

Blazing A Trail Together: Artist and Gallerist Conversation with Masato KOBAYASHI and Shugo SATANI

Masato KOBAYASHI is an artist who has been incessantly making “paintings” with oil and canvas while publishing his autobiographical novel *Paint of This Planet* last year. Shugo SATANI is the director of ShugoArts who has been supporting KOBAYASHI as a gallerist. Through this conversation with the two, I would like to shed light on what the relationship between the artist and gallerist has created while walking together for many years.



Shugo SATANI (left) and Masato KOBAYASHI (right)

On his novel *Paint of This Planet* and solo exhibition *Artist and the Model*

—First of all, I would like to ask you about your autobiographical novel *Paint of This Planet*, which was published at the end of last year. I have heard that you are currently working on the second book after publishing *Under the Tree at Hitotsubashi University*, the first book of the trilogy. Why did you decide to write a book?

KOBAYASHI: As I started teaching at Tokyo University of the Arts, I had more opportunities to talk about

why I started painting to students. But, I don't want to talk about myself as if I were a hero or something. I thought that it was better to tell my story in writing. Also, I wanted to write about my "teacher" whom I admired, who introduced me to the world of painting when I was in high school.

After writing it down, I realized that everything I did is all connected. I couldn't arrive at this conclusion if I didn't write it down. I also realized that those connections were made possible through making paintings. If I was not making paintings, those individual episodes had no connections to each other.



On *Under the Tree at Hitotsubashi University*, the first book of the trilogy *Paint of This Planet*

—What are your thoughts on the novel?

SATANI: I thought it was good that he wrote it. Since there are numerous episodes on KOBAYASHI, I was hoping that someone would write about him. I decided a long time ago that I, as a gallery owner, would not commercialize his character, so I was intentionally not publicizing those episodes in the novel and his collectors were buying his artworks without knowing about those stories. I feel like his theory of painting has been completed through his novel, and I believe this is a great achievement. But,

KOBAYASHI's understanding and some facts are apparently a little different. [laughing]

KOBAYASHI: It's the same in painting. As each individual looks at one painting in his or her own way, so do I see those facts through my own lens and write about them. I wrote those stories while traveling back in time, just like diving into a painting when I make the painting.

—Although the current exhibition *Artist and the Model* predominantly focuses on the horse and the model, viewers can find artworks from other series such as *Unnamed* and *Model of This Planet*. I think this juxtaposition of different series allows us to see a glimpse of your artistic endeavor until now. Did writing your own novel affect your exhibition?

KOBAYASHI: I think whatever I do goes back to painting, so everything is connected. I installed this exhibition featuring the painting of a model laying herself down and the painting of a painter disguised as a horse. In those paintings, the model is shot, the horse holds a paintbrush in its mouth. In another painting, the model is on top of the horse and they are fused into one.



Masato KOBAYASHI "Artist and the Model" installation view, 2019, ShugoArts
Model of this planet, 2018 – 2019 (left), Unnamed #61, 2018 (right)



Masato KOBAYASHI "Artist and the Model" installation view, 2019, ShugoArts

Encounter, and Painting = Sky

—Please tell me how you two first met.

SATANI: I saw KOBAYASHI's painting for the first time at his first solo exhibition *Absolute Painting* at Kamakura Gallery in 1985. There was a fierce-looking young man at the back of the gallery. I said hi to him, but he didn't seem to care about me.

KOBAYASHI: In the solo exhibition, I was telling people that I wouldn't sell my paintings even if they wanted to buy them. Back then, all I was thinking was that all of my artworks should go to museums. It was not because museums had power over everything, but it was because, back then, I was making my paintings for my "teacher." I couldn't imagine that someone would want to buy my paintings. I just wanted to paint everyday. I was in that kind of phase.



