

Toya Shigeo: A Gaze That Sees Invisible Sculpture

Chiba Shigeo

When considering issues in sculpture, even now, in 2021, I believe Yoshimoto Takaaki's *The Incomprehensibility of Sculpture* (1973) should be taken as a starting point. The piece was written by Yoshimoto and published under a new title as an additional volume of *Selected Works of Takamura Kotaro* (Shunjusha) edited by Yoshimoto and Kitagawa Taichi (later reprinted in *Complete Writings of Yoshimoto Takaaki* and elsewhere). The text is almost 50 years old, but the phrase "one's own ideas" has aged well. If one does not get distracted by various "topics," and calmly surveys the scene at the level of "theory of expression," one will find that the state of the art world has not progressed substantially in the last half century, and in fact remains unchanged.

Even today, we do not know what sculpture is, and we may not have reached the stage where we can know. Of course, this applies to sculptors who think of me as a fellow sculptor, and to those versed in art criticism who think of me as an art critic. They lack a theory of expression.

It seems that the transition from relief to full three-dimensionality would not have been possible without a major change in global consciousness, which could be called a cultural great leap forward. Some regions of the world have achieved a clear sculptural sense, while in other regions, making three-dimensional images is really just an extension of the relief method. This is not an issue of artistic value, but I believe there are undoubtedly qualitative differences in what cultures have absorbed.¹⁰

To underscore, the issue is not one of "artistic value," but of a "qualitative difference" in cultures. Toya says he was a "huge fan of Yoshimoto's," so he must have read this as soon as it came out. Meanwhile, he was already familiar with Lee Ufan's work and his philosophy: "when everything has existed since the dawn of time, and the world is already fully open to us, what worlds can we create, and where?" However, there was something about Lee's works, and his method of producing works by juxtaposing natural stone and artificial materials (glass, steel plate and so forth) and creating "relations" between them, that gave Toya pause. Having been born and raised in a culture that possessed sculpture, painting, and relief – which was somewhere between the two – if he wanted to create sculpture, he could not ignore the discrepancies among them. Toya reinterpreted Lee's concept as, "Why introduce the additional element of sculpture to a world that already exists?" Extracting something from the natural world, such as a stone, and placing it in the context of a work does not guarantee the creation of a new "sculpture."

Toya arrived early on at the idea that art, and visual art in particular, was in the end a matter of the gaze. Sculpture, too, is created by and established in relation to the gaze. And while sculpture is physically experienced, relief is a semi-3D art form that is only seen, as is painting, although it is not painting either. Western sculpture is based on the idea of facing the object head-on and shaping it in a unified manner around a central axis, so what emerges if this idea is set aside? It is the endeavor to embody the gaze to the greatest possible extent. If this is achieved, it will be clear that space is filled with invisible "sculpture," and the question becomes one of how to express this invisible sculpture.

Toya's experimentation began with multiple series – *Exposing "Sculpture," From "Carving," From*

“Construction” – over nearly a decade from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s. These were experiments with rendering “invisible sculpture” visible, seeing what could hypothetically emerge as sculpture, carving and composing so as to re-examine what these actions were. They were endeavors to make the invisible visible by working from within and from without, conceptually and visually, “making” and not-making, hypothetically and artificially, that is making a work as if it were shaped by the eyes.

However, the results were either unsatisfactory or frustrating, and he came to the renewed realization that he did not want to “make visible sculpture,” but to “render invisible sculpture visible.” This was an important realization. It is no coincidence that underlying feelings he had had since childhood were revived at this time.

As a child, Toya had sometimes slept on dried underbrush (between the ground and the forest canopy) in the mountains. This place was not one from which the mountain or forest could be seen from a distance, and it was neither inside nor outside. Lie down at the boundary between mountain and sky, and you can intuitively sense that the place has width and depth. These were the aspects his work needed to reflect.

He also played around, throwing pebbles into a bamboo grove. Usually the pebbles hit the bamboo and bounced around, but sometimes they would sail in smoothly without hitting anything. If the trajectory of a pebble is interpreted as a gaze, then there are any number of gazes that could penetrate the bamboo grove. It is this kind of space, expanding into a cosmos where the gaze can follow all these trajectories, that makes “invisible sculpture” possible. [image 5-7]

He also recalled the human-shaped plaster molds of Pompeii. When their surroundings (spaces) were buried and heat was applied, what had once been human bodies became empty spaces, and eventually matter (the body) became void and void (space) became matter. “With one surface as the boundary, the interior and exterior were reversed.”¹¹ The implication is that “invisible sculpture” can only be found there, in the aspect we call “surface.”

Since then, he has focused primarily on “the forest as a way of being,” and based on the idea that for the sculptor the gaze encompasses various senses including the sense of touch, he has continued to pursue the development of images and forms connected through gazes circulating in space (which Toya termed the “Body of the Gaze”). Here the “forest as a way of being” means not only the forest itself, but also in the sense that the forest includes the boundary zone with the sky. In this boundary zone there is width, expanse, and space.

