

Review by Takuma Ishikawa in ARTFORUM CHINA

Naofumi Maruyama: Is it possible to construct a dream to see at night?
ShugoArts

In the early 1990s, Naofumi Maruyama received critical acclaim for abstract paintings depicting organic forms created by a technique known as stain painting - letting his diluted acrylic ink seep into his unprimed canvases. His works thus achieved recognition within the tradition of Post-Painterly Abstraction, led by such artists as Helen Frankenthaler, who developed the stain painting technique, and Morris Louis.

And yet, to limit analysis of Maruyama's work to the context of American post-abstract expressionism is to get things around the wrong way. In modern *nihon-ga* (Japanese style painting), there is a technique known as *morotai*, developed under the influence of historian Tenshin Okakura, in which the outlines are blurred as though the subject is enshrouded in mist. Likewise, one look at the history of ink painting or ukiyo-e, will tell you that you can't just think of Maruyama's work in the context of staining. In developing his art, Maruyama has become more conscious of its reception and has hence actually reined in the seepage that is the hallmark of stain painting and come to more clearly delineate the landscapes or people that are his subjects. Needless to say, this does not represent an estrangement from the Western canon, nor is it a return to figurative painting.

On the other hand, discussing Maruyama's art solely in the context of Japanese art, Asian art or figurative art would also deprive us of important critical vocabulary. Maruyama has not at present completely abandoned the potential of stain painting and his most recent works have again evinced stronger elements of abstraction.

Gilles Deleuze once quoted Marcel Proust in reminding us that "writers invent a new language within language, a foreign language, as it were." He goes on to explain, in reference to all linguistic activity including painting and music, that:

It is a delirium that invents (artistic visions), as a process driving words from one end of the universe to the other. They are events at the edge of language. But when delirium falls back into the clinical state, words no longer open onto anything, we no longer hear or see anything through them except a night whose history, colors and songs have been lost. Literature is a health.
(From the preface to "Essays Critical and Clinical")

I think this idea of healthy "delirium" precisely describes Maruyama. There is no single vantage point from which his entire oeuvre can be appraised, but instead each work differs slightly in terms of technique, space and composition. And yet, just as Deleuze defines health as a condition of "delirium," this does not mean Maruyama's works are chaotic or lack order. Even as each work addresses unique problems, it is also part of a dynamic system that works as a whole. Maruyama maintains in his works a fluidity so that they can escape being reduced to fixed concepts - points in a diagrammatized version of art history with Western art and Eastern art in separate, discrete categories - and, even as he undermines the notion of painting, he always imbues them with the sense that they are in fact "a new language within language, a foreign language, as it were."

For example, what the Post-Impressionist painters such as Cezanne, van Gogh and Gauguin,

achieved in oil painting was a kind of translation from other media such as printmaking, watercolor and tapestry that allowed them to give a degree of plasticity to the system of ink and ground. To the point of foolishness, van Gogh made imitations of prints using oil paints, while Gauguin incorporated the unique textures of tapestry, prints and reliefs into his oil paintings. Cezanne's oil paintings have a close relationship to his watercolors, and in his expression of light or color, those areas left blank on his canvases play a role equal to that of the paint's. This was one important aspect of their attempts to get beyond the technical system established by the Impressionists, who had to perfection capitalized on the unique potential of oil painting.

This kind of translation work also forms a key to understanding Maruyama's art. In his case, the translation work is directed at a movement back and forth between paper and canvas, between the medium of drawing and that of painting. Initially, Maruyama created his stain paintings directly on the canvas, but in recent years he has used an overhead projector to project a drawing he has made at first on paper onto his canvas so he can trace it. This tracing is completed so skillfully that at first glance you can't distinguish between the early works and the later, traced ones, but there is in fact a significant difference between stains generated automatically by osmosis and those made by the artist's moving hand. Not merely the composition and colors of the paintings are determined at the drawing stage, but accidental stains and textures that appeared on the original paper are, too. By transferring an image onto a canvas, which has a different scale and support to the original drawing, the details become enlarged, resulting in disconnect between the strokes and textures and the scale of the canvas. Furthermore, this transference to the canvas means that the original physical appearance of the ink on the paper, which was determined by the ink's dilution and the paper's ability to absorb liquid, is also changed greatly. This results in a distancing of the works from the kind of purely visual quality that is generally considered the hallmark of stain painting. Rather, this kind of resistance between the artwork as substance and the vestiges of the artist's actions come to the fore and emphasize the tactility of the works.

With Maruyama's drawings, it is true that some look like the work of young children, while others are so painting-like that they themselves could be considered completed artworks. There are some that were made for experimental purposes, and others that are more like sketches, in which the artist has just noted down things he saw or felt. You could say that for Maruyama drawing represents one step before reality.

For that reason, I think that Maruyama has become so accomplished in his drawing that he can now free himself from the limitations of technique and form - he can fly around in dreams, become a child, become another person, and even kill. The existence of this kind of drawing, which can possess a different objective, a different time, a different subjectivity, is one of the things that gives Maruyama's paintings their delirium. The reality of a dream might be incoherent, but it is more solid than the reality of the world.

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