

Keisuke Miyashita - Perspective Look -

I do painting and sculpturing indeed. From the beginning, when I started to paint pictures, it was to get hold of reality, to protect myself, to nourish myself, and to grow in greatness. (“My Reality” by A. Giacomettiⁱ, translated by Isaku Yanaiharaⁱⁱ).ⁱⁱⁱ

Giacometti, a sculptor and painter, writes he produces ‘to get hold of reality’. Looking at his works free of vanities described ‘as wire’, we can feel his sincere attitude exactly as expressed in his words. Artists produce artworks for various purposes, and there are surely some artists like Giacometti who look closely at and ‘get hold of’ the world and ‘the reality’ where we are living. I think they are the most interesting and the most precious beings in the world.

Keisuke Miyashita, who is an artist with a long career, is one of them. He started as a sculptor and reached the current form of work, tableau (painting), after going through various changes. Judging only from his work style, he looks like a fast-changing depicter, but we can see his consistent attitude in there as an artist. I describe it as “perspective look”. I’d like to discuss here the new development of his recent works, looking over the transition of his works.

Miyashita presented his sculptures in public in the late 1960’s, but he actually started to put his works out into the world around 1970. From then to 1980, he presented works of metallic material with minimal tinkering like just filing. Around that time, presenting works without tinkering much was dominant in Japanese contemporary art. So his works were not exceptional, while his distinct ‘look’ was already appearing. For example, let’s look at his work of grove of trees in 1978 with pieces of paper stuck on them. In the picture, each tree has a square sheet of paper stuck on it, and those sheets look in alignment from some viewpoint. It may look a tricky work using an optical illusion, but there is more to it. What matters is that the depth of the grove became nothing and the paper looks like a flat line from a specific point. It’s a mystery of optical illusion, which is also a structural mystery of vision. Furthermore, we can say that it reverses the illusion of picture space in the real space, just the opposite of the works expressing depth on the flat. In a recognizable manner does it express the mysterious structure of the vision, which we are usually unaware of.

Next, Miyashita produced works using plywood from 1981 to 1992. Let’s have a look at the work “Naisetsu-han-en (Inscribed Semicircle) 92 N (M) -2” in 1992. In this work, the

right-edge is cut off just like being torn off. From the bare tear, materiality of the wood and thickness of the laminated board can be seen. On the surface of the layer can we see a semicircle inscribed to the outer frame. Further, the left tangential line borders on the left black-colored plane. In a word, the material, the form, and the diagram depicted on the surface are related to one another and such a structure is visualized in this work. There, planarity of the semicircle seen on the surface and materiality of the bare plywood appeal to the different senses respectively, vision and touch, which are incompatible with each other. This feeling of incompatibility reminds us of the relation between the flat line and the depth of the real space in his work of grove of trees. We come to realize the structure that the visual plane is established on the tactile material, the broken plywood.

From 1993 to 2002, Miyashita shifted to the series of planar works called “Veil”. Let’s look at “Veil III-5” in 1996. The base of the work is pieces of plywood stuck together, which look like brown compartments. Acryl is over-painted on them and its transparency tells us how thick the paint is. In fact, in this work too, we can visually see the layered structure forming his work. Compared with the series of “Naisetsu-han-en”, material tactility backed away and it became almost visual, or pictorial, work of illusion. Here again, however, materiality of the plywood stuck together and visibility of the surface paints take stand against each other with incompatibility. We can foresee development to the next form of work in these “Veil” series, which have already gained the distinct manner. I think they show a fairly high degree of perfection among his body of works focusing on the structure of material tactility and pictorial visibility. Because of their high degree of perfection, however, he might have had to change to mark a new step.

From 2003, his work changed into the form of painting. For example, here are three photos of his works: “Work3-4” in 2003, “sign on sign6-2” in 2006, “sign on sign12-18” in 2012. Colors and figures depicted are each different, but the way of making and the concept of the works (what is intended) are common. Each work consists of layers of paints widely over-painted and figures like lines and diagrams depicted in the process. The process is systematically set and here again we can see the structure of the work visually. Generally picture paintings don’t leave the trail of depicting in the end, but his works are clearly different from those. Rather, the process of depicting is imprinted in each layer as ‘sign’ (shirushi), and it provides us with a full view of the time which has passed. Miyashita himself made a comment on his works as follows: ‘Forms and colors

seen in each layer being “sign” (shirushi), “signs” cross one another, breaking temporal sequence, and make a picture plane, accumulating and entwining.^{iv} If we have a close look at Miyashita’s picture plane, it’s possible to see the process of making. Even if we can understand the actual process of making, however, temporal sequence mixes up and complexly entwines, and its synchronicity becomes visible, which is a characteristic and also a wonder of pictorial expressions.

