

Aki Kondo interview

LIFE GOES ON: To Be Alive. To Be Kept Alive.

Text by Yoshio Suzuki

There is something about the way Aki Kondo chooses her motifs, bold colors and compositions. Her paintings sing the praises of life. This interview unfolds Kondo's prolific art practice while focusing on her exhibition, which is inundated by her paintings. What is there along with brightness? I cannot help myself from harking back to the iconic phrase from a novel — "Death exists as a part of life, not as the other end of life."

Perhaps, there were paintings even before the time there were no words. Even between two parties who cannot understand each other's language, a painting can act as a liaison through which those two can exchange their feelings. As a communication tool, paintings are so old yet still so convenient that our passion for discovering new ways of painting and developing new ways of expression never ceases to exist.

Children make paintings. For adults...there are some people who make paintings and some who almost never do. Adults used to make paintings when they were kids. Children make paintings with so much dedication. They have no idea about the High Renaissance, the Baroque or the Rococo. Neither Abstract Expressionism nor Neo-Expressionism. Yet they still make paintings. Among adults who do not make paintings, some can explain the difference between the Baroque and the Rococo, and name famous painters from Abstract Expressionism and Neo-Expressionism without skipping a beat.

I thought about those things again when I stood in front of Aki Kondo's paintings, which gave me a conviction that paintings existed first; there were always paintings. In front of her paintings, it was almost meaningless to ask about her painting techniques or talk about art history.

Plants, humans, animals and food that are painted in a bold manner. To summarize them in one word, it is life. Her unrestricted forms, also with her vivid colors, are there. And the vitality of what is depicted in her paintings. What is more to confirm this painter's energy is the number of her works.

When "adults who do not make paintings" look at her paintings, they may think what kind of force makes this painter move forward and stay productive. Aki Kondo, on the other hand, thinks that way of thinking is strange. She says, "painting is like breathing" for her. To breathe, we do not usually organize its procedure, think of ways to do it or use too much of our energy. Her paintings are created without any special preparation as she breathes in and out.

She also says, "Painting is part of my daily practice, painting is the same as living." About Kondo's paintings, one curator asserts the following, "It seems like Kondo's painting practice is her way of accepting events happening to her in real life." (quoted from *The Happiness that Exists Here* — Aki Kondo, written by Ryoko Kamiyama, a curator at Fuchu Art Museum)

When you assign the artist's and the curator's words into an equation, the answer is going to be "Living is to accept real events happening to one's life." Given the obvious statement, however, Kondo can overwhelm her surroundings solely with one single painting of hers.

"While living your life, you experience everything, including things you cannot see but can feel with your body and things you accept with your heart. Humans live on the earth, so I feel like we are affected by many things such as gods of various kinds on this planet. The basic principle is that those gods are keeping us alive, and I have been easily affected by them ever since I was a kid. It took some time for me to get used to what is happening to my life and what seems to be created by gods."

Aki Kondo was born in Hokkaido in 1987. Her talent was first recognized while she was a graduate student at Tohoku University of Art and Design, and she started her career as an artist after having received her master's degree in 2012. She currently works and lives in Yamagata.

"Without anyone's advice, I somehow started painting when I was three years old. I realized, while I was painting, that I was not affected by what was happening in front of my eyes, including both good and bad things. I could say that I am making paintings for what my soul learned from things that already happened, visible phenomena, physical experiences, and material and immaterial existence. My art practice is not about painting to express what humans have verbally created, but it is closer to the process of spitting out what I have felt and then accepting what I have painted on my own."

Is it a sort of verification not for what she is going to paint, but for what she already painted?

"When I paint, I have about fifty canvases ready. I start painting without knowing what I am going to paint. Then I put colors on. I paint whatever has come into me on canvas or paper without stopping. It is not about what I want to tell you, but it is about things that came into my mind. After I am done with painting, I have many paintings scattered around me. For me that is when one thing is realized. Sometimes I notice it through my painting, and other times my paintings show me things that happened in the past. And when those things from the past appear, they also remind me that they are connected to the present. And so, my situation is like I have been kept alive thanks to (what appears in) my paintings."

This story might sound like a feeling that only painters like Kondo can understand, but is it similar to a dream if regular people want to understand it?

