

## Kobayashi Masato: It's All About Light

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Kobayashi Masato (b. 1957) has been writing and publishing a trilogy of autobiographical coming-of-age novels that are surely unlike any other books.<sup>24</sup> It is safe to say that if you read them, you will understand him and his paintings fully. In the books, which tell the plain, unvarnished truth, Kobayashi describes the origin of his obsession with painting.

Kobayashi falls in love with his high school music teacher, and can only think of wanting to sleep with her. However, the woman, who the book calls "Sensei," one day asks "Wouldn't you like to try painting?" and invites him to her home. When he goes, full of joy and courage, a new set of painting supplies – paints in a wooden box, an easel, a white canvas – await him. Although he had not come with the intention of painting her nude, he offers to do so. "Really?" she says. "OK, I'll call you when I'm ready." She goes upstairs, and a little while later he hears "All right!" On the second floor, he finds her reclining without a stitch on. With this scene and the canvas in front of him, he stands for an hour or two, unable to do anything. She says "Show me your painting." "I haven't painted anything. I'm sorry, I couldn't." She looks at the blank canvas and says, "There it is. Your first painting!"

*If I only could, I would have transferred that beautiful something before me onto the canvas!*<sup>25</sup>

This is certainly an unusual start to a painting career. He goes on to a preparatory school for art and then to an art university, and naturally, he attains a firm grasp of contemporary art. This does not mean he becomes very well versed in the art scene. He simply engages head-on with what painting is to him, but as it happens, he is on the cutting edge of contemporary painting. For example, he says:

*If you make something the usual way, the results will always be what we call artful. Making something unartful does not mean making it unmindfully. What I mean is that if people are unmindful when they make something, it'll end up being artful. Before I can complete a work, if for example I'm painting the sky, and there's a part that doesn't feel right and I have to keep on fixing it right up to the end, it's because that part is painted 'like a painting.' The so-called painterly stuff is what I don't like, and I won't be satisfied until I get rid of it. It spoils the painting.*<sup>26</sup>

Kobayashi had an extraordinary first encounter with painting. The thing he wanted to paint, "that beautiful something" was internalized in his head. "The picture I'm envisioning is in my head, that is, it doesn't have a body yet. In its true state, a picture is completely free, it is an image that can take on any form, so it is invisible to people's eyes. When pictures come out of the artist's head and take on various forms, then they become visible, and those are the pictures that everyone sees." That is why "the picture's true state and its visible form are seldom the same. To the artist, the work is always unfinished."<sup>27</sup>

For him, "expression" is a matter of getting it out of his head and into the world. To that end, he explores only his own senses, and he has had an intuitive grasp of his trademark unique approach to making things since he first began painting. Moreover, this expression must not be artful or painterly, it must be unartful expression.

*I had a dream. It was too late to paint after stretching canvas over a wooden frame. The dream was to have it already be a painting at the time it was stretched. Not to stretch the canvas and then paint on it, nor to paint on the canvas and then stretch it. Could it possible to paint while stretching, and combine canvas, wooden frame and painting in one process?*<sup>28</sup>

It's a totally unprecedented way of painting, but for him it was the only way, otherwise the result wouldn't be the "picture" he wanted. First he would "break down the structure" of these three elements, then "reunite them, all at once." Once the three are combined into one, the possibility of "the mind and body becoming one" emerges. [image 5-26, 27]

For example, suppose "that beautiful something" is the sky, and Kobayashi produces a work with the subject of a blue sky. However, he says, "it is not a painting depicting the sky. In other words, I am not trying to create a painting of the sky, but to create a 'sky-painting.' it is actually a different sky than the one above us." For Kobayashi, it must be "a painting, not a painterly art." This is the implication of "a sky-painting."<sup>29</sup>

We would usually understand a "sky-painting" to mean "a painting of the sky." However, some people might argue that an image of the sky painted in the conventional manner on a canvas could be "a sky-painting." What Kobayashi speaks of is a state where his work itself embodies "painting = sky." The "sky" within him is realized as it is, not at the level of an idea or concept: it has no meaning unless it is realized as a work. So, he accepts the use of wooden frames and canvas, and of course he uses paint, but the important thing is that it be direct. This means holding the wooden frame and canvas and painting directly on them while squeezing paint out of the tube. The three elements, the act of painting, the self (mind and body)—if the work is realized at the same time that these things emerge, there will be results. If there are:

*There is a certain amount of space around the picture, enfolding the picture, and it is in this space that I work. In this space, separate things can be combined into one, and the will to unite into one is at work. This space surrounds the picture, and is one with the picture.*<sup>30</sup>

When it is time to work, Kobayashi is enfolded in a space, entering a peculiar field in which everything gravitates toward the picture. The artist is now in "combat mode." Things become quiet, the air grows denser. The field, the space around the picture, also enter combat mode. In that field there are only the painter, the paint, the canvas, and the wooden frame. What is the proper metaphor for what occurs inside his head at this time?

He is "looking around" inside his head, seeking for what he is about to paint. Trying to extract something from the image in its free, unformed state. What leads and shows the way is light. The space around the picture becomes a field of light. He feels that he is guided by light while painting, or in his own words, actually "painting with light." For him oil paint can be light itself, something that contains light, or something that generates light. His medium is the light that emerges from the oil paint.

Light itself is something that cannot be painted, but somewhere in the heart of the artist there is a desire to paint and to express light. Surely it has been this way throughout the ages, and it will always continue to be so. Of course, however, painting a landscape or scene full of light does not mean painting

light itself. What makes Kobayashi Masato unique is his innate sensibility of “painting with light.” If he can entrust everything to light, he can paint it. This is not something that can be imitated. However, at a time when painting has become difficult, Kobayashi's achievement can be seen in terms of listening more closely to, or looking more closely at, light and space, and giving us hope that it is possible to believe in these things.

Today, it does not seem to make much sense to wander around the perimeter of the tools, systems, institutions, and other externalities, what we might call the unnecessary, peripheral matters, in search of the possibilities of painting. Surely a full-frontal assault is the only approach to art.



5-26: Masato Kobayashi in his studio, 2016, Photo: Shizuka Kobayashi



5-27: Masato Kobayashi 《Unnamed 2004 #11》 2004, oil, wood, canvas, paint tube. 93x152x17cm. Private collection.

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<sup>24</sup> Masato Kobayashi "Paint of this Planet — Under the tree at Hitotsubashi University" ART DIVER, 2018, and Masato Kobayashi "Paint of this Planet — Duifhuisstraat 52" ART DIVER, 2020

<sup>25</sup> Masato Kobayashi "Paint of this Planet — Under the tree at Hitotsubashi University" ART DIVER, 2018, pp.102-103

<sup>26</sup> Masato Kobayashi, Open discussion: The Paintings of Masato Kobayashi, July 15, 2000, *Masato Kobayashi*, Miyagi Museum of Art, 2000, p.57

<sup>27</sup> Masato Kobayashi "Paint of this Planet — Duifhuisstraat 52" ART DIVER, 2020, p.340

<sup>28</sup> Masato Kobayashi "Paint of this Planet — Under the tree at Hitotsubashi University" ART DIVER, 2018, pp.42-43

<sup>29</sup> *Masato Kobayashi*, Miyagi Museum of Art, 2000, p.64

<sup>30</sup> Masato Kobayashi "Paint of this Planet — Under the tree at Hitotsubashi University" ART DIVER, 2018, pp.45-46

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Translated by Christopher Stephens

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