

“Resident of the Mysterious Forest”

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It was late May in the pouring rain when I went to see Aki Kondo’s open studio. There was a clear concept behind this open studio—to “observe” the ecology of “a curious living creature called Aki Kondo.” Peering in through a cage of cardboard, piled up like a barricade, Kondo was wearing a jumpsuit painted like a monkey, an animal mask over her head and painting onto the cardboard with all her soul. Sometimes she would look our way and talk to the visitors who had come to see her. This was unlike any “open studio” I had seen before, nor was it a performance. Perhaps the right word here would be something like “nest-building.” Rather than painting oils on flat canvases as Kondo had exhibited till now, here she was attempting to use acrylics on the three-dimensional form of a white cardboard box. Assemble the cardboard box, paint, stack, put it together, paint. What emerges from this is not so much an artwork as a situation, an environment, a mysterious living creature with a paintbrush building its own playground and habitat.

At any rate, Kondo paints. She paints, well, “magnanimously.” We cannot comment here on her work that is not created publicly and yet based on what we can see of Kondo’s open studio process, her speed is remarkable—she just paints and paints. Glance away for a moment and something completely new has now appeared where before there was nothing. It seems less that she is thinking things over and making judgments, as that she is painting more just as her body responds.

Needless to say, her previous two-dimensional works also manifested this sense of velocity. But in the words of the artist herself, this was like the vestiges of a story; “a new world shut up inside the picture.” “The pictures I paint are not my things, they are for the viewer to imagine and enjoy,” as the artist has said. In the process of completing a painting, Kato has already let it go, and from there its relationship with the viewers’ imaginations is established. However, at this open studio, we were then, in that place, observing the very moment of creation. But surely that is the same as any work produced in a regular open studio? And yet it’s not. Kondo was not making public her “process” of production aiming to create a finalized work, but, infinitely changing by assembling polyhedral boxes, she was showing the viewer the very torrent of her endless imagination, never complete, proliferating through the passage of time. This engaged the imagination of the viewer, at times seemingly moving toward a faraway point.

By the fifth day, the venue for the roughly one-month open studio was filled with all manner of painted cardboard boxes, already exceeding the space of the gallery and becoming a mysterious place where Kondo’s imagination, till now shut up inside paintings, was manifesting in that very place. However, on a later visit to exhibition held after the open studio period, the form of the curious living creature was no longer there; the place had become the vestige of a vast story that Kondo had already let go.