

Ceci n'est pas tofu.
Mizuki Endo

“Yuichi’s paintings are all old people’s paintings, whipped with old bones. Just what are fresh and youthful paintings? Japan’s oil paintings are crawling, rolling, walking onward from a place far, far behind the West.”

Mokuma Kikuhata, “Modern Art Told by Painters: From Yuichi Takahashi to Fujita”
(Genshobo, 2003)

In autumn 2013 I took Gabriel Ritter from Roppongi to Kunisaki. “Go to the Kunisaki peninsula. There’s a masterpiece by Masaya.” “Roppongi Crossing”, the exhibition that Ritter had curated, had just opened. From Oita Airport we headed north along the round coastline to arrive at the garage venue. Imi, Kunimi-cho in Kunisaki City. This was where Masaya Chiba’s painting “A Sporty Planet” was. “Hey, Mizuki, this is great, isn’t it?” said Ritter. For a while he stood in front of the painting; he sat, he thought. After some time, he said: “I think...”

Masaya Chiba took part in the Kunisaki Art Project 2012’s artist-in-residency program, during which, after conducting research on the entire Kunisaki peninsula, he came to a decision: rather than employing easy icons and materials that display a certain regionality, he would aim for “depth”. Prior to being depth as painting, this was also a purely physical depth. Chiba spent the first two weeks of his residency just digging hole after hole.

“I think... something in Masaya’s paintings leads back Yuichi Takahashi.” Ritter associated the raw fish in Chiba’s work with its insides exposed to Takahashi’s “Salmon” and also pointed to similarities on the technical level. I was at first quite surprised that this American would out of the blue know the name of a Yoga oil painter. And yet after my initial surprise had died down, the idea that his remarks opened up spread out like a space. This sharing of understanding is fun. I want artworks to always be like this. For which reason I decided to write this text as a response to him and as an extension of that association. But it will surely head down a different route. Not one of “Salmon”, but of “Tofu”.

Piling up the soil that arose from digging holes and then making shapes. I’m going to avoid the facileness of finding Nobuo Sekine’s “Phase – Mother Earth” in this. Chiba’s forms are not corollaries of dualisms like hole/earth, form/nature, convex/concave, light/shadow, or round/squared. His “sculpture” is not fitted with such lucidness. The various elements of earth, stone, wood chips, drawing, sound, computer and the video on its monitor, image printouts, ready-made items, natural wood, food products, and fire – all are manifesting in their entirety that they definitely do not relate to the other. The problem lies in that disorder through diverse media at this level of “sculpture” will always, willingly or not, converge into the medium of “oil on canvas” and become a “painting”. It lodges in that inhumanity and eeriness.

Takahashi’s representative work “Salmon” is said to mark the pinnacle of his painting. In an age when there was no Western visual awareness of perspective, no brushwork, paints or canvas, here is the salmon, in a place arrived at through groping in the dark. But this accomplishment in Japan is, when seen from the West, without any value. We need to consider “between” this disparity. This is not about “one ideal painting” and a hierarchy that is based on it; there are countless paintings within the ceaseless translation. And this is where “Tofu” appears.

Let’s look next at the picture “Tofu”. It is said to have been painted between when Takahashi was 49 and 50 years old. Look at the painting through eyes used to the beauty of Western oil painting and you cringe, like you want to cover it up with a

cloth... In the West, this year (1876) also saw Renoir's "Bal du moulin de la Galette" and Dega's typical painting of a beautiful dancer, "L'Étoile".

A painting of a Parisian cafe where high-class gentlemen and ladies flock; a painting of a beautiful ballerina; a painting of a grimy chopping board and tofu. Without doubt, this is where Japanese oil painting was born. This tofu painting is a very important picture in order for us not to look away but rather to store the proto-image of Japanese oil painting inside ourselves for all time.

Mokuma Kikuhata, op. cit. pp.41-42

Chiba's paintings are always made by a process of actually producing the motif and then recreating that on the canvas. No matter how peculiar the scene, it is created for real. First, coolly and slowly acknowledge this. It means that this peculiar situation once existed. This engenders a double fluctuation: relating to the reproductiveness asking if it really once existed and relating to the ontology of a painting which asks whether a painting of what really once existed, now having vastly deviated from it or very much reduced it, actually exists as something completely different.

