

interview - 2019.9.26

Interview with Shigeo TOYA: Examining the “Gaze” in Society as a Sculptor

Body of the Gaze, a solo exhibition by sculptor Shigeo TOYA, is currently on view until October 19 at ShugoArts in Roppongi, Tokyo. TOYA has been praised for his persistent art practice bolstered by his original theory in which sculpture is formed by the integration of numerous gazes. In this interview, which took place at the artist’s studio in Chichibu, Saitama, the readers can get a grasp of his thoughts that have been accumulated through his half-century-old art practice and his mission to recognize himself as a sculptor.

Interviewer=Keisuke Mori (Curator at Chiba City Museum of Art)

Editor=The Editorial Board of Bijutsu Techo

Photographer=Natsume Tezuka



Shigeo TOYA at his studio in Chichibu, Saitama

—What kind of concepts are behind this exhibition title, *Body of the Gaze*?

My basic concept for *Body of the Gaze* is to create sculptures that are made by the integration of numerous gazes. As a sculptor, the gaze is not only about sight but also about many senses, including touch. I used to use the term “visual and tactile senses.” The body of the gaze is not the two-dimensional gaze but rather the spatial gaze, moving around the space, creating images and shapes.

It has been said that sculpture is to carve an image out of something; however, in my understanding, an image does not exist in the first place. Nothing exists in raw materials such as stones or wood; you can see a form only when various gazes in the space intertwine with one another. In my art practice, an image does not precede the gaze.

—This exhibition consists of two exhibition spaces. In the back room, there are approximately 480 small artworks, which are installed on the entire walls of the white-cube-like structure.

I am focusing more on the gaze this time around compared to my previous *Woods* series. The artworks on the wall create lines, which are also part of the installation; some of those lines are obviously straight and some randomly intersect each other.

There is a correlation between the structure of the gaze created by the space itself and the structure inside the small mass of each artwork. As the space itself contains a body of the gaze, so does the small mass of each of each artwork.



Shigeo TOYA, Body of the Gaze—Scatter (2019) (C)the artist Courtesy of ShugoArts, Photo by Shigeo MUTO



Shigeo TOYA, Body of the Gaze (2019) (C)the artist Courtesy of ShugoArts, Photo by Shigeo MUTO

—On the other hand, there are 9 bulky sculptures neatly aligned in the front room near the entrance. What do you think of the spatial relationship between the two rooms?

Those 9 masses are in different sizes but they are all carved out of wooden cuboids. When you gradually carve into a cuboid with your chainsaw, small pieces get chipped away; those wood pieces are actually mounted on the walls in the other room among other pieces chipped away from similar processes.

Since I make many similar diagonal lines, all masses, small or large, created during the process, share the same structure to a certain extent. Whether scattered or left behind, those masses have the same traits. This is when the integrated idea of the cuboid gradually gets decomposed.

When you think about the history of fine arts, such a decomposition of preexisting ideas has always taken place. In my case, such a decomposition occurs when I work with my chainsaw. It is like things produced by my manual labor get dispersed into the other space.

—***Bamboo Grove II***, your performance in 1975 in which you had the vinyl ropes stretched between bamboo trees, was also about the gaze.

In graduate school, there was a period of time when I could not decide where I should locate the source of my artmaking. I made things along similar lines of Mono-ha artists, but something did not sit well with me. In the midst of my struggle, I returned to the traces of ancient human creations such as petroglyphs in the Cave of Altamira and Lascaux Cave. Some of the contour lines of those paintings are inscribed with hard rocks a little by a little, and their images remind us of relief sculptures. Thus, we can find a structure in which multiple gazes enter into the wall surface. In the same way, *Bamboo Grove II* is a work of art depicting how we gaze at objects, with vinyl ropes stretched between bamboo trees.



Shigeo TOYA, Bamboo Grove II (1975) copyright the artist courtesy of ShugoArts

—I understand that you are locating petroglyphs as the source of sculpture. It makes me think of the time when you were talking about the significance of relief as an inseparable mixture of painting and sculpture, in relation to the development of sculpture in Japan.

It can be said that those cave walls, the nature itself, are the mothers of the petroglyphs and the figures carved into them. Western modernism has allowed the separation of petroglyphs and sculptures from mother nature. Maybe Japanese people are appropriating this dualism as well.

Just like a relief cannot be separated from its mother wall, we used to be part of nature, and we have recognized the world through relief-like perception. Now it is important to recognize how we perceive the state of consciousness before its separation from nature. This thought reminds me of my childhood when I was jumping around to step on my own shadow. Your shadow leaves your body when you jump up, but it eventually becomes a part of your body as you come back down on the ground. This is way too obvious, but what I said is somewhat related to the relationship between the body and its shadow.