"People have dreams about things that did not happen in real life, but what I am painting is what actually happened and is happening. That's how I feel."

That is certainly true. That must be the fundamental difference.

“For example, it has been ten years since the 2011 Tohoku earthquake. (note: Kondo experienced the earthquake as a graduate student in Yamagata.) I did not choose it, but I certainly experienced it as an event that happened. There are some people who wonder why it happened and why they did not die there and survived. It was too much of a big event and many people lost their lives.”

“Even at my school, there was an atmosphere that we are sinful and should stop painting and go volunteering. But, including all of that, I believe those who survived the event are kept alive. I still remember some of it even though it has already been ten years since then. Just a while ago, sometime in February this year, there was an aftershock of the earthquake that happened ten years ago. When I felt the shockwave, I remembered things I had forgotten until then. That is somewhat close to how I make paintings.”

“Humans always forget things and I think sometimes we partially consider catastrophic events that happened to us as beautiful events. When I experienced the tremor in February in Yamagata, I remembered things I had forgotten up until then. It scared me and I could not go to sleep. It was the same feeling of recognizing a teaching I needed as my lost memory pops up in my painting.”

When looking at Kondo’s paintings, the viewers might think that she was born to be an artist because her art practice is so free, extravagant, fresh and prolific. Perhaps she was born to be an artist; however, her disposition can be found somewhere more profound. For Kondo, painting is not about documenting things but resurrecting things.

Seven years after experiencing the Tohoku earthquake, she lost a person who was very close to her in Shodoshima to which she had moved by the time of the accident.

Kondo got married in Shodoshima and realized that she was pregnant when she and her husband were about to go on a honeymoon to India. They were planning to cancel their honeymoon, but Kondo agreed to let him travel since the trip was also related to his job. Everyone around them tried to stop him. He too must have had some internal conflict. Amidst all of this, Kondo was the only one who did not stop him.

“He called me from India saying, ‘Maybe I shouldn’t have come here by myself. I’m going home tomorrow.’ Soon after the call, his heart stopped beating.”

It was two weeks after she got married. It was an inconceivable experience for Kondo who just received the news that there was a new life inside herself. Her beloved one suddenly died on foreign soil, and she did not even have a chance to see his corpse; his bones were turned into ashes when he finally came home.

“It was an event in which I was on a ship and about to go on a voyage. Then all the sudden I lost the ship and I was falling deep into the ocean. I did not know how to go back up to the surface and I wondered if I would die while falling down like this. I spent my days not knowing whether I was dead or alive. Up until a little after my baby was born, I was cursing my own life, or in other words,

I was hating everything. What happened to me was so sad and it was hurting me so much. But I could paint. I also hated myself because I was still painting under such a condition and I thought I was sinful. It was cruel to realize that I could still paint even right after a person close to me died. But I desperately looked for a light because I thought a mother had to be the sun for her kid at any time.”

After all, she did not stop painting.

“During all of this, there was a teaching that convinced my soul. Through what I experienced, I understood the feelings of the families who lost their close ones from the Tohoku earthquake. I had made many paintings about mountain gods and the earthquake, but I did not fully understand what it means to be left alone and continue living and how people felt in that situation. One thing that I learned in my soul from my husband’s death was that I would not be able to die in peace by holding onto death. And also, living and dying are so agonizing that I cannot weigh the two on a scale.”

However, her everyday life continues. She continues living. She continues painting.

“I feel like humans cannot live without a ray of hope. Living life is very difficult. Good things do not last, and bad things do not last either. When the sunlight hits something, it always creates a shadow. When I felt that, I thought about what kind of paintings I should make. I wanted to make paintings that people can relate to. Those paintings include not only energy, colors and shapes, but also what I am feeling in my heart. I believe interpersonal connections are the circle of love in which we receive power from the earth while consuming other lives and being helped by other people. For this exhibition, I wanted to send this message to my audiences, so I incorporated the message into every single one of my paintings.”

In addition to the exhibited works, Kondo made 100 flower paintings. Those paintings were for the 100 special editions of Kondo’s recently published artist monograph *The Happiness that Exists Here* — Aki Kondo. Each special edition contains one flower painting that is different from one another.

Of course, there was love before words. In order to deliver that message, Kondo surely must be painting again today.

Translated by Ion Yamazaki

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