

## Human Figure and Landscape: Muneyoshi Hase's Nature

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Human figures, or landscapes? The first thing came to my mind was this examination after seeing Muneyoshi Hase's works exhibited. Probably, he would say, "Both are not right" if I asked him about that idea. Hase has been trying to deflect his sculptural works from being tied with specific subjects matter from his early stages of creating works. That is one of the reasons why he does not put a title on his work. In short, those have been designed to keep viewers away with equal distance from his artistic objects exist in the real world. But, if you borrow another word, you are at the position of close enough equally to his artistic objects in the real world. Therefore, those objects become to be viewed as to match the people's interests as viewers.

The reason why I see this exhibition can be seen either as human figures or landscapes resides mainly in its symmetry and the depth of space which steps back continuously. This kind of characteristic has not been seen in his works exhibited at his studio, or stayed there subtly and unconsciously.

The piece of work which consists with numbers of lumbers straightened up all and placed parallelly is located nearby the entrance of the large space. The materials are mainly solid wood boards but plywood are used partially. Their surfaces are darkened and scorched which make the both materials look aged deterioration. These kinds of materials have been used by Hase repeatedly, and some of them were actually used for his previous works.

The cause of these boards reminding me of a human figure exists in the sizes and proportion of each board and in its symmetricity. Although the scale is larger than the life-size, it does not exceed the human figure way more than that. Most of the boards' heights are scaled as high as an adult male stretches his arm upward. The proportion is very long in vertical, which makes me imagine human statues. And, this character has rarely seen in his past works, but they possess the symmetricity by having the sides of the boards cut vertically and evenly. Despite the cutting might be required to prop up the boards with the small base area on the support of less noticeable size, this

supporting part also recalls a human figure since it looks like a shape of a human foot.

The reason why it reminds me of a landscape is also in the space between each wood board placed parallel. Those boards near front keep more distance to each other, but the distance becomes closer as you go into the inner part of the room. Though, this kind of arrangement might have been planned in purpose for letting viewers walk into the middle of the installation, as a result, it classified into the expression of perspective of paintings which depict more compressed space at the further end of space.

At the divided space opposite to the wood board installation, there are two works mainly consist of nearly clear vinyl material which includes bubble wrap, are hung on the walls. These works also have scales and symmetry which evoke human figures. They are much wider than the wood boards, but the proportion is close to the one of a human spreading his arms horizontally. Dare I say, one of the works can be associated with Jesus on cross, and the other can suggest Saint Veronica who holds and spreads a large sized cloth.

The sense to the landscape is led, because the feeling of depth which becomes distant parallelly. This feeling is similar to the one in the wood board works. Since these works are installed on the walls, the physical depth barely accompanies within. But, the depth as an illusion arises, since the parts of plastic sheets overlapped are losing the transparencies.

Within the work placed in the smaller room, various sized small mobiles are set. As being identified the clothes hangers are used in the work, nevertheless they are smaller than the other works, they hint a shape of human shoulders and arms. Among those materials which are taking balances of left and right, there are stone and egg, child toys and fruits, ancient book and bare electric circuit, which make viewers want to read allegorical meanings in them, but they do not issue any specific message. That aspect urges viewers to be conscious of form, and contributes to recall human figures.

On the other hand, comparing to his other works, it has less characteristics of landscape. It is difficult to grasp the depth of space since many parts of the work are pointing various directions. Highly saturated primary colors which are often used in toys are placed randomly which takes part in that effect as well.

This kind of property of space has been seen in his works in recent years as well. The difference appears coming from the fact that viewers look down at this work from above, instead of the other works are being looked by viewers horizontally while they are standing. It is rather having a feeling of “seeing a model of landscape” than “seeing a landscape” for this work.

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This kind of duality of human figures and landscapes may be taken as the duality of “Western ones” and “Japanese ones” in Hase’s sculptures. Not just in sculptures, the core of expression is taken by depicting human figures and it is the “nature” as the foundation of fine arts in western art. On the other hand, there are expressions of human figures in Japanese traditional art but it does not take the major part of it. Moreover, it is common to connect “nature” to landscapes for Japanese.

Certainly, the Japanese have been consuming the value of the Western art and it shows some achievements at some level during the process of modernization. Hase submitted a wooden sculpted human figure as his graduation work at the Tokyo University of Arts in 1979. Although, modern Japanese wooden sculptures succeed the production of Buddhist statues from the Edo period, it is clear that he learned the expression of the structures of bones and muscles of human body in the Western sculptures.

The diversity of art expression had progressed in spite of in Western or Japanese after the late part of the 20th Century, but I assume there are still the differences between human figures and landscapes left as like scars. That can be sorted out as below (I created this matrix being suggested by the content of the guest lecture by Ryo Katsumata at Tokyo Zokei University in 2023):

|          |              |           |          |           |                           |
|----------|--------------|-----------|----------|-----------|---------------------------|
|          | Nature       | Form      | Boundary | Extension | Political Correctness     |
| Western  | Human Figure | Substance | Membrane | Action    | Race / Ethnicity / Gender |
| Japanese | Landscape    | Device    | Margin   | Place     | Ecology                   |

Based on this matrix, some of Hase’s recent works can be explained. For example, let’s take a look into the video work titled “Let it be” (2016) he

created while he was staying at London. In this video, along with the title song by the Beatles, he composed the still images of metal parts gradually changing their position, like a flip book. He does not appear in this video work. This work proposes the transition of the placement of objects (Place) directly, but the expression also suggests the human figures (Action) potentially.

There is another work he created about the same time titled “Enshrined records” (2017). The work consists of the multiple layers of cut-open black polythene garbage bags. It is difficult to decide if the boundary between the work and the else is the polythene surface (Membrane), or it is the precisely calculated distance (Margin) to the four walls, or it is both of them due to the lack of its volume.

Regarding the “Political Correctness”, though Hase never pushes out that kind of assertion, I would like to pick up that he mentioned his visit to the Auschwitz Birkenau German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp in the statement of his solo exhibition in 2019. At the same time, it is pointed out the materials such as disposed lumbers or empty cans he uses make viewers be conscious of the connection with “Ecology”. (Yuri Mitsuda, “Vessel of Thought - Twenty years of work by HASE Muneyoshi” 2002)

It is not limited to fine art. Japanese people during and after the modern era have lived in the duality of “Western things” and “Japanese things”. The reason why this kind of duality surfaces on Hase's sculptures is because that forms the foundations of our real lives.