Yuichi Takahashi was born in Edo (now Tokyo) in 1828. It is said he took up a paintbrush when he was just two years old and painted a face. He studied Yoga (Western-style oil painting) techniques from an Englishman living in Yokohama in 1866 and opened his own school for painting in 1873. The usual explanation about "Tofu" is that it has a deliberately familiar motif so that ordinary Japanese people might be able to understand the Western Yoga oil painting style. During this period, not only tofu, Takahashi was also doggedly painting other everyday objects such as dried bonito, books and cloth.

There are two questions. Through this painting, what did he want us to understand about Western painting? Its reproductiveness? If so, why not use a photograph? Secondly – and this is the fundamental question – did he really think that these tofu images would feel familiar?

Various processes and time go into the sculptures that I make with paper clay, so they seem to have a human element associated with them, and, insofar as necessary, I imbue them with that and make an effort to bring it out on the canvas. However, it is important to the painting that this impression comes from an inanimate object. I think it's best when the painting has equal degrees of looking just like a person and looking like an inanimate object with not the slightest likelihood of being mistaken for a person.

"Roppongi Crossing 2013: Out of Doubt" (Mori Art Museum, Heibonsha) p.91
(interview with Masaya Chiba)

Why not use a photograph? This is not a fair question. Photography at the time was only for the purposes of taking portraits of the upper classes or famous people, or for photographing typical Japanese landscapes or architecture. It would have been unimaginable to take a photograph of tofu. And we must also consider here the fact that photography and Western-style painting were both new technologies introduced to Japan in the exact same period. Accordingly, there is no conflict of photography attacking the tradition of painting through its reproductiveness, and painting answering through self-awareness of its own identity as a painting. In fact, it's surely more the case that the properties of the media are rather in a state of chaos. Although photographic motifs were still trapped in the confines of the "painting-esque", Yuichi Takahashi was discovering the motifs themselves in much the same way as the New Objectivity photographers. He utilized a new medium and, with gusto, depicted a white rectangular foodstuff.

Search: *momen-dofu* (cotton tofu), *yaki-dofu* (fried tofu), *abura-age* (deep-fried tofu)

Results: 1 recipe for “*momen-dofu, yaki-dofu, abura-age*”, “Papa’s Yaki-dofu & Yaki-abura-age” by Papa’s Dinner

Search on Cookpad.com, retrieved January 31st, 2014

Note: Made with *momen-dofu* and *abura-age* with soy sauce, dressed with ginger and pan-fried with olive oil. Does not contain *yaki-dofu*.

Saying that because tofu is not a Western still life painting motif like fruit, vases, baskets or glasses it makes “Tofu” a “Japanese” painting is just an afterthought. A schema of the Orient facing off with the Occident is very far from the essence of the matter. Rather, here tofu is nothing more than an expression of an experimental curiosity in a new medium. It was Takahashi’s desire to share with ordinary people the joy of being able to paint subjects the masters of old did not, the flaunting of technology that can freely express their texture, and the attributes of new media. “Tofu” is not something foreign in the cubbyhole of the Western still life. What exhibits the foreignness of “Tofu” is how, led by misuse of and blind faith in technology, it has finally appeared without precedent or parallel at a place far from the rule of Western media, distinct from painting and photography. It is a coincidental product cut away from the development of the logic that resides inside the painting. It is a painting utterly lacking in historical weight. It is ridiculously familiar, nothing more than a painting.

“Tofu”, with its aim to make people understand Western painting, does indeed succeed in conveying that it is a portrayal of *momen-dofu, yaki-dofu* and *abura-age*. The message that is attempting to express the various differences in texture through an oil painting also surely comes across. And its reproductiveness must also have come across – how this image actually once existed. But at the same time, it is also conveying hard facts. You do not simultaneously cook with *momen-dofu, yaki-dofu* and *abura-age* tofu. It is completely unrealistic for these three foodstuffs to be on top of a chopping board at the same time in such a large quantity. This could only happen in a painting. Anyone who shares an understanding of the conventions of Japanese cuisine would see this. (And if we’re talking about the details, it’s precisely for this reason that the tofu and *abura-age* are protruding from the frame of reality that is the “chopping board”. Underneath and behind the chopping board there is only paint. It is the world of unreality.)

Accordingly for viewers at the time the painting would have been simultaneously something familiar yet also very much something unreal. It was familiar unreality. This is the definition of the painting. The benefits of being able to reproduce differently through new technology a reality that once existed are inversed to become the unproductiveness of reproducing something even though the very fact that it once existed is strange. It is this unproductiveness alone that exists now before our eyes as a painting.

