possible to say that he reached a plateau around 2002 and 2003 when he recognized that there was a sense of

“...this planet” inside him as he explained in My 10 Picks.

KOBAYASHI says, “My utopia is on the border.” He tells me, “I want to paint beautiful things.” On the other hand, he also says, “It’s not enough if it’s just beautiful. There needs to be the abject—something close to Bad or Awful—within the beautiful.” As I mentioned above, he seems to have a sense of “...this planet” at the root of his concept.

“Beautiful paintings may suffice if you hang them in a gallery, museum or living room with a piano. But, I’m making my paintings to place them on this planet, for this world. When I think that this planet itself is a place you can decorate with paintings, beauty alone cannot be enough. It’s not just a piano but there are animals and many more. For that kind of place, there needs to be awful things—something really close to the awful—if I want my paintings to exist in this world. Truth be told, I want to make beautiful paintings. But I get defensive when I want to pursue the beautiful even if I feel like ‘I want them to exist on this planet at full strength!’ I can probably say that those paintings become too obvious. Then it becomes pointless. So, I have to be aggressive until the end of the end.”

KOBAYASHI, if I am allowed to say such a thing, is a painter who succeeded in deviation. He managed to deviate from preexisting ways of painting and installation, and his path might add a new page in the history of painting. However, his aim is solely derived from his personal desire and urge to “make paintings freely.” There is no difficult theory. Nor easy one. Just his simple wish. But what’s wrong with it? It must be way easier than setting his start point by flipping the order of “want” and “should.” There are numerous ways and definitions of a “painter” and his style is exceptionally unique. However, when I was listening to his story, I felt like I could see a glimpse of a painter’s true form.

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Translation: Ion Yamazaki