

Contemplating Themes on Sculptures

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Translated by Jun Itoi

It is a battlefield. This was the first impression I had when I saw Muneyoshi Hase's installed new work. Of course, that kind of theme is not proposed clearly for this work. "It is such a difficult thing to accept each other by coming over good and evil, or like and dislike" - is one of the lines from his statement and is very abstract. Arranging disposed materials or daily used things, by aligning and overlapping is his unchanged method. Even though, it can be said that Hase's work has changed - as the world surrounding us has changed. Both changes may seem slightly. But it changed definitely.

First, the installation work is at the large space of the right-hand side of the studio. A large metal tubular shaped object is placed at the back of the room, almost centered. You can tell it is a disposed object by rusted and beaten surface. It might be a water tank used to sit on a residential building. The transformed shape which is made from hard material and larger than the life-size, gives an impression of the possible violent "power" added onto it.

There are numerous black polypropylene plant pots arranged over this side of the floor. They are all placed as sideways and look like crushed following gravity due to their thinness. The characteristic point of this arrangement is that they are placed as the angle not to be able to show inside when viewers see them from the entrance. If viewers move to the opposite side, there are various daily things even used for the solo exhibition last year stored inside the pots. It is better to be said that those things are "hidden". This installation had me perceived a battlefield.

The work at the small room on the left-hand side of the studio is contrastive. It can be said something is being "exposed". It is because the two sheets of glass plates are placed parallel to the face of the wall, even arranged tidily. Though, all the other things are not much arranged neatly, they are placed carefully not to destruct the symmetry created by the glass plates. Especially, the arrangement

of two glass bottles is exquisite. This installation reminds me of a tombstone, or a memorial monument.

The third installation is placed in front of the studio. This is his fourth exhibition at this location, but it is the first time to show his work at outdoors. Comparing to the works at indoors, the composition is a bit complicated. This can be much similar to Hase's previous works than others in the studio, but it succeeds the characteristics of them. There are a slightly deformed drum and crushed black plant pot (things to hide) at the lower part, and glass products and plastic bags which are all clear visibly (things to expose), are placed at the upper part. However, those two groups are not separated apparently, since the arrangement of the objects is complexed. Moreover, they become integrated as one by the natural elements, specifically by sun light and rainwater.

As a matter of course, there are some risks along with these kinds of interpretations. Since Hase himself is not proposing a theme, there are possibilities for viewers just to interpret his works selfishly. Yet, what are the original themes for sculptures in the first place? To deliberate it, we need to go back to see the historical works carefully, and consider - especially, the sculptures regarding war-conflicts and peace.

Seibo Kitamura's "Peace Statue" (1955) stands near the hypocenter at Nagasaki city. Although it is clear that the sculpture means "peace" from the title, is it really so? A muscling male straightens his left arm horizontally and palm facing down, and right index finger points out upward. I wonder if this sculpture may also be able to exist even with a title like "domination". During the war time in history, muscling male figures were often used to symbolize superb soldiers.

Fumio Asakura created a piece titled "Follow the Wings" (1943) during WWII. It is a female nude, her chin is slightly up, and both arms are diagonally stretched out. Although, it is doubtful if this kind of sculpture was appropriate for the time of war - unlike Germany, very few numbers of nude female figures were sculpted during that time in Japan, it did not object to the military administration's code, because of its title. After the war, this sculpture's title was changed to "Wings", and installed at the main hall of the Ueno railway station in Tokyo, 1958. Though, the alteration of the title is little in words, it is exact opposite in its meaning.

I am not here to criticize these things ethically. I just want to mention that the relationship between sculptures and titles have been simply like these. Incidentally, both Kitamura and Asakura taught at the Tokyo Academy of Fine Arts from 1921 to 1944. Even it is the way of the world that criticisms always exist for an academy, it has had the most powerful social influences. In short, most of the sculptors' awareness at that time should not have been much different from ones of Kitamura and Asakura, I guess.

From this point of view, we may have to rethink why Hase does not put any title on his art works.

Nonetheless, we should say that there are no sculptures without themes. A sculptural work always has its theme. At the late 20th century, the direction of seeking purely the independent art value (the beauty of colors and shapes) started appearing during the acceptance and spreading of the formalism in Japan. From 1950's to early 1960's was the forming era of Japanese abstract sculptures, and "untitled" or "work" were often taken as titles for those artworks. It can be said that these artworks are based on the theme of "works take no external subject matter".

This kind of direction started showing the apparent change in 1990's. Art expressions with themes which propose social issues clearly such as races, ethnicities, gender gaps, economic differences, and environments, started spreading out in various formats. Though, this kind of movement hardly formed the mainstreams in Japan, many of the art projects started being executed from the 2000's was directly connected to the political issues such as depopulation and aging at farming regions, or urban donut phenomenon. They can be called as art expressions with solid themes.

Hase's works take distances from every of those works. The nearest one is the formalism, but he does not pursue the autonomous art forms. This is obviously explained by that he started continuous exhibitions at his own studio. That is not separated from his own life. If it is, there should not be words like "the important things to human should be at your everyday life, not exist as the special things" in his statement for this exhibition. From this standpoint, if he creates a sculpture

with a theme of wars, it will never be an expression detached from everyday life of his own.

How Hase handles themes in this way can be called allegoristic. It was the exhibition "Allegory of Seeing" held by the Sezon Museum of Art at Tokyo in 1995 to classify the art expression into "symbolistic art", and "allegoristic art". The former one has a simple and clear construction of interpretation, yet the latter's forms and contents are connected in complexed ways.

If compared to the "symbolistic art", the "allegoristic art" has the narrower areas to be accepted definitely. However, it contains the power to let viewers stop in front of the artworks, and deliberate.