



'The invisible is more important than the visible.'

An interview with Muneyoshi Hase, on a sunny day, by Ellen Mara De Wachter.

Ellen Mara De Wachter : Thank you for your previous e-mail containing the images of your works from your degree show. I wonder if you could start us off by discussing the materials that you used. What they are and why you used these particular materials?

Muneyoshi Hase : This time, the main material for my work was black garbage bags, timbers and metal. The reason why I used them was that I thought they were interesting and suitable materials to express my concept.

As my work depends on materials, it's very important for me to understand them. For me, materials are not just materials, because I think everything has its own spirit. So, I feel as if materials are partners that are collaborating in the creation of my work. I try to draw out the characteristics of them through 'communication or dialogue with them', and then assemble them into their proper space.

Of course, such communication or dialogue is an internal conversation with myself. But, I try to 'get into a material' using my all sensations to feel and grasp not only the impression that I receive from its outward appearance but also its sentiment and thought in regard to its own image. This is the feeling I get; as if I was the material as well.

E: So, the material is like another person then? And what do you mean by 'spirit'?

M: Yes, I feel that they are like another person and I think Japanese Buddhism and Shintoism have had a great influence on my way of thinking about the term 'spirit'. It is said that, traditionally, the Japanese have always had a sense of awe and respect for nature and natural things.

As I said now, I feel their characteristics are like that of a human. In fact, when I encounter a material in my daily life, I feel as if it is speaking to me, especially ones that are expected to be good for my work of art. I suppose it's a feeling I get via my 'sixth sense'.

E: Is that something you know at that very moment in time or can you sometimes realise it later?

M: Yes, I can generally realise it at that moment in time, however, there isn't a firm reasoning behind it, I just feel it. That's why I feel as if it's 'my sixth sense'.

I think another firm reason for this might be because of the way my mother brought me up. She always said to me, "Cherish and make friends with everything, even if it's visible or not.". This was because I was really shy and preferred being alone above anything else while I was growing up. So, I used to chat with things, even though I was talking to myself. Even to this day, it has already become a part of my custom to have a 'dialogue with things'.

E: Do you have a name for this sixth sense and what would you say it is?

M: No, I don't have a name, also, I cannot explain well what this sixth sense is. But, I would like to call it an instinct, intuition, or inspiration. I think this sixth sense is not only a natural sense but also one that can be polished by experience. In my case, I would say my inspiration or intuition about materials has been polished through my experience in making works of art.

E: With the exhibition that you've just finished, you're using a different material than what I've seen you use before. Can you talk about that a little bit?

M: Indeed. There was a big change in my use of materials for my latest works. I remember the works were constructed mainly from many timbers when you first saw them. At that time, I didn't have a clear concept or theme yet. But, gradually I had developed my thought about materials, and then I changed the main material from timbers to garbage bags.

Since I hadn't been familiar with such artificial materials until then, I feel I could expand my way of thinking about materials. Curiously to say, for me, materials in Japan, 'speak in Japanese', while of course, they 'speak in English' here.

E: So, you have to translate it?

M: Yes, indeed. I've also come to understand what they say a little bit more than before.

E: When I looked at your work I thought the material (the garbage bags) was used much in the same way that paper might be used. I felt like it reminded me of carbon paper, like when you write and it leaves an imprint behind, especially the shine of the black bag and the plastic. I wonder if that's what you mean by the transformation of materials, that when a person looks at it, they think it might be something different. Is that what you mean, or is there a different kind of transformation?

M: Materials in my work have to play an important role in expressing a concept, and what you felt from my work is almost the same feeling as I would expect.

In this work, a thin black sheet is like a data film of records. So, I needed this thin material to represent my concept, 'record'. If a viewer can feel this then it's near my concept.

And, as for the black garbage bags, I think they are used to dispose of everyday rubbish and sometimes to wrap a dead body. It seems to me the garbage bag means the end of things, but even rubbish keeps their own record or memory. I mean, the rubbish can start as a record.

This process is not the transformation of materials, but rather one might say that characteristics of materials are brought out to be able to play their individual roles in my work.



E: And this shape on the wall, you've made a very long, connected surface of the bags, like a scroll. Were you thinking of Eastern scrolls, like Japanese scrolls with calligraphy?

M: Yes, I was thinking of that, a type of Japanese scroll called 'Kakejiku'.

E: What kind of writing would be on the 'kakejiku', normally?

M: I think normally it would show letters, traditional Japanese paintings, or philosophical words or pictures.

E: Yes, so pictorial.



M: In my last work, I had planned to make a contrast between two pieces under the same concept 'record'.

The one piece on the wall is an awoken and opened situation of records. And the other one on the floor represents a resting and closed situation of them.