He is also concerned with the state of the world, and has always taken a critical interest that is indirectly reflected in his work (after he has internally digested it). To give a recent example, he felt the concept of “common land” (through which multiple rural settlements co-own resources such as firewood and grass) could help overturn the polarization of globalism versus nationalism, and he seeks to superimpose these possibilities on his own sculpture. These are possibilities for work that is neither Western-style sculpture nor quasi-sculptural relief.



[5-7] Shigeo Toya, *Bamboo Grove II*, 1975, vinyl string, bamboo grove, variable size

Toya's sensibility and philosophy reject the current situation in which "the word 'art' encompasses everything."¹² Incidentally, in my book, *A History of the Breakaway from Orthodoxy in Contemporary Art in Japan 1945-1985*, I discussed the idea of "art as a category," but as readers of the book will know, I was not trying to make the word "art" encompass everything, nor did I have the idea of conflating sculpture, painting, and relief so that everything simply belongs to the category of art. My goal was to express the peculiar nature of the art of the Japanese islands (although there were misunderstandings of the kind I have just mentioned at the time *A History of the Breakaway from Orthodoxy in Contemporary Art in Japan 1945-1985* was published).

As a critic, in circumstances where creation of both painting and sculpture had become problematic, and feeling the need to interpret or create space for interpretation of painting and sculpture in a manner that differed from Western concepts and developments, I posited the "category" as a working hypothesis. I thought that if this could be properly carried out, it might be possible to escape to some extent the wretched state of the brain and senses in which the loan word *aato* (art) was unhesitatingly used in Japanese, as if fully exposing the unconscious following of the West.

In that sense, my sensibilities and thinking are almost the same as Toya's. Without doubt, the younger generation today will view it as old-fashioned. However, nothing can be considered old or new in the space of just fifty or a hundred years—though lacking a visceral understanding of this, and being swept along by new technology, are the privileges of the young. However, in terms of art – at least at our current stage of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, the only surviving sub-species of *Homo sapiens* – there is still such a wide range of variation, and it is not possible to reset or update to a new model.

Toya's obsession with the medium of sculpture, which may seem old-fashioned, is of course the result of a synthesis of sensibilities, ideas, and experiences. Over many years, he has been deepening his pursuit of the "body of the gaze" through varied and multifaceted approaches. In his recent solo exhibition *Body of the Gaze* (September-October 2019, ShugoArts), he clearly endeavored to "make invisible sculpture appear through visible sculpture." In his view, this "invisible" sculpture is none other than space itself. It is based on the idea that "the visible 'body of the gaze' and the invisible 'spatial body

of the gaze' are equivalent, and they permeate and resonate with each other.”¹³ Abruptly reading this statement without context, it may be confusing, but it clearly makes sense if one follows the development of Toya's work. What he has been trying to do is to make the “body of the gaze” itself the actuality of sculpture. [image 5-8]

It is probably impossible for us to produce Western-style sculpture. And that sculpture has to some extent completed its development, so from now on there can only be variation and sophistication. Relief will never be sculpture. And basing work on precedents (taking repetition as a given) can never be productive. At the same time, in reality, simply insisting that something is art is only usage of words, and it does not mean anything has been realized. The value of art is measured by what is realized, otherwise no effort is required. This realization may be difficult, next to impossible, but Toya is pursuing that path. Where anything seems possible, it is often the case that there is nothing there.

It occurs to me, seriously, that the phrase “leave it up to people” could be modified as “leave it up to space.” I am also reminded of, or should I say haunted by, a quote from the Buddhist monk and Jodo Shinshu sect progenitor Shinran, *Menmen no on hakarai nari* (“in the end, the choice is up to you and me.”) Why is this?

Be that as it may, it is certain that Toya, who has sought to realize “invisible sculpture” through the “visible body of the gaze,” has advanced to a horizon where the visible body of the gaze and the invisible “spatial body” of the gaze are equivalent. A point where they are equivalent, but where they are reversed and the latter (or should I say the latter also) takes the initiative. In other words, he is endeavoring not just to capture space, but to realize it as sculpture. I hope this difference makes sense.

Just because we cannot see something does not mean we cannot feel it. Make full use of the possibilities of the brain and the various sensations lurking within it, and see “the space itself”: something will surely be felt. When that occurs, we are seeing *it*, the thing that Toya's work causes to happen.



[5-8] Shigeo Toya, *Body of the Gaze - Scatter*, 2019, wood, wood ash, acrylic, size variable, Installation view at ShugoArts, September 2019

¹⁰ Takaaki Yoshimoto, "The Incomprehensibility of Sculpture," *Complete Writings of Yoshimoto Takaaki*, volume 8, Keiso Shobo, Tokyo, 1973

¹¹ *Shigeo Toya —Sculpture and Word, 1974-2013*, The Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum, 2013, p.66

¹² Shigeo Toya Interview: *Examining the "Gaze" in Society as a Sculptor*, First appeared in the Bijutsu Techo website, 26th September 2019, Bijutsu Shupan-Sha Co.Ltd., Tokyo.

¹³ Shigeo Toya, email from him on 10 October 2019 in response to an email I sent him after seeing this exhibition.。

Translated by Christopher Stephens

Reproducing or copying this document, in whole or in part, is prohibited without the written consent of the copyright holder.