

Anju's Kagemi

I am standing in front of the classroom with the blackboard behind me, and Anju is sitting right in front of me on the left-hand side. His paintbrush, which is completely soaked in sumi ink, is swimming on the paper. In the drawing paper on his work table, I can see an unfinished figure that looks like a landscape. The drawing paper is oriented horizontally and I assume the line on the bottom is a bush, judging from its serrated edges. Until a few seconds ago, he was filling colors into those serrated shapes from right to left. Now he is drawing a tree that shoots straight up from the center of the jagged line. The tree branches out left and right. Those branches look like black lightning. Although the tree trunk has not completely filled in yet, the leaves are almost done, showing an interesting contrast between the black of the sumi ink and the white blank spots of the drawing paper where the leaves do not overlap with each other. I thought he was going to finish the trunk from the middle part, but he is now drawing a beast head in the shadow of the bush near the bottom of the tree trunk. Its facial feature reminds me of a cat or a wolf.

Then all of a sudden, he burst out "Done!" and put his brush away and went home. I could not read his mind at all. He would paint everything including rather complicated designs by using only the sumi ink, even without an underpainting nor an esquisse. The way he used his paintbrushes was fairly violent and he ran them down quickly because of that. However, he was able to paint intricate parts, edges and shapes with astonishing accuracy and speed even with the disintegrated tip of his paintbrush. It is never boring to look at how people use their paintbrushes; it is because their movements correlate with painters' physical and respiratory actions which are completely different from mine. Though, what Anju presented was a little different. Even though his physical movements were not acrobatic per se, the way he painted was very athletic. It was full of "Look at how you paint!" and "You start from there?" While dancing fiercely on top of the cliff, he knew which lines to draw, which shapes to paint. And then he would fall. On the next cliff, he lost his footing, but he carefully drew a line, made a dot and fell again.

Just like that, Anju Mishima was drawing cat whiskers and birds flapping their feathers. Back then, he was a student of my drawing seminar at Bigakko. He was my student for two years. Once a week, I was watching him draw and pretending to be calm even though he made me nervous every time he was in class. He was easily annoyed by whispers and there were quite a few times that he yelled "Shut up!" at other students who were exchanging banter. Perhaps I depicted my memory of him as if I were describing something in front of me although my memory is not trustworthy. But, it is true that my heart was mesmerized by his paintings every week while he was there. Although my understanding of painting was that it should be made with no restriction, no set of rules, his way of painting gradually made me think that

I was on shaky ground.

There is a “stroke order” to write a kanji. Japanese schools would love to force it on their students. My stroke orders were very questionable and my teacher often fixed them in red during kanji writing practices. However, foreigners (excluding those who use Chinese characters in their countries) would write incredibly beautiful kanji. And children who have just started learning kanji for the first time, too. They write fake characters that are too dazzling to believe. In addition, those “phony kanji” on street signs abroad are also amazing whether or not those signs attract Japanese tourists. When a kanji lacks a horizontal line, has an extra dot or has parts slightly different from the original ones, I cannot help myself from looking at it before reading it. And it gives me a chuckle. Since we remember a kanji both with its meaning and composition (which is totally thanks to our educational system...), the joint between our experience and comprehension gets dislocated when we witness a “similar thing” that has not been registered in our systems. Kanji was derived from a series of ideographs and is the result of numerous symbolizations and organizations of various shapes up to now. This is why kanji exhibits the highest level of abstraction and perfection simultaneously, but due to its specific nature we would receive a completely different impression when we find a tiny mistake in just one part of one kanji. That is also the moment when we witness a partial breakdown of our robust writing history which has been supposedly bolstered by our perception and experience. New forms appear in front of us and they hypnotize our eyes. We have no power over “bare forms” that are beyond our experience and perception.

My story will get off track here again, but sometimes I cannot suppress a grunt of admiration when I see a face in front of me on a train. Although all our faces are different, I cannot help myself from being surprised by unexpected ones. It is not because their facial characteristics are intense or rare. It is rather their faces are somewhat different from “faces” that I am familiar with even though they are ordinary Asian, Anglo-Saxon or African faces. One can say that those face samples are not saved in my facial image repository. It is like a part of the fabrication process of what makes a human face a face has been reformed at some point, and the reformation has spread all over the face naturally yet rapidly, completing an “individual” face. My experiences with “unexpected” faces can be summarized in that sentence. And whenever I see them, I get affirmed by voices such as “This type of face does exist.” or “This is a possibility.” They can be called “familiar new faces,” I think. I feel luckier when I encounter those faces with slight anomalies than when I see originalities or stark differences in people’s faces. They are one of the examples of something that makes us think of the limit of our semantic world, which can be easily disturbed by the existence of the slightest anomaly that is well-assimilated and unrecognizable unless it is right next to me or in front of me .