E: The material of the black plastic behaves very differently on the wall than on the floor. On the floor, it feels like it's sleeping, it curves, it's like a body almost, the curve of it. Whereas on the wall, you really become conscious of how flat it is.

M: Yes, exactly. The title of the work on the floor is 'Enshrined records'. It means the situation of being stationary, or having a rest or sleep as would significant objects in a holy space. It's a preparation for the next active stage.

E: Almost like they are waiting?

M: Yes, they are waiting. In my view, records are so important for us human beings that they need to be preserved and kept in a calm place.

E: The one on the floor almost feels like it could be grieving up and down the floor.

M: If my work makes you feel like that, I am happy, because I hoped that both works would become a place where a viewer could recognise records and recall something from his or her memory, and eventually, meditate over those thoughts by himself or herself.

E: It's very much like the surface of water reflecting... I see your work as something in which the material is also the theme. But in a lot of people's works, the material is different than the theme. It helps to convey the theme. For you, is that right? Are they the same? Or is the material helping to explain a theme or is the material just the theme?

M: I would say that the role of the material depends on the work. I think materials are like words. We need to use words to express our thoughts if we want to convey something, and it's very important to choose which word and how to use that word to express out thought. So, it's really important to understand the function of each word in the expression.

In my creation, I always take care not to use the materials to express my image. My way is to draw out their characteristics and then I consider whether these characteristics could be a proper way to express the theme or not. Therefore, I use the material that has such characteristics and also set them in the best way to fit the theme.

Incidentally, I call this process 'a dialogue'.

E: So, you respect that there is a distance between you and the material, that you cannot be entirely the master of the material. Is it the material that makes you the artist or is it you the artist who makes the material into a work? That's a difficult question, of course. Maybe that's just a paradox.

M: It's an interesting question. I think my work is the result of collaboration between materials and I mean it's not necessary for me to be a master of the materials. The reason why I think so is that 'we' support each other and create 'our' work together. So, the most important thing for 'us' is communication, and also there is a possibility that one of 'us' will become the leader of the communication or creation.

E: Is there a question in your work about concerns around consumerism? Is there somewhere that it becomes about recycling, or waste, or not polluting? I ask this because you're reusing materials that someone else maybe threw away. It could have gone to a landfill but you're saying there is some value in having the material take part in your work and you bring it back to, actually, what is quite a precious environment – the art gallery.



M: It's said that nowadays we are living in a mass production, mass consumption, and mass disposal society, and this has given us the development of a way of life. But on the other hand, it's also said that this has caused problems, like a change in one's sense of values, depletion of nature resources, and air pollution. As you said I've used refuse or waste material to make my work, and my activity is also a part of the consumption. But, I myself, don't so much feel that my work concerns with consumerism. However, it might be good if the viewers would think about recycling when they see my work and I think if people can change their way of thinking about things, especially about rubbish or the useless, then I think it is very valuable. In art galleries, I think, many art works would be expected to be concerned with consumerism.

E: It's not your primary theme. But if you say that after the show, your work can become rubbish again, then are you saying goodbye to a 'friend'? What happens in that case?

M: In Japan, I never throw away my materials even when I break or take a work apart because they will be new materials for the unseen works. So, I can keep all of them in my studio. However, in the UK, I've had to say goodbye to 'my friends' before the start of a show, because I don't have the storage for them.

E: Can you describe your process? You said you find things. How do you find them and what do you do with them when you find them?

M: The beginning of the process is a chance encounter with a material, and I start communicating with it to understand it deeply. Observation and conversation with materials are very important in my process, and I spend as much time as I can on this.

Actually, the process of 'our' creation involves a lot of repetition of trial and error 'communicating' with the materials. I feel my materials and works always try to 'tell' something. So, I try to listen to their voice, which leads us to notice what we should do the next.

E: This takes a lot of time. How do you do that? Because I know there is a lot of pressure on artists to continue to produce. How do you fight that pressure?

M: I always try to enjoy 'our' discussion. But, to be honest, I feel pressure. In short, I cannot have enough time to discuss with materials here. However, I have managed to learn how to make quick decisions due to being in that situation many times.

E: So, you learned that as a particular skill? Maybe you don't always have to use it, but...

M: I wouldn't say it has become a part of my custom rather than being a special skill.

E: This takes me to my next question. What do you think of the main differences there are in your practice between when you made work in Japan and when you made work here? This ability to decide to make things quickly is one thing. What else is there?



M: With regard to making work, I feel there is no difference, but, my relationship between the viewers and I have extremely changed. In the UK, as the viewers have various backgrounds, I have to face directly, a diverse way of thinking, for example, differences in politics, religion, culture and so on. This leads me to think over the world and myself.