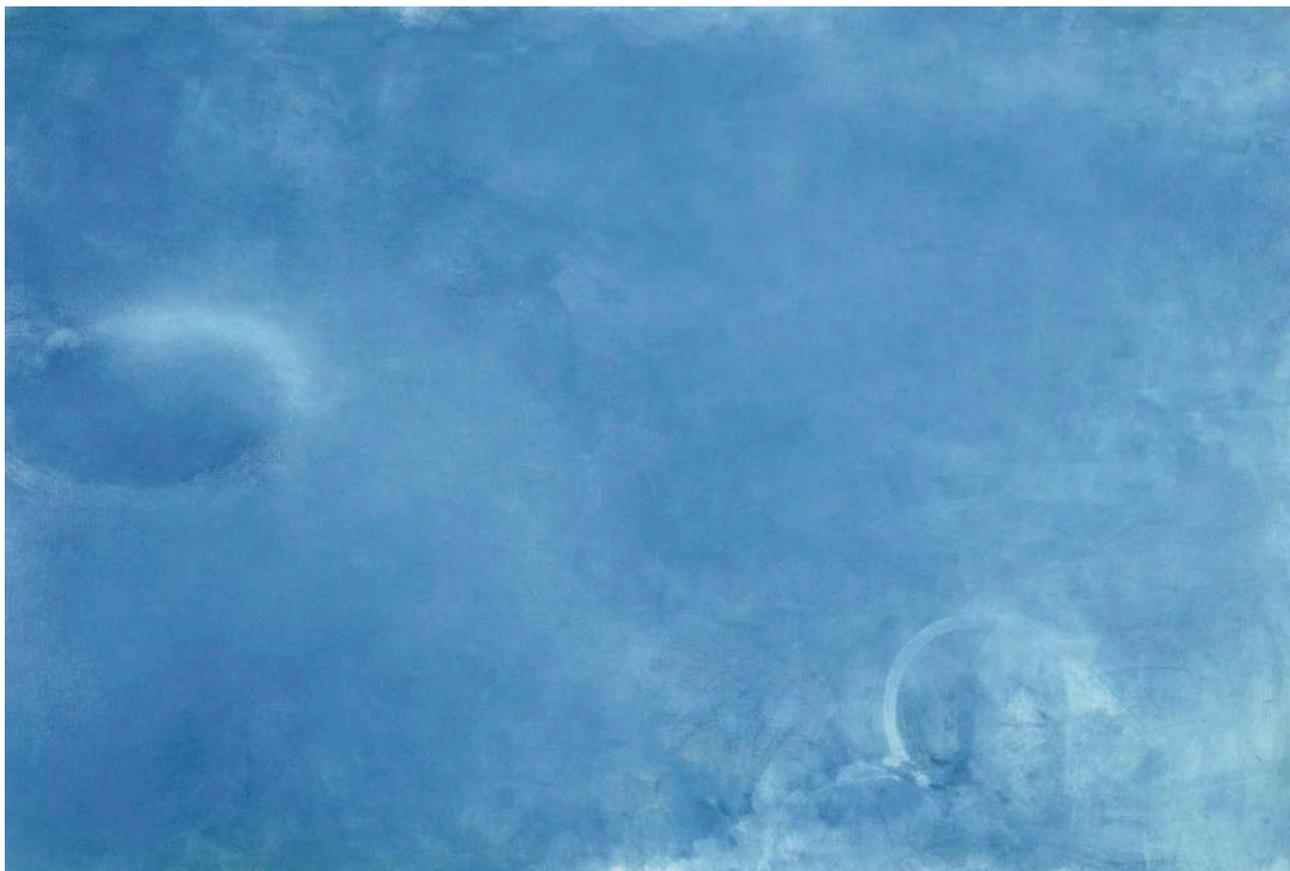
On Angel = Painting (1984), the final artwork KOBAYASHI completed before graduating from Tokyo University of the Arts and one of the works of art shown at the first solo exhibition *Absolute Painting*

—One year after his first solo exhibition, KOBAYASHI-san had his solo exhibition at Satani Gallery. SATANI-san, how did you realize his solo exhibition?

