

Vessel of Thought – Twenty years of work by HASE Muneyoshi

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This exhibition marks the first opportunity to view the body of work that HASE Muneyoshi's has produced over the last twenty years and being a native of Takaoka city, it is very significant that it should be the Takaoka Art Museum which presents this overview of his career on a scale appropriate to the work.

HASE Muneyoshi is an artist who produces serious works of largest scale possible to be created by the hand of a single person, all of which pose the view with earnest questions. These works to which he devoted himself cannot be used easily to decorate any space and are not of the type to win widespread popularity. Only appearing at rare intervals, his works are incompatible with commercial fashion and it can be said that throughout his career he has maintained a posture of proud aloofness but I think that it is due to this method that he has been able to create something in his work that is so valuable to us all. It is the role of art museums to introduce work of his nature and by so doing allow us to understand what HASE has been searching for all this time.

His most recent work (cat. no. 20) is shown here for the first time, and in common with all his other works, it confronts the viewer without a title. The artist hesitates to place titles on his work because he believes a title can provide an easy explanation of the sculpture. He does not like to place limits on the meaning of his work, preferring to present it to the viewer in the form of a question. My intention in this text is to look at his latest work, on which he spent four years in preparation, and attempt to relate the impression it made on me and consider the questions it posed. It is epoch-making, in the truest meaning of the word, I felt confused and unsure whether it should even be described as sculpture. This was because it existed in a way I had never seen before. The outline seems to blaze like a spectrum, ripping aggressively through the surrounding space to flow in all four directions. It is like a handwritten manuscript on parchment which opens of itself to present the viewer with numerous pages from which to read.

The entire object consists of scape wood. Trees are cut from the mountains, made into planks that are used to build houses, but eventually the buildings are demolished and the wood finally ends up in the hands of the artist. The passing of years has weathered its surface, giving birth to delicate shades of colour, the cracks,

the splits and even the rusted nails each imbuing it with their own shape and colour that talks of history of the materials. Appearing like a “Thousand-armed Buddha”, the hands which stretch out towards us, do not contain the jewels of Buddhist art, rather the mementos of their previous existence. Looking at each of those tiny fragments, we are intrigued by their charm and unexpected delicacy, gradually realizing that the space is filled with a strange polyphony. It is a polyphony that combines the aggression of the structure, with the gentle delicacy of the details.

Wood is a natural material, but scrap wood can be said to be manmade. It is created as a result of mankind’s activities, a by-product that remains after its original objective has been achieved, and the weathering of the surface emerges irrelevant of people’s intentions. Rather than embodying both nature and mankind’s actions, it could be said scrap lumber contains the opposite of both. Natural and artificial are reversed in the accumulation of scrap wood, creating a negative image of our society. Although the materials have been joined together in an exquisite fashion, the fact remains that the artist has made no attempt to integrate them. The structure displays an anarchic movement but appears natural and offhand; rather than aim for a complete form, it appears to be on the verge of opening up and changing into something else. The expression of the details that appear to have been created so carefully seems to represent the uniqueness of the moments that make up a person’s life, each of them preserving the colour form and condition of the scrap wood from which they are made.

The work exhibits an extraordinary balance between details and composition, materials and form, that would be impossible to achieve without the skill and attention of the artist. HASE’s art stands opposed to the Dadaist method of utilizing waste objects, his aim is not to take objects that have been cast away and reconstruct them in an aesthetic way, rather he is more like a master hand, working minutely to create a natural form.

All the aspects of the work combine to create the polyphony; the materials, the composition, the details, opening up a pluralistic world to give new life to the neglected objects. That is why it can be described as a vessel of thought for we who live in the beginning of the new century. Even though the work may not have some kind of plain statement attached, it would be impossible for the artist to create this kind of object without having analyzed globalism and adopted environmental problems for his own. HASE’s work had undergone a clearly-defined transformation. There can be said to be two reasons for this, one an intellectual change in his creative thinking and the other a change in the artist himself springing from his shifting worldview.

The work that he produced could still be classified as “sculpture” up until about 1987, the year in which he created a huge, powerful, object of wood that resembled an elephant’s back (cat. no. 7). In 1989, HASE began to move away from “sculpture-like” objects, producing instead a vast wooden pyramid (cat. no. 8), the idea for which is said to have come from Mt. Fuji. The uncompromising straight lines of the work give it lift, and its presence fills the space as it towers over the viewer. Although Mt. Fuji is most undeniably a three-dimensional object, it appears to our eyes in the form of a silhouette, and likewise HASE’s pyramid, although being almost aggressively massive, gives the impression of consisting of just surface, these being the walls of wood, ingeniously polished and neatly painted.

Having reduced a sculpture form to planes, HASE proceeded to experiment with works consisting solely of wooden surfaces. This fascination with surfaces runs through all his work from his early creations in around 1984 (cat. no. 1-3) and may even be traceable to a much earlier period, before he entered the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music his interest in graphic design. There again, it could be that the importance he attaches to the detail of his work led to him becoming fascinated by the surface like a craftsman. However, most important of all is the challenge he feels to deconstruct the genre concept of sculpture. The division between the three-dimensional and two-dimensional, his aspiration to return to this origin can be seen in its most extreme form in his 1991 work that is a self-standing, ten-metre long “Wall” (cat. no. 10). This work marked a turning point in his career. Up until 1991 HASE obviously started with an image. He then used huge amounts of camphor wood in order to materialize the image and create a work. However, in the work that was to become the “Wall” he moved naturally towards painting, using paints and flames to create images on its surface. In this way, his method of work changed from trying to achieve an image that he had already visualized to attempting to draw out an image through the process of creation itself.

Another factor that contributed to the change in his work was the materials he used. From 1993, he changed from using camphor timber to scrap wood (cap. no. 11-13). He gathered the shattered timbers and read images into each fragment. After that his process of creation consisted of experimenting with every possible combination of materials to choose the one he needed. Up until this time, he had been an artist who produced strong, masculine images with overpowering presence, but then he chose to listen to the voices of the shattered timbers, seeking out places where they matched and ascertaining where the images lay.

Japan has changed a lot over the last twenty years. The period of rapid economic growth came to its peak in the bubble economy, however, the final blow was the failure of the banking system, which has been described as Japan's second defeat, and the consequent recession. The value of objects, including the value of art, changed drastically. Tastes changed from the luxurious to the simple and natural. HASE's studio, at the foot of Mt. Fuji is situated close to the site of the Aum Cult religion's headquarters and working there he was in a position to observe the entire process of the rise and fall of this group.

Although he works alone in his studio, his works coincide with the course followed by the society to a remarkable degree. From having been an athlete in his youth. HASE now resembles a novice priest. As we look at what HASE Muneyoshi has been trying to say through his body of work presented here, we can also look back over our own lives. His latest work offers us a new field of view while simultaneously allowing us to think about the present. This has to be the function of art and he has devoted his life to create works that take on this role.