

Wind, Water, and Fire...

Motoaki Hori

Yoriko Takabatake held a solo exhibition titled “Fountain” at ShugoArts last April. The works presented on this occasion all appeared to evoke a peculiar sensation of floating, and had left a vivid and lasting impression on myself as the viewer. Her earlier works, those presented in her 2014 solo exhibition for example, had also conveyed a sense of floating. This however, was due to actual physical spaces created between the paint and the canvas through overlaying thread-like lines of paint in numerous layers. In her new works from last year, although such physical gaps could not be observed, one could still sense a curious discrepancy between the paint and the support medium that too could be likened to a sensation of floating. Countless traces of paint with their subtle nuances of shadow spread dynamically across the entire picture plane like a stir of commotion, and while conveying a texture reminiscent of a corroding copperplate engraving, the paint seemingly refused to settle on the support medium, instead wandering and drifting upon the surface. Or, in the way that a pond or lake had suddenly dried out to leave the creatures that lived there to fossilize, it seemed as if the artist had forcibly fixated the ever-changing image in constant flux within the space of the canvas.

It was only when I had learnt of the details of Takabatake’s production method that I came to understand that this impression was not necessarily mistaken.

In producing her work, she first applies a base layer of paint to the panel that serves as the support medium, which she then surrounds with a deep wooden frame. The panel and wooden frame are tightly fixed with a vise, and then are waterproofed. She thus creates a small tank of sorts that she fills with water, and then proceeds to drip various lines of paint upon its surface. After drifting along the surface of the water for some time, the paint gradually sinks to the bottom to fixate on the panel. In works in which she uses paper instead of panel as her support medium, she places the sheet of paper on top of the water’s surface to capture the lines of paint during the fleeting moments before they submerge. In this way, elements such as the current and pressure of the water as well as gravity, function as agents in creating unique works that permeate with an air of transient levitation. One could even describe it as a painting depicted on the water’s surface. Furthermore, attempts have also been made to freely maneuver the paint in a more complex way by means of heating the water that is used.

A solo exhibition of Yoriko Takabatake's works was held at the Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery in October 2014, while she was studying for her doctorate at the Graduate School of Tokyo University of the Arts. When she began to actively engage in painting at the graduate school under the tutorship of Masato Kobayashi, the idea she had come up with was to treat the canvas like a human body that could be dressed with garments woven out of thread-like drips of paint. She thus devised a method of squeezing out thin lines of oil paint, which she would overlay meticulously in vertical, horizontal, and diagonal directions upon the canvas to create elaborate images. As previously mentioned, the layered paint threads naturally rise slightly above the support medium of the canvas. While these compositions resembling textiles indeed appear to convey a feminine air of delicacy, they also remind viewers of the sheer time and perseverance involved in this highly stoic method, as well as the level of concentration in intently and continuously squeezing out countless threads of paint.

Occasionally, floral patterns such as sunflowers would be arranged systematically amidst the accumulated layers of paint threads. Although the images in some aspects seem to exhibit similarities with optical art in the way that they present slightly different expressions depending on the height or angle from which they are viewed, the artist herself is neither interested in an artificial and geometric manner of design, nor the optical or perceptual illusions that accompany them. Upon close observation, one in fact realizes that the threads of paint are never mechanical or inorganic, and the lines that look to be straight from a distance are in fact faintly wavering, fraying and interrupted here and there to clearly show traces of the artist's handwork. In several of her works she applied strong gusts of wind using a blower while the paint was yet to dry, thus intentionally fraying and lifting some of the threads of paint. From these various reasons, it is evident that Takabatake had placed utmost importance on realizing spaces with a sense of materiality within the context of the picture plane.

While it has been less than five years since Takabatake's exhibition at Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery, her subsequent style has developed and transformed remarkably. At the same time, her means of production came to deviate significantly from that of general painting, thus enabling her to strengthen her own experimental approach. She constantly devotes herself to advancing her distinct painterly expression, continuing to explore new possibilities for expression through devising her own methods, and repeatedly engaging in experiments and attempts as necessary.

There are two noteworthy points with regards to her means of producing work that is replete with adventurous spirit. One is her bold pursuit to liberate painting from the

constraints of the support medium, and consider ways in which they can exist as an autonomous form of expression. In her undergraduate years before she began engaging in painting, Takabatake had produced works using sugar and crayon as materials. Indeed, in her eyes, oil paints are likewise simply a material for producing work. One suspects that the peculiar floating sensation surrounding her works is inextricably connected to her awareness in considering paint as a mere material. Since her solo exhibition in 2014, she had already treated the support medium as not that which to depict upon, but instead something to be dressed with paint. This way in which she perceives the support medium is an aspect that is consistent throughout her practice. As aforementioned, in recent years she deviates from working with canvas, and the panels that she does appropriate only function as the base of the tank where the paint sinks and falls.

Another key point in Takabatake's practice is the manner in which the production methods have a close and inseparable relationship with the expressions themselves. In her recent works, the unique method by which she fills her support medium with water is what serves to largely define their expression. The reason for her feeling affinity and showing great interest towards Korean monochrome painting (Dansaekhwa), in addition to its almost stoic means of production, is perhaps attributed to the way in which they harmoniously and cohesively bring together production method and the expression of the work.

In Buddhist philosophy, the five fundamental elements that comprise the universe are collectively known as godai. Said to originally derive from ancient Indian philosophy, they refer to the five elements of 'Earth,' 'Water,' 'Fire,' 'Wind,' and 'Void.' Although presumably by coincidence, Yoriko Takabatake's experimental means of production happens to be deeply connected to these five elements. There is 'Wind' that is used when breaking the layered threads of paint with a blower, 'Water' in which paint is dripped and left to float, and then 'Fire' that is used to heat and transform the water and the paint. 'Void' in this context is the slight space between the paint and the support medium, and the paint that consists of minerals and metals can be regarded as corresponding to 'Earth.' In this respect, her practice involves all five elements, that is to say, the fundamental elements that make up the cosmos, nature, and everything else in the entire universe.

While Takabatake had experienced studying abroad in London, her recent methods for production significantly differ from Western methodologies that advocate formulating works based on predetermined concepts. Her early works had followed the concept of

treating the canvas as a human body to be dressed with garments woven out of thread-like drips of paint, yet her recent practice adheres more closely to approaches of natural science in the way that she devises a hypothesis beforehand, and then proceeds to explore means to realize it. At the same time, by actively employing elements of 'Water' and 'Fire,' she intentionally attempts to incorporate the uncontrollable power of chance into the production process. In terms of entrusting a part of the production process to the flowing current of water and gravity, and thereby introducing limitations that cannot be controlled by human hands, her recent works also seem to encroach upon the realm of ceramics.

Nevertheless, one cannot help but feel that the artist herself enjoys producing works through willingly introducing uncontrollable elements into her practice. She mentions how she had come up with the method of filling the support medium with water while playing on a boat. One day she was on a boat near her studio, and noticed the beautiful scenery that reflected on the water's surface. In hopes to incorporate this into the production of her paintings, she arrived at the method of creating a tank to fill with water. There is an old anecdote that recounts how the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi had learned of the joy of fish swimming in water ("The Debate on the Joy of Fish," Zhuangzi, Outer chapters, 17. "Autumn Floods"), but perhaps Takabatake herself had at this time instinctively discerned the essence of painting in the water's surface.

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Translated by Kei Bengler