In addition, I feel that in England there is a great tendency for an artist to address a social problem.

Another big difference that I've noticed between the two nations is that the support system is extremely different. In the UK, under the strong leadership of the government, many institutes like the Art Council provide lots of opportunities, for example getting funding or art residencies.

E: Yes, it's a very different structure and support system. So, you said that there is more of a political side to making art here. Do you think that your own practice has gained a new political significance somehow? Or is there something political in your work now?

M: My works often involve a social and political problem, but, I don't directly show my thought about the issues. In other words, I prefer to express the problems as an expression within my works rather than express it in a direct way with discourse.

For example, my latest work is concerned with records of human activity. I was deeply affected when I visited Auschwitz, the venue of an act of cruelty by human beings. However, I try to avoid giving a direct explanation for my idea or thoughts, and I hide it inside of my concept and my works.

E: I don't remember the title of the work on the wall, with the bin bags. Can you remind me?

M: On the wall? Yes, the title is 'Imprinted Records'.

E: That helped me think about carbon paper.

M: And the title on the floor is 'Enshrined Records'.

E: So, it is available for you to read and put away for history, almost?

M: In the work on the wall, each black sheet is backed with newspaper. People can read it in the caption, but they cannot easily recognise the existence of it.

E: They have been blocked.

M: Yes, that's true. They have been blocked.

E: It really made me think about communication that was being blocked. The format, as a scroll, or even if you think about a rotated billboard – they're very thin and long, but just rotated. But the message was abstract; the message was a black, shiny texture. So, then you start to think, 'What is being blocked? Or, is it up to me to formulate my own message to project on to it?' So, it's quite interesting what it makes you think.

M: I think that depends on the situation, and sometimes the invisible is more important than the visible. In the case of this work, I wanted to make the viewer imagine the meaning of newspaper or something through the word, newspaper. So, I avoided showing concrete signs on the surface of the work. Therefore, I think the viewer could freely imagine about my message.

E: How many bin bags did you use in the floor piece?

M: Please take a guess at how many.

E: 250?

M: No.

E: More or less?

M: More.

E: 270.

M: It's in the thousands, in fact, it's 4,000.

E: 4,000? Wow!

M: I wanted to get the height, so I first started with 100, then 200.

E: But you had to unroll them, I guess, and flatten them?

M: That's right. During those days, I'd devoted myself to cutting and opening bags.

E: How many days were you working on bin bags?

M: More than two weeks.

E: So there is a real endurance aspect to this as well – the cutting and the repetitive layering. It is like a historical document.

M: Exactly. At first, it was interesting, then it soon became boring, but after a while, I started to have a different feeling, like I made the history as you said, namely 4,000 years.

E: There is a historical aspect to it. Like the layering of sedimentation of experience. Like how rock is formed, the sedimentation of the layers. So, I suppose in the exhibition you received a space. Did you ask for this particular space? Or how was it to install the work in such a big group show? Because it is a really big group show when you consider the different buildings.

M: Yes, I requested a higher wall and a spacious floor when I submitted my works, because space is the essential point for what and how I display my works. I felt a sense of satisfaction in the space I was allocated. As to the works on the floor, I needed to make many changes whilst making it because I want to think of a relationship between it and the space of the studio and other works.

In regard to how the works should be installed, it also completely depends on the space of the venue. The number and arrangement of the works are very important to make an appropriate meaning of the space under the concept of the show. It can be said that the meaning of the space is changed by the object and vice versa.



E: Was this the first time you have worked with the bin bags or is that something you have done before?

M: No, it wasn't the first time. The first try was in 2016. At that time, I couldn't be close with the garbage bags. But this time I feel I could deepen my understanding of them and become familiar with them through the process of making these works.



E: And with these transformations in your thinking, in your practice, and also in your work, that have taken place since you've been in the UK, what kind of dialogue does it open up with the art that's being made here? Are there any similarities with your work now and art being made here? What do you think the future is for your work?

M: That's an interesting question.

I think diversity is a key word and it's important for people to know the difference and understand it. My works also express that diversity and I'm happy if the viewers enjoy and feel something through my works.

I don't think that there are similarities between my work now and the art being made here, because each work has its own world.

With regard to the future of my work, I expect I will 'meet' various materials and develop works that I cannot even begin to imagine now.

E: I think these are my questions. Thank you very much today.



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Ellen Mara De Wachter is a writer and curator based in London. She is a frequent contributor to Frieze magazine, and her writing has featured in numerous publications and exhibition catalogues.

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In 2013-15 she was Curator of Public Collection Development at the Contemporary Art Society, where she was responsible for CAS's acquisitions scheme for museums across the UK. Prior to that, she worked at various arts organisations including the British Museum and the Barbican Art Gallery.