SATANI: My father Kazuhiko SATANI, the owner of Satani Gallery, had a strong desire to showcase younger artists and held many different exhibitions working together with art critics. I was helping his gallery at the time, and one day an older gallerist told me, “Your gallery doesn’t even have adequate planning skills as long as you’re inviting critics to hold exhibitions.” I was truly upset by the comment and requested to my dad, saying, “I’m gonna take care of the next exhibition for a younger artist.” Around the same time, I received a brochure of *Absolute Painting*, KOBAYASHI’s first solo exhibition. When I looked at the image of his artworks, I thought, “This artist is unusual.” And that’s how I invited him to the gallery.

KOBAYASHI: I was brought to Satani Gallery by this person who was unconditionally supporting my artistic practice at the time. Truth be told, maybe that was the first time I went to a commercial gallery. Of course, when I was a student I went to many vanity galleries, in which I saw some Mono-ha exhibitions, but I didn't see any price lists. Back then, nobody thought that they would be able to make their ends meet by pursuing their careers in contemporary art.

When I entered Satani Gallery in 4 chome, Ginza, I felt different vibes. At the time, I was in the middle of making *Painting = Sky*, but I didn't have any clue of an exhibition space to show the work of art. However, I had a vision in my head that the painting would work when it's surrounded by a white space. The vision that my painting would be hung on a beautiful white wall and my "teacher" would come see the artwork. But, I didn't know how it would become possible. Arriving at Satani Gallery, I felt for the first time, "Woah, this would be the white wall I was imagining," and I wanted to have my solo exhibition there.



Masato KOBAYASHI, *Painting = Sky*, 1985-1986, oil, canvas, 195X291cm, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo

— *Painting = Sky* was shown in his first solo exhibition at Satani gallery. SATANI-san, what did

you think of the finished painting?

SATANI: When I visited his studio in Kunitachi, there was *Painting = Sky*, which was about three-meter-wide, on the floor of the very tiny room. KOBAYASHI was like, “What do you think?” but I could not look at the entire painting because the room was so small. I didn’t know where I should place my focal point. Then, KOBAYASHI handed me a pair of glasses with very thick lenses and told me that I could see the whole painting if I put on those glasses. [laugh] I actually understood its high level of perfection through those thick lenses.

I asked KOBAYASHI to have his show at our gallery because I liked his artworks in his first solo exhibition *Absolute Painting*, so I was confused because I was not ready to see a painting without lines like *Painting = Sky*. When I showed my dad a picture of the painting, I said, “His new work is a little different from his old stuff.” He also didn’t know what to say.

— *Painting = Sky* was eventually collected by the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, and it became one of KOBAYASHI-san’s famous works of art representing his career.

SATANI: *Painting = Sky* was featured in *Color and Monochrome*, the exhibition at the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo in 1989, and was purchased by the same museum in 1991. I am glad that the museum collected the artwork at the time. *Painting = Sky* has been exhibited many times in their permanent collection exhibitions, and one of their staff members told me that the visitors always say good things about the painting in the survey.

KOBAYASHI: *Painting = Sky* was called a sign board back then. When I was making the painting without adequate ventilation, I passed out due to a lack of oxygen. When paramedics tried to carry me out, I heard that they were saying, “A sign board painter fell.” While my consciousness was fading away, I thought, “Am I going to die while my painting is being called a signboard?” [laugh] To be honest, the impression is not entirely wrong. When I was making the painting in my studio in Kunitachi, I was trying to make the painting visible to my “teacher” who lived in Vancouver, Canada at the time. Just like I was making a signboard. It sounds like a fantasy, but all of this was super real in my mind.

On delivering the power of artworks

—According to your autobiographical novel *Paint of This Planet*, every art student was carrying philosophy books and talking about the end of painting when you were in art school. In that time period, were you already an atypical artist among them?



Masato KOBAYASHI

KOBAYASHI: I went to Tokyo University of the Arts to become a painter. I was looking up to painters such as Shigeru AOKI, Yuzo SAEKI and Kanji MAEDA. But when I entered the university, everyone was like, “painting is dead.” When I was making a painting at school, older students would ask me, “What are you making?” Of course, I answered, “I am making a painting,” then they would ask, “A flat object?” When I was a student, artworks were either “flat” or “three-dimensional.”