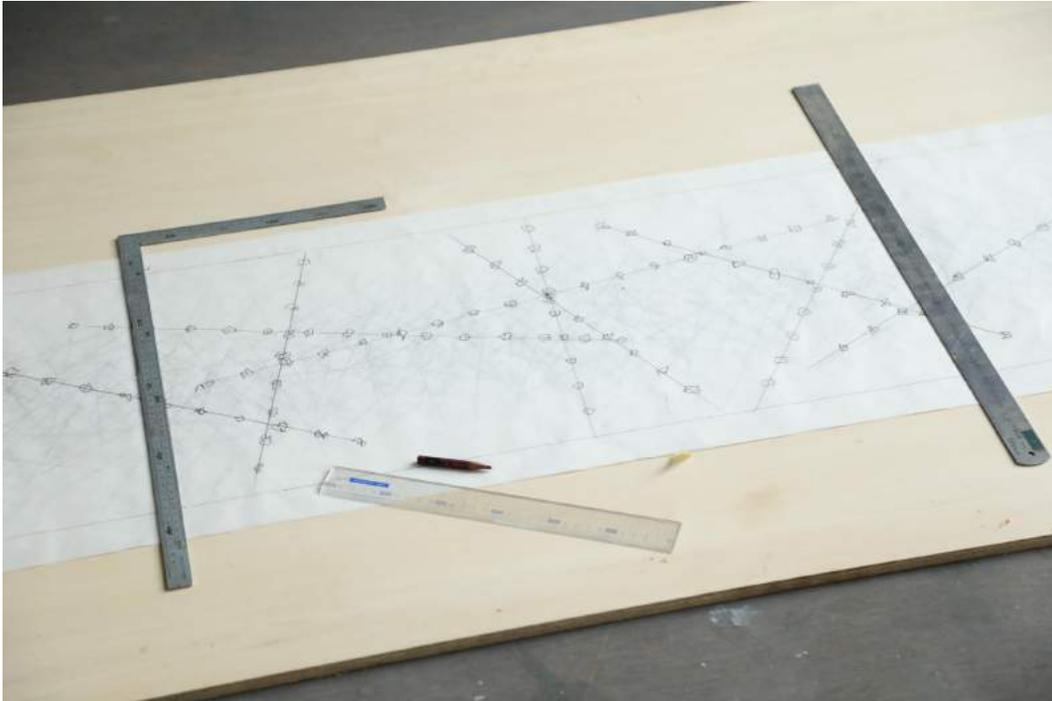
—The lines carved into your sculptures with a chainsaw is the integration of numerous gazes. Compared to *Woods X* (2016), your previous exhibition at ShugoArts, I feel like the surface of your artwork has become an important element of this exhibition.

For the conceptual origin of the *Woods* series, I was thinking of the boundary areas of mountains. I have my studio in Chichibu, and the trees in the mountains get swollen in the spring. Contrarily, they become bare after the fall and the soil gets exposed. When you think about the boundary between the mountains and the sky, the boundary fluctuates from the trees full of leaves to the ground without green. This natural process gives birth to the rich boundary area and has become the origin of creating the *Woods* series.

Although I am undoubtedly emphasizing surface for this group of artworks, it is also connected to the *Woods* series in terms of the thickness of boundary. Once you carve lines into a wooden cuboid with your chainsaw, new surfaces appear in places where the cuts are made. I wanted to focus on those surfaces. When you connect 2 dots, you can make a line; when you connect 3 dots, you can make a surface; when you connect 4 dots, you can make a three-dimensional object. All of these connections provide us different viewpoints and eventually multi-layered thick boundaries.

—In your studio, you make a lot of drawings to sketch out your ideas.

I have never thought of making them into actual artworks, but I make drawings to plan what I want to do for my project. I do not start making my sculptures with their contour lines, and the same goes for my drawings. Drawing with a pencil is as same as carving with a chainsaw. I draw as if I would inscribe lines.



Shigeo TOYA, installation plans for Body of the Gaze—Scatter (2019)



Shigeo TOYA, maneuvering his chainsaw at his studio

—What do you think of the relationship between the current social climate and the current context in which sculpture is being situated?

You can say that I intentionally made sculptures that are “obviously outdated;” however, this group of artworks may also reflect the current social climate.

In the world of so called contemporary art, I think sculpture is on its last legs. Everything is being absorbed into “art” or “fine arts.”

It is not like I am responsible for reviving sculpture, but I was trying not to see the end of the long history of sculptural expression in the current situation but to find some ways of expression to transfer sculpture to the future. Every painting and sculpture has its own identity as an independent medium, and I do not like it when those identities get absorbed and integrated into a few categories such as art or fine arts.

This sentiment is also political. It shares a structural similarities with our intentions to understand nationalism, regionalism and the framework of the global nation. By critiquing globalism and the nation, I want to overcome the nation itself while physically recognizing its localities such as its land, culture and customs, which are the roots of the nation. I see those possibilities in sculpture.