Let’s think about what is called ‘each layer’. It’s only a very thin film of paint materially. Ordinary artists would regard it as just something born technically in the process of painting, but Miyashita looks closely at the phenomenon of lying on top of one another which comes into view. The awareness - his great awareness for process and time of production – must have been born from his previous experience as an artist who had produced works structurally out of the process of working with materials. For example, we can take it that the depth of the real space in his work of the grove and the thickness of the torn plywood in “Naisetsu-han-en” series have been translated into the planar paint layer in the artist’s consciousness. There’s such a real tactile feeling in the films of paint he depicts that it makes us think like that. Therefore, it is reasonable that the process and the time of making become visible ‘crossing and entwining each other’ in those layers. I think it’s because his work changed from the material one to the form of painting that he gained such a distinctive awareness and style of his own.

Thus, tracing back the transition of his works, we can feel his strong consistent will to visualize ‘structure’ of the work, the look to see through the ‘structure’, which I expressed as ‘perspective look’. To visualize the structure means to share the requirements for completion of his work with its viewers, appreciators. That means, therefore, to share what he is thinking about painting and how he is making. I think, furthermore, that also means for an artist to share what he thinks about the reality he is living in. I’d like to call that very attitude of making a ‘perspective look’.

There is an interesting study for the paradigms of this ‘perspective look’.

First let’s have a look at the research paper titled “Transparency”^{vi} written by Colin Rowe^v, a British-born architectural historian. Rowe uses the word ‘transparency’ as an important concept to express the characteristics of contemporary architecture. There are two kinds of ‘transparency’: ‘real’ transparency and ‘virtual’ transparency. ‘Real’ transparency is a physical transparency and “Virtual’ transparency is a perceptive transparency. I’ll focus here on his description on the paintings he is referring to, omitting that on architecture. For example, paintings in perspective, which are traditional in Western paintings, are classified as a ‘real’ transparency because they are

arranged with a transparent grid from close view to distant view, expressing perspective in that order. On the other hand, pictures painted by cubists^{vii} and Cezanne^{viii} are classified as a 'virtual' transparency as expressed in perspective based on their own perceptive feeling though counting on opaque brush touch. It might be a fairly incomprehensible distinction, but at this moment, let me tentatively say like this: structurally clear 'real' transparency and perceptive, unclear 'virtual' transparency.

Atsushi Okada^{ix}, an art historian, presents in his book "*Hantomei no Bigaku*"^x (Translucent Aesthetics) there is a domain called 'translucence' between 'transparence' and 'opaqueness'. Paintings in perspective are classified as a 'transparent' picture in here too. Abstract paintings after modernism emphasizing planarity and materiality are classified as 'opaque' paintings. On that basis, Okada thought we could get over the existing view of art not by separating into 'transparence' and 'opaqueness', but by paying attention to the indistinct domain, 'translucence', which lies between the two. Referring to the paper of Rowe's, his predecessor, he writes that the border between 'real transparency' and 'virtual transparency' is ambiguous, and that the word 'translucence' is used several times in his paper. His point is that if we think about 'transparence', it's better to organize it with the concept of 'transparence' and 'translucence'.

If we apply the above discussion to the transition of Miyashita's works, they seem to have changed from 'real' transparency to 'virtual' transparency, or from 'transparence' to 'translucence'. His works up to "Naisetsu-han-en" are considered as a real 'transparence' because their structures are clearly visualized by materiality of the subject matter. His works through "Veil" series up to the current ones expressed visually and subtly with paint layers are considered as a 'virtual' transparency or a 'translucent' work. I think this change fits in his direction to get over the existing view of art with the concept of 'translucence'. He stepped into the new domain by getting on the path to the subtle and vague 'virtual' transparency, or 'translucent' domain from the 'real' transparency, which can be described clearly. Unfortunately, however, the artists who have actualized 'translucent' work by putting layers of paint like Miyashita are not mentioned in "*Hantomei no Bigaku*". Probably that's because his works are very distinct and there are no eminent artists like him existing. Whether we can see his paint layers more deeply and accurately with the concept of 'translucency' is the challenge we have to address by ourselves. Let's move ahead on the matter.

Accordingly, his works after he stepped into this new domain show new development. He started to draw lines and figures freely on the picture plane regardless of materiality

of the subject matter. The figures drawn there were not a clear form like circle and rectangle, nor letter or code. Looking at these icons (Miyashita calls them 'sign', but let's call them 'icon' tentatively here), I have referred to an artist, Cy Twombly^{xi}. Twombly doesn't paint layers (films) on top of another like Miyashita, but I recollected what Roland Barthes^{xii} wrote about his drawing lines. Barthes wrote about Twombly that 'his works don't belong to concept (trace) but to activity (tracing), furthermore, to place (plane) as far as the activity is being developed.'^{xiii} I thought belonging to 'activity' rather than to 'trace' overlaps somehow with Miyashita's icons rich in activities. Twombly, unlike Miyashita, often writes letters on the plane. Barthes' interpretation is that those letters don't mean anything but they are to bring 'incoherence into the picture' and 'shake' its stillness. He surely writes letters clumsily, probably intentionally illegibly. If Twombly's letters are written away from their original meanings, I feel this also has something in common with Miyashita's iconic expressions. If the icons depicted have some shape or code easy to understand, there is no question, but if they are depicted away from easy-to-understand meanings, how should we take them?