Let me talk about another example since I already mentioned faces. There was a painter in the US. He was born in Armenia in West Asia. He and his sister moved to the US as immigrants when he was sixteen. He dreamed of becoming a painter and started using his new name Arshile Gorky (1904-1948) while abandoning his Armenian name Vostanik Manoug Adoian. Although he was a tragic artist who ended his short life by his own hand, the artist left numerous paintings behind. He is considered as a Surrealist and one of the pioneers of American Abstract Expressionism. In his practice, Gorky incorporated Armenian people, landscapes and toys by altering their lines, shapes and colors so that he could disguise his painting style as that of other artists. He tried to depict our ontological landscape on his canvas in which image complication and emotional confusion are naturally put together. There is a painting titled *The Artist and His Mother* (1926-36). He made this painting based on a picture of the young Gorky and his mother. It took ten years for him to complete the portrait, in which the viewer can catch sight of his early influence from Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres as well as other images that affected his painting style over those years such as Bizantine icons. The mother and child looks back at the viewers with their slightly dimmed, fish-like eyes. When I first saw this painting in a catalog, I thought it was one of Picasso's paintings because the faces of the mother and the child were painted in quintessential neoclassical style. It was beyond copying and being truthful to his influence. It made me sick and surprised. However, I was convinced at the same time; "This painting strongly reminds me of Picasso's painting, but it is not an imitation. This is what Gorky is capable of doing!" I do not know where that confidence came from. His paintings certainly remind the viewers of images created by others such as Cézanne, Matisse, Kandinsky, Calder or Miró. Yet all his paintings are undeniably that of Gorky. They are Gorky's without a doubt. While rejecting to imprint other artists' styles on his canvases, he manages to project their images on me and other viewers like stickers and labels. It almost feels like he plays with them by sticking them on the viewers and removing them. But this is the most dangerous game. Where did he learn how to play like this? Gorky is also an athletic man.

The reason why I have been writing in this length is that I believe the above-mentioned examples are all "Anju-like." Yet I have not been able to decipher his very artistic practice. It is very hard to be able to touch his core. On the other hand, he and his paintings can easily access mine. They shake and rub my body at times. It is possible to say that I am also touching him at those moments, but there is something missing in that kind of philosophical analysis. Thus I have given up on reaching at his core since it appears that I do not have enough tools to do so.

On a different note, Anju's paintings are not similar to anyone's; however, that does not mean that the originality and value of his paintings are secure no matter what. He uses natural elements for the motifs of his paintings. They are, including, but not limited to, seas, mountains, stars, the moon, plants,

minerals and animals, all of which are very common motifs and images for us. His paintings are rather scenes than landscapes. Through his paintings Anju seems to create reports that he “saw this and that out here and there.”

Let me talk about two of his paintings: COMET AND NIGHT and SEA DAWN. They are both watercolor paintings on kumohadamashi, Japanese paper made of hemp and paper mulberry. COMET AND NIGHT is a painting in which a star is falling, leaving its long tail in the sky. The background is painted in three layers and all the blue colors resonate with each other so beautifully. Here is a quote from Anju himself; “In a world where the quiet night is deep, a comet come a night visitor.” SEA DAWN is horizontally divided in two colors, ultramarine and turquoise blue, and a pair of strokes runs to the left edge of the painting. As the artist explains, “It became brighter in the dawn ocean. It was made me calm.” Perhaps he misspelled some letters, and I can recognize multiple traces of changes in this text. When I type Anju’s words for this text in my computer, wavy lines appear in multiple places under his words. I do not think those words describe the paintings, but I think they are the “words” he has left for me. They are independent images which are not absorbed by or relying on those paintings. There was this thing. I had an opportunity to teach a class at HIGURE 17-15 cas and told my students to come up with an exhibition title. Next week, when I entered the class, everyone was meek and they acted weirdly. Anju handed me a piece of paper with his title on it, it says “Love of Kagenmi” in sumi ink. I read, “Ai no Kagenmi?” and then he corrected me by saying, “Kagemi, Ai no Kagemi.” It was an unfamiliar word and sound. Kagenmi is a Buddhist term meaning the three different worlds, the past, present and future, and Kagenmi instead of Kagemi appears to be the correct pronunciation. “The love of the past, present and future...Oooh!” said no one at the time. We were hypnotized and shaken by the sound of what we just came out of our mouths, “A, I, No, Ka, Ge, Mi.” By dropping only a letter, Anju opened up a new scene for us by making us hear an unknown word instead of letting us know its meaning.

O JUN

July, 2014

First appeared in Anju Mishima “BLUE CRYSTAL”, BOOK PEAK, 2014

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