SATANI: In those days, the influence of *Modernist Painting*, Greenburg’s famous critique, was so strong that we could not even use the word painting to describe painting.

KOBAYASHI: Everyone was participating in lectures on modernism. I went to some of them and I partially understood their points from the art historical perspective. However, what they were doing was to come up with ways to articulate “There’s nothing more to paint.” I felt like they were just nitpicking.

—I feel like making “paintings” is the foundation of your artmaking.

KOBAYASHI: Right. Everything I do goes back to painting, and they all can be dealt within the realm of painting. This picture hasn’t changed since the time I was making *Painting = Sky* until today. Images in my mind are my paintings and I am the only one who can see those paintings since they are not physically out here. When I actualize those paintings in my head, they are transformed into various shapes and forms. I consider every single step of this process and the process itself as painting. I don’t call them installation. What I made in the past and am making right now is clearly painting.

—I understood that KOBAYASHI-san has been consistently working on painting. As a gallerist, how did you work with his art?

SATANI: I really liked his artworks and financially supported him so that he could survive. However, it was really difficult to receive acceptance and validation from others. Older artists were constantly making fun of his works of art. Although people from the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo understood the significance of KOBAYASHI’s paintings, people from other museums didn’t necessarily appreciate his body of work as much as the national museum did.

He was seen an atypical artist, and only a handful of people who understood the nature of his practice bought his artworks. Some said, “We couldn’t remove from our dining table since we all liked it too much,” after installing one of his small artworks there. Accounts like this made me realize that the value of an artwork can be proved like this. This is another reason why I have enjoyed handling his work.

On the fated encounter with Jan Hoet

—Eventually, KOBAYASHI-san’s work was witnessed by Jan Hoet, an internationally-known curator and director of the Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent, Belgium in 1995.

SATANI: When *Ripple Across the Water '95*, an exhibition curated by Jan Hoet, was held at Watarium, so

many artists tried to show him their stuff.

Thanks to the unprecedented success of *documenta 9*, a numerous number of artists and people in the art industry tried to show him their artworks. Fortunately, I had an opportunity to meet Jan, so I put together a portfolio of my artists and brought it with me. As Jan was flipping through the pages of my portfolio, he stopped his hand on KOBAYASHI's. He got really excited and started walking around in circles like a bear in a zoo cage. He burst out saying, "I want to see this." (photo: *Three Apples*) As I showed him the actual artwork at the gallery, Jan started looking at the artwork without taking his eyes off of it even for a moment. After standing and sitting in front of the painting for about an hour, he said, "I am going to buy these artworks for a new museum opening soon. And, I will invite this artist to Belgium."



A Painting, 1993, oil,canvas, 198X262.5cm, S.M.A.K

It was really surprising. I thought that Jan Hoet completely understood KOBAYASHI's talent in

that moment. To me, it was amazing. On the other hand, KOBAYASHI was like, “Who’s Jan Hoet?” I thought that he would be able to achieve something in Ghent since it was getting harder for him to survive in the Japanese art scene. When he first stayed there, people from the Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent and other artists understood and valued his body of work right away. They highly valued him because he was one of the most artistic artists in the world.

In Japan, KOBAYASHI was seen as a weirdo and people didn’t have a positive image of him since “he didn’t say ‘hi.’” But, he found his place in Ghent.

After his exhibition, everyone from the museum put their hands on my shoulder telling me, “Leave KOBAYASHI here in Ghent.” I realized that there would be many in this world who would “get it.” There are many artists who want to live and work outside of Japan, and I believe you can do so with your art. KOBAYASHI proved my point by himself.

—After that, KOBAYASHI-san created a painting, which is meant to be installed on the floor, for the exhibition titled *de Rode Poort* in Ghent.

KOBAYASHI: *Red Door* was a pre-exhibition for the opening of the Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent. The name of this exhibition was derived from the huge rolling door of the storage building, which was going to be part of the contemporary museum in the future. So, Jan was planning to hold an exhibition in a storage space. I think this idea is edgy even today. This was an unusual exhibition; for example, Cai Guo-Qiang painted a dragon with gunpowder on the long wall of the storage space, and Jan bought the artwork.

