

Leiko Ikemura Interview

Japan is of course very important to me, yet I also consider its context within the world, and how when I observe the world at large, expanding my perspective to encompass not only the world but also the entire universe, I begin to recognize numerous aspects from the preciousness of our existence to the preciousness of life, and the developments of culture and history. I think about how I as an artist am to position myself within this context, and how I am to develop my works. I have no doubt engaged in such efforts, and still continue to pursue this today.

Having lived in the edge of Europe is a significant part of my background. I feel that when I came to Switzerland and Germany in the 1980s I was kind of innocent. This is something that I want to always maintain. While having this intention, since the 80s I have indeed experienced to heart the profound severity of developing one's own world within the art sphere.

In my case, when creating a certain visual world that not only harbors emotion but also a sense of spirit, or as one may refer to as the poésie that resides in its backdrop, what becomes necessary is a particular attitude. Rather than how to work, it is in fact about how to continue working. The issue is how to continue working in a way that maintains meaning. It is not about continuing to work while simply in pursuit of something new, but is about what is created within a single organism in being aware of what lies on the outside. When observed formalistically, there is a certain progression. However, progression does not mean to move from A to B, or going upwards or downwards, but is instead in reference to a particular state of mind. While placing importance on introversion, one is simultaneously conscious of what happens on the outside. For instance, there are the things that happened in Europe, and the fact that there was a major political event at the end of the 1980s that led the West and East to seemingly blend together. Strangely enough, I always find myself to be in these places. To begin with the 1960s, it was the era of student activism. It was a time of conflict for Japan. Thereafter when I went to Spain in the mid-1970s, the so-called dictatorship had ended with the death of Franco, and I found myself in the very midst of the advent of democracy. Next I went to Switzerland, where in the 1980s their first reform took place. It was a reform led by the youths. It was what one might call a revolution. I also found myself amidst this. Then I moved to Germany, around 1988~1989. From this time the East and West were beginning to become very unbalanced, leading to the crumbling collapse of the wall. I too, was there. Come to think of it, I always found myself in such states of turbulence, in those very instances when history had changed. Strangely enough however, although being away from Japan I had also in reality always been conscious of Japan. There were personal elements such as my father's death, and then my

mother's death. Intersecting with such things, there was next the Tohoku disaster. Various things are connected to Japan.

What is important is that back then at the end of the 1970s I had been strongly conscious of the world, and felt the determination to leave Japan, in that I believed I could not pave my path as a woman and as an artist if I did not depart from Japan. In retrospect, it is indeed somewhat tragic. Having this background, I think it is something that also gradually comes to emerge within my works. I am not what you might call a flag-raising feminist, but I feel that the way I live is more feminist than any feminist out there. Nevertheless, I don't voice this. I don't wish to do so. Because I believe that freedom is to be free of these kinds of things.

The times when I was young had been a very complex era, concerned with accommodating to the West while also opposing it. The 1960s was an era of student activism, yet despite being in the midst of it I had found myself distant. I don't believe you can create something from rebellion. I feel that Japan's post-war era is not yet over. This so-called peace is extremely important, however the wounds and scars of the Pacific War still remain in many ways. While bearing these scars we strongly wish for a sense of hope in the love and peace of mankind, or in a sense consider hope as certain responsibility of human beings. Then how could one live this out as an artist? In this case, it is not an issue of being a moralist of sorts. I say this because I think the issue of art and morality is very difficult. We are not moralists, nor are we educators. That being said, I drag out these burdens of mankind as well as the darkness of mind that lies within the depths of my being, and while looking at it thinking, "how frightening," I continue to confront it. I feel that this sense of courage is the driving force behind my work.

When you're working with your hands you are essentially working with your body. Working with your body means that it also engages the intellect within your head. This coalescence of thought and body, through my hands, becomes the driving force for my work. Therefore it would be a misunderstanding to render it as mere handwork. It is not what you may call "Kogei" (craft). One of the subtle differences between craft and the world of art is that art is not that which simply concerns the creation of something beautiful. The important thing regarding the hand as an organ is its convergence. While bearing that in mind as a basis, I feel that it is important to not just make something, but to also possess a sense of maternity from which something is born. For this reason it is not about refusing the material. When making things, something is born at the very moment in which both the intention for creating it and conceiving it form a connection with one another. I believe that this tension is extremely important. What I mean is that, say if there is a certain concept, if one makes something according to an order, the result

is exactly as envisioned. For example, so-called mediums that appear classical yet never lose their existence such as painting and sculpture; embody the freedom of not adhering to this. It is a challenge with the self in the real sense. I think that one cannot understand the world unless going through this. That's why I always come back to this, look upon it once again, and attempt to gain a sense of freedom from it. This is something I believe will never end, even if I spent my entire lifetime engaging with it.

In my case, the 1980s was an era of drawing. At first, I had liberated myself through drawing. I think this is a strong feeling that had resided within me from around 1979 to 1988. I made thousands and thousands of drawings that resulted in a certain archeology, or a sense of archaeologically entering one's own subconscious and subconscious of culture. This is something that I continued to pursue, and is one of the things that built the foundation of my oeuvre. The next stage was to challenge myself in painting, which was extremely difficult. Painting is the path to freedom, so we are quite unable to attain freedom. Various things obstruct us. This is most apparent in painting. It is that which enables me to clearly recognize my yet incompetent self. That is why I continue to engage with it.

Until now I feel that I have pursued one element individually. The world of drawing in the 1980s, despite various things becoming intermingled, had indeed possessed a sense of narrative. Drawing was a medium that could extemporaneously be implemented. I think in the 1980s I was able to communicate through drawing. The next development was to reduce this, and to convey each and every element more clearly, in that each image embodied certain content. This is something I have channeled my efforts towards over the past 20 years or so. Within this there are images of girls, children, animals, or hybrids of such subjects. These kinds of things, these various eras or epochs, had been present within my life, each which served to create a certain element. Recently, in particular after 2011, I had felt something change within me. What I strongly feel from this is to build my very own universe. I consider it not to be about engaging in so-called "product making." It is a certain way of thinking. It is also a philosophy. The issue is how to realize this through art. It may seem extremely ambitious, but I am pursuing this endeavor.

I think that in the case of people these days there are very few who seem to possess the composure to look at paintings. Everyone is attracted to things that move, so the moving image is beginning to permeate the world of art. I think there are not many people who in fact care about the *matière* (texture). I wish people to have more of an interest. In my case I purposefully use things like zinc that create a rough texture. It may seem slightly out of step with the times, yet I want people to engage with something archaic, or that which really exists beyond the realm of time. This is why I make these kinds of sculptures. I don't at all believe it is necessary to follow the times because it is progressing in a certain

way. I think one can go in the opposite way altogether because one is an artist. At the same time however, it is necessary to be conscious of the times.

Even when creating a space I would like people upon entering to view it in the sense of thinking “oh, I wonder what this is?” but at the same time I do not want to overly manipulate. For instance, I don’t want to purposefully conceal something. All I simply hope for is for viewers to look. Time is not about looking at someone coming into the space and saying “that person’s seen it because they’ve been here so and so minutes.” Instead, I think viewers perhaps in 10 years time or so could reminisce and think, “I remember seeing something strange back then.”

June 24, 2017, at Ikemura's studio in Berlin

Translated by Kei Bengler

This interview was filmed on the occasion of the following exhibition:

Leiko Ikemura "After another world" September 9 - October 7, 2017, at ShugoArts

A movie of this interview is available on the ShugoArts website.