Atsushi Okada points out something interesting in "*Hantome no Bigaku*" as follows: If paintings are to be separated into two categories with the concepts of 'transparence' and 'opaqueness', representational paintings in perspective are 'transparent', and abstract paintings out of perspective are 'opaque'. It is obviously easy to comprehend what the icons depicted in 'transparent' representational paintings indicate while the icons depicted in 'opaque' abstract paintings are incomprehensible. In this sense, we can say that abstract paintings don't have a clear structure of perspective, and at the same time, they are 'opaque' from an iconic point of view. Even though abstract paintings are seemingly 'opaque', we may still be able to see some meaning in the whole picture, he argues.

That is probably why, for example, the meanings of 'spirituality' (for example, Vassily Kandinsky^{xiv}), 'transcendancy' (for example, Mark Rothko^{xv}), and 'subjectivity' (for example, Jackson Pollock^{xvi}) have been repeatedly discussed regarding abstract paintings. Not reflection of the reality already existing there but deeper meaning with its own reality is created following the rules inherent in paintings. If that is the case, it'll lead us to even think that abstract paintings are a very privileged object which is thought and realized by the transcended subject, and that they are nothing but one of the completed works of Western metaphysics. ("*Hantome no Bigaku*" by Atsushi Okada)

Okada says both abstract and representational paintings are basically the same in

that we can see the 'meaning' in the picture plane. He even writes that it's abstract paintings that are 'nothing but one of the completed works of Western metaphysics' if we can perceive high 'spirituality' from abstract paintings of Kandinsky's as if they were expressed as a code. The source of this idea comes from the concept of signifiant and signifie in linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure^{xvii}. I'm afraid I cannot write about it in detail here, but Saussure's linguistics had much influence over contemporary thought of the 20th century. In the meantime, a view about and an interpretation of signifie / signifiant^{xviii} have spread. For example, some people take iconographic expression in painting as signifiant and what it means as signifie, but it is an understanding only within the range of semiotic interpretation. To interpret what the whole painting means with signifiant-signifie relation is similar to the applied idea of semiotics Barthers advocates, and it is fairly audacious. Okada writes as below, following the above quotation:

Renaissance aesthetics and modernism aesthetics appear to be antinomic and contradictory to each other, but in fact both of them are thought to have supported the ideology of symbol=emersion, based on the major premise of a certain happy combination of signifiant and signifie. Alberti's^{xix} transparent 'Window' is regarded to lead straight to the profound meaning beyond the surface, whether philosophically, religiously, or mythically. Similarly to that, on the other hand, although being reversal, abstract expressionism's opaque painting planes, despite being opaque, lead through transparently to the creative and transcendent subjectivity. Therefore, whether representational or abstract, basically there is not much difference. (*Hantomei no Bigaku* by Atsushi Okada)

If we can grasp widely what paintings mean like this, what meaning can we get from Miyashita's paintings? Let's look at his more recent work, "sign on sign" in 2013. What is noted is that the lines drawn on the uppermost layer of paints, or the surface, became more audacious expression. Entwining with lower paint layers, they seem to strengthen their assertion as an icon even more than before. Despite that, however, these icons don't seem to mean anything specific, and I can't still see any clear meanings there by looking at the whole picture.

What I can think about this is as follows: Even though abstract paintings, they are complete as a 'transparent' work if they mean something clearly. There are already many works like those, and actually there are artists who have produced beautiful finished works by doing minimal^{xx} work of over-painting like Miyashita. Paintings

Miyashita is working on now, however, are not easily complete and their meanings are left unclear although the structure of expression is clear to everybody. A group of lines he scrawled don't form a clear shape but appear in front of us entwining with icons in various layers. As I repeatedly say, it's a mysterious phenomenon that could happen only with pictorial expression. In other words, we are meeting 'picture' itself by looking at Miyashita's works. What Miyashita is creating is a 'place' for us to meet a pictorial expression itself like that, not something having been complete with a convergent easy meaning prior to that.