At the time of installation, Jan exclaimed “Stay!” when a curator held up my painting to hang it on the wall. After a moment of stunned silence, the curator put down the painting. [laugh] While staring at the painting on the floor, Jan said to me, “Look, this is already incredible.” For some reason, I immediately understood what he meant. At that moment, I felt like that justice was finally done to my painting.

When I made an international call to Shugo after putting my painting down on the floor, he was really angry. He said, “What are you even doing in Europe? Do you think this is a joke? Aren’t you supposed to be pursuing painting!?” [laugh] I said, “You’ll understand when you come here and look at the painting. I cannot explain it to you in detail unless you are here.” Once he came to the exhibition, he understood right away.

SATANI: Back in the day, I could not articulate the meaning of leaning a painting against the wall, I feel

like I can do it now. When KOBAYASHI had his solo exhibition *Son of Painting* in 1993, he was already painting while stretching the canvas and choosing stretcher bars according to the motifs in his painting. That's why the physical structure of a painting and its canvas is transferred into the image of the painting. Thus, his painting is strongly affected by its physicality and vice versa. Since his painting possesses strong physicality, it is insusceptible to all sorts of exhibition space even if it's leaned against the wall. Since then, his artistic practice has been logically sound and that hasn't changed until now.



Shugo SATANI, holding the catalog of *Absolute Painting* of Masato KOBAYASHI (1985)

I remember that at KOBAYASHI's artist talk, Jan Hoet also said, "This painting already shows KOBAYASHI's artistic practice later in his life," while pointing at *Angel = Painting*, which he completed at the time of his graduation from Tokyo University of the Arts. He said, "Look at the arms of the portrait painted in here. It is pushing the wood frame away as if it wanted to get out of it. This right here shows the future of his artistic practice." Just like that, KOBAYASHI's artmaking has developed. But, I thought that it would be difficult to sell a painting placed on the floor. You can't even clean the room. [laugh]

KOBAYASHI: Back then, there were stereotypes towards painting; one of which was that there needed to be frontality in painting. That's why placing paintings on the floor was revolutionary and it was also Jan's first attempt to do so. We see so many paintings on the floor today, but it was different in those days. I believe it was not easy for Shugo to exhibit my painting on the floor in a commercial gallery.

On artist and gallerist

—When did you understand KOBAYASHI-san's concept?

SATANI: I may not understand his concept completely even today. He would tell me, "Shugo, it's finished," then I would go to his studio to see the artwork, and I would be usually dumbfounded. It has been like that for many years. But the benefit of being a gallerist is being able to see exhibitions every day. Looking at his paintings every day, you start to understand what KOBAYASHI is saying and appreciate the level of perfection in his paintings.

KOBAYASHI: Artists understand works of art faster. Shugo also gets it, but I think he takes a little bit of time. But, a gallerist has to look at works of art considering many different things at the same time. Artists would judge the quality of a work of art with their intuitions, but gallerists would also have to think about its durability and physical limitations. From this point, a lot of my paintings would give Shugo a pain in the neck.

SATANI: One time, I was scolded for accepting KOBAYASHI's stylistic changes by his long-time supporters who have liked his work since he was a student. Maybe they feel like they are betrayed. Sometimes there are nails sticking out from the canvas of his painting, some of my clients told me, "Don't you usually hammer in all these nails when you bring a work of art to a client?"

KOBAYASHI: I don't paint on a canvas that is already stretched out, so the process of making painting is completely different. It was too limiting to make my paintings freely with square canvases, so I had to change the structure itself. I decided to do everything all at once: making the frame, stretching the canvas, and painting on the canvas. Therefore, it's not uncommon to find nails sticking out. I didn't talk about the logical aspect of my painting practice, so maybe people didn't understand the process.