In this way we can understand how the motifs Chiba makes as things that “once existed” are thoroughly multi-media and disordered, and that these are now paintings. What Chiba is doing, in a society which can mediate all manner of materials by codes and values, in our multi-media-ized information society, is withdrawing painting from painting itself. As opposed to how Takahashi raised painting up from out of the pitch-black world lacking even in a sense of perspective, Chiba takes the obscure in a lucid world and turns it into painting. The aged Takahashi misapplied a new technology (painting) photographically, while the young Chiba is misusing an old technology (painting) like information media. The reality of realism can only inhabit this kind of error.

Why are there two parliamentary houses? You all have heard of what we call the “backup” in sports like baseball. When one player has the ball, another player will be behind him or her to back them up and ensure there are no mistakes. The Diet does important work for the nation and so that mistakes don’t arise with just the House of Representatives, the House of Councillors works as the “backup”.

Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture, "About the New Constitution"
(1947)

Running and running a scan are the same. In the keyboard hit with the hung-over head resides Bruce Lee's spirit. Mistaking the cool condition from rubbing a salve into the shoulder as LSD, grateful to Dr. Hofmann. The drummer on YouTube bustles but only because the fire beside him is hot. The sound that can be heard comes from a banana, the bad odor wafting from the speaker is a rotten fish on top of a clod of soil. The footprints of Onitsuka Tiger shoes, such a phantasmal urban legend online, are supposedly the shape of a naked female or a squid. The Constitution of Japan is supposedly influenced by American sport. All American sports supposedly derive from laborers digging holes with shovels and picks to mine for coal or gold. If both the Houses of Representatives and Councillors make mistakes and, in actual fact, everything here is said to be correct, then painters are the backup. So says the plaster dog.

If I am honest, I feel uneasy when ten people paint pictures like ten people's, with similarly rich colors and easy themes. Reality is more diverse for the individual. I think realism is a bit different, something moving, something not playing, something that plunges in.

Yuriko Miyamoto, "Critique of the 1st Japan Independent Exhibition" (first published in 1947) (online Aozora Bunko)

In short, Chiba paints like a hacker who has lost his purpose. Layering link over link, repeating searches, connecting connections, hammering in a brush with little paint into the canvas. However, the process is distorted or otherwise is far and away too slow. Links between things must be smooth. Collecting information must be done efficiently. Communication must be effectively utilized. The value from the referential potential between equations of the world that arises from layering up searches must be secured. And yet the things in Chiba's paintings do not behave in this way. They block the relationships between each other. The varying disjointed labor of the results works in one line. Things that you must not connect, connect. Inside Chiba's paintings, the relationships between things, the order for the usage of things, and the makeup of society are wrong. It is not a world in which values are arranged like that. Probably it "once existed", yet in no way is it realistic. The inefficiency is scary. It is a wrong recipe for the information society. That recipe has become a painting. Something on and off the chopping board, moving but not playing, it plunges right in.

Notes

Gabriel Ritter: American art curator

Kunisaki: a peninsula located in Kyushu in southern Japan

"Roppongi Crossing": a series of exhibitions that happens every three years at the Mori Art Museum, showcasing the latest movements in Japanese contemporary art

Kunisaki Art Project 2012: a public site-specific art festival

Yuichi Takahashi: Japanese artist (1828-1894), a pioneer of Western-style oil painting

Yoga: "Western painting", Japanese genre of art that emulated the conventions of Western technique and materials

Nobuo Sekine, "Phase – Mother Earth": definitive example of Mono-ha, the postwar conceptual art movement in Japan. "Phase – Mother Earth" was a large cylindrical tower of packed earth removed from a corresponding hole in a park in Kobe.

New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*): German art movement during the Weimar Republic

Dr. Albert Hofmann: Swiss scientist who discovered LSD

Yuriko Miyamoto: novelist (1899-1951) and leading figure in the proletarian literature movement in Japan. Her husband was Kenji Miyamaoto, Secretary-General of the Japanese Communist Party. During World War Two the couple both suffered imprisonment and state oppression.

Japan Independent Exhibition: open call exhibition founded in 1947. While the famous Yomiuri Independent Exhibition featured many avant-garde artists' work, it was predated by the Japan

Independent Exhibition, which focussed on social realism. The exhibition continues to this day in the same vein.