However, on the other hand, this could mean we are free to find whatever meanings in Miyashita's icons, and there is no correct answer. Miyashita's paintings don't show clear meanings, but their organic icons and lines don't make cold denial of such an element, either. Some people may feel some concrete image in his work and others may receive some meaning and message from the whole body of his work. In accordance with the time looking at his paintings, icons in the lower layer may start to stand out, and lines on the surface may lead to lines in the lower layer. What is important probably is that the interpretation is not fixed but is open to anybody. Such a characteristic of Miyashita's works can be described as a 'translucent' painting if we borrow Okada's concept. That just means the paintings lie in between 'transparence', clear 'meaning', and 'opaqueness', denial of 'meaning'. I think that positively discussing such an ambiguous domain, which could be discussed only vaguely, makes it possible to step into the new domain getting over 'the ideology of symbol=emersion'.

Such an attitude of Miyashita's making shows in structure of each layer of paints as I referred to before. I have already mentioned that he has a high level of awareness regarding layers of paints. Colors painted and icons depicted in each layer keep independent though relating to those in other layers. For example, if we look at colors of each layer, they are not to blend in with one another but they keep a subtle, proper distance from one another. Lines drawn on the uppermost layer of paints, the surface, seem to go together with icons in the lower paint layers, but if we look at them carefully, we get to know they move independently. Actually, Miyashita usually draws sketches, saves them, and sees them when he paints so that the lines drawn should not be influenced too much by icons in the lower paint layers. If an easy interpretation as an abstract painting is expected, such a way should be avoided because it might spoil the whole meaning of the work. But for Miyashita, it is important to create a 'place' for appreciators to meet a pictorial expression, so it is necessary for each layer of paints to keep independent and at the same time related to one another with a certain tension like that. Such an attitude of Miyashita's making leads to paying attention to an

expression of ‘each layer’ ordinary artists tend to overlook, which produces ‘translucent’ icons entwining intricately with one another. As a result, that distinct way opens up new possibilities of pictorial expressions.

Such an expression of Miyashita’s is not as easy as it sounds. It is only one remove from general abstract paintings or minimal art. Compared with the works using the subject matter with strong materiality, his current works are no different than ordinary paintings as a matter of form. There is even a possibility that they might be seen as conventional, common abstract paintings depending upon the quality of the work. As mentioned in the example of Giacometti in the opening sentence, Miyashita’s sincere attitude as an artist needs to be continued.

In such Miyashita’s works, I find an answer to the difficult reality the current picture painting is facing. In the world of contemporary paintings, after minimal art paintings, there was a time when painting pictures was thought to be meaningless. After that, we got to see a pictorial form of art everywhere but difficulty in fully facing picture paintings fully shows no sign of decreasing. In such a situation, how should a picture be expressed in order to exist as the one painted after modernism? Miyashita’s paintings show their distinct presence in presenting a new potential without making a display of his eccentricity in form. I think Miyashita’s paintings’ concept itself is the very reason why picture painting should exist now.

(Minoru Ishimura, an artist)

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- i A. Giacometti (1901-1996); a sculptor and painter born in Switzerland.
 - ii Isaku Yanaihara (1918-1989); a philosopher and critic.
 - iii “My Reality”; by A. Giacometti, translated by Isaku Yanaihara and Eiji Usami (Misuzu Shobo).
 - iv Miyashita’s comment at a private exhibition held at ‘Gallery Yume’ in June, 2013.
 - v Colin Rowe (1920-1999); an architectural historian and architect born in England.
 - vi “Mannerism and Modern Architecture”; by Colin Rowe, translated by Toyoo Ito and Yasumitsu Toyonaga (Shokokusha).
 - vii Cubists; artists of Cubism (Movement of contemporary art started by Picasso and Black at the beginning of 20th century).
 - viii Paus Cezanne (1839 – 1906); a French painter.
 - ix Atsushi Okada (1954 -); an art historian.
 - x “*Hantomei no Bigaku*” (Translucent Aesthetics); by Atsushi Okada (Iwanami

Shoten).

- xi Cy Twombly (1928 – 2011); a painter and sculptor born in America.
- xii Roland Barthers (1915 – 1980); a French critic and thinker.
- xiii “Bijutsuron-shu” (Essays on Art); by Roland Barthers translated by Kouhei Sawazaki (Misuzu Shobo).
- xiv Vassily Kandinsky (1866 – 1944); a painter and theorist born in Russia.
- xv Mark Rothko (1903 – 1970); an American painter.
- xvi Jackson Pollock (1912 – 1956); an American painter.
- xvii Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 – 1913); a Swiss linguist and linguistic philosopher.
- xviii signifiant / signifie; linguistic terms defined by Saussure.
- xix Leon Battista Alberti (1404 – 1472); a Renaissance humanist, architectural theorist, architect.
- xx Minimal Art; paintings and sculptures depicted with simple shapes and colors eliminating decorative and explanative parts.