Installation view at *Gelijk het leven is*, the Vlaamse Opera Gent, Gent, Belgium

SATANI: I remember what Cai Guo-Qiang said when he saw KOBAYASHI's painting on the floor. He said, "I left Japan after living and working there for 7 years because I came to the conclusion that there would be no Japanese artist in the future who could create works of art from scratch without appropriation. So, I'm surprised to see KOBAYASHI doing something totally new."

KOBAYASHI: In Japan, people usually renew preexisting images or materials when they start new things. But I completely changed "oil on canvas," the preexisting structure, to "oil with canvas." Maybe this approach was different from that of other artists in Japan.

—Through your conversation, you two gave me a strong impression that you have gone through a lot together under your strong trust. Did you want to develop KOBAYASHI-san's artistic potential with your own hands?

SATANI: People sometimes tell me, “You’re developing your artists’ potentials,” but, in my opinion, artists develop their skills and potentials by themselves. I feel like I’m a person running next to the artists.

KOBAYASHI: There’s one thing I can say. If it weren’t for Shugo, I might have been still making paintings of the same sky. I have to stop painting since my paintings are transported to the gallery, but I honestly never want to stop painting. Even though I made a considerable number of paintings so far, they disappeared from my studio and storage. This is all thanks to Shugo.

SATANI: I sometimes make fun of him by saying that even penguins would help KOBAYASHI if he goes to Antarctica. He was born under a lucky star that connects people around him and makes them want to help him. But he is not just lucky. KOBAYASHI has his clear purposes and has his power to realize them on this planet. Thus, his work is so powerful and I am enchanted by the power ever since I saw his paintings for the first time.

KOBAYASHI: By making paintings, everything began to become one. I thank Shugo for letting me make paintings.

SATANI: What’s wrong with you, all of the sudden. [laugh] But, I can say that Masato KOBAYASHI is the motivation of ShugoArts gallery and also its identity. Because I met Masato KOBAYASHI, ShugoArts has been able to survive until now. This is an undeniable fact.



An illustrated fax Masato KOBAYASHI sent to Shugo SATANI while he was still in Ghent. The completion of the artwork he was working on at the time and his need of financial support for sustaining his artmaking are expressed here.

Profile

Masato KOBAYASHI

Born in Tokyo in 1957. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting from the Department of Art at Tokyo University of the Arts. He represented Japan at the 22nd Sao Paulo Art Biennial (1996). In 1997, KOBAYASHI was invited by Jan Hoet, a curator of contemporary art, to develop his art practice furthermore in Ghent, Belgium and other parts of Europe. He came back to Japan in 2006 and has been continuing his art practice based in Fukuyama City, Hiroshima. He has pursued his own definition of painting which is free from any possible restrictions, and he established his own style by simultaneously utilizing different actions such as constructing the wood frame, stretching the canvas and applying the paint. In addition, he often paints with his bare hands. His selected solo exhibitions include, but not limited to, *Masato KOBAYASHI* (The Miyagi Museum of Art in 2000), *A Son of Painting* (S.M.A.K., Ghent in 2001), *STARRY PAINT* (Tensta Konsthall, Sweden in 2004). He also participated in many group exhibitions such as *Painting, Let's Call It Love vol.9 Masato KOBAYASHI+Hiroshi SUGITO* (gallery aM, Tokyo in 2013), *Atsuhiko Misawa's Animal House: House of Enigmas* (The Shoto Museum of Art in 2017).

Shugo SATANI

Born in Hokkaido in 1958. Having worked at a chemical manufacturer, he joined Satani Gallery in 1984, which was owned by his father. He became independent in 2000 and founded ShugoArts. While mostly dealing with works of contemporary art and realizing exhibitions at his gallery space and museums, SATANI has contributed to collectors, museums and companies inside and outside of Japan. After having had to move three times in 13 years due to multiple rent increases, ShugoArts reopened in the first-ever gallery complex built by Mori corporation in Roppongi in the fall of 2016. He has also served as a committee member of Tokyo Photographic Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo and the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo. In addition, he gave a series of lectures on art management at Musashino Art University and Keio University.

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Information

Masato KOBAYASHI " Artist and the Model"

June 1 Sat - July 6 Sat, 2019

ShugoArts