Many people have expressed sociopolitical issues straightforwardly, but I would like to output those issues after internalizing them. Observing recent expressions called art, I feel like they are directed toward outside. First, I personally try to digest specific phenomena and situations, and then I will find ways to express my understanding through my sculptures. Therefore, my artworks might not appear to be strictly sociopolitical, but my conceptual base is actually associated with those issues.



His studio in Chichibu, Saitama



His studio in Chichibu, Saitama

—Can you point out specific parts of this exhibition *Body of the Gaze* where those issues are visible?

The surfaces I create with my chainsaw are full of lines that are not simple but complicated as if they were interlocked fingers. They are sort of cat's cradle and they move from left to right and vice versa. The Western canonical understanding of surface implies a dichotomy between the front and the back, just like when you put your both palms together. In order to break down this dichotomy, I have to make a passage connecting the space between the front and the back and treat the entirety of this passage as the surface.

This way of thinking has the potential to change the concept of the border of a nation-state. For me, how I treat the concept of the border is connected to sculpture. The Western concept of nation was created by modern demarcation with flat surfaces. However, when I think about the village where I grew up in Nagano, the boundary was not flat.

Back in the day, there was another village across the valley from our village. When kids from the other village trespassed onto ours, brawls took place occasionally. Although we got angry when we see them near the center of our village and vice versa, minor intrusions into each other's territory were allowed. This tendency could be summed up into the concept of "common land," in which multiple villages store their materials such as tree logs and grass together. Many villages in Japan were connected by this kind of relationship. I believe this is also a part of the foundational concept of my sculpture. This concept of common land can disturb the bipolarity of globalism and nationalism and may eventually find its way into the ideation of sculpture.



Shigeo TOYA, at his studio in Chichibu, Saitama

—While you are always working with universal issues such as globalism and nation, you also make sure to include your childhood experiences and memories into your artworks.

I see similarities both in our life in the Paleolithic era and my childhood experiences. On my way to elementary school, there was an area on the wall where soft rocks were exposed, and many other students had inscribed lines with hard rocks, generation after generation. My friends and I also took part in the tradition and inscribed those lines as hard as we could while leaving the residual powder on the ground. Then, I would put the powder right back into those grooves, and it felt so good since the powder flows into them smoothly. Thinking back, our practice was completely that of a sculptor.

—Perhaps, because of those experiences, your body of work from the 1970s reveals your interest in cultural anthropology as well.

I created two artworks for my thesis exhibition in graduate school. One of them is titled Stone Axes (1975), which captures the conceptual transition of a stone becoming tools by turning a piece of rock into axes. The other artwork is titled Milky Way (1975), in which I set its theme based on cat's cradle and utilized

stone and ropes for its main materials. Although living so far away from Japan, the people in Papua New Guinea also play cat's cradle just like people in Japan. I was interested in the fact that those two groups of people play the same game even though they do not directly interact with each other.

I was also intrigued by the ruins of Pompeii, an ancient Roman city in Italy. The entire city of Pompeii was buried under volcanic ash in which we can observe hollow spaces where buried human bodies were before they were evaporated by the heat. One can pour plaster into those negative spaces and make cast forms of those buried humans. For example, when you make a bronze sculpture, you make a figure with clay, cover the whole thing with plaster, and complete its mold by removing the clay inside. Then you would pour plaster into the mold, break the mold once, and pull out the cast form once the plaster is set. To make a bronze cast, one will have to go back and forth between the negative and positive images as one does in photography. However, in the case of Pompeii, the inner surfaces of those molds are not flat since the bodies were vanished by the heat; they retain human-esque shapes with ambiguous boundaries. Therefore, the relationship between their forms and molds is tied up by their oscillating surfaces. My interest in those issues has provided new developments to my sculpture practice.

—**Last but not least, please explain what you will focus on in your future artmaking.**

Just like I have mentioned earlier, I feel like we are witnessing crises in the current world situation and forms of expression, so I am trying to create something that leads us to the future through my sculptural expression.

It would be nice if we could control all sorts of natural disasters and fly freely without machines in the future, but I do not think it is going to happen. After all, there is gravity, birth and death. I feel like our behavior to gaze at our happiness from birth and our sadness from death will be passed down from generation to generation. I think a sculptor's work is to get close to those gazes and maintain one's access to them.



Work in Progress, at his studio in Chichibu, Saitama

Translated by Ion Yamazaki

Interview with Shigeo TOYA: Examining the “Gaze” in Society as a Sculptor

First appeared in the Bijutsu Techo website, 26th September 2019, Bijutsu Shupan-Sha Co.Ltd., Tokyo.

<https://bijutsutecho.com/magazine/interview/20586>

*Reproduction is prohibited.

Information

Shigeo TOYA "Body of the Gaze"

September 21 Sat - October 19 Sat, 2019

ShugoArts