

Tadashi Fujii (art critic)

Reconfiguring the relationship with reality

Looking at the most recent works by Muneyoshi Hase, I sense a change from his past creations. Perhaps in reality though, they may not have changed that much. For instance, there is no significant change in the materials used in his current works - old timber from demolished wooden houses, rusty iron plates and tools, discarded/redundant daily objects such as empty glass bottles, vinyl bin liners for disposing of those household refuse, and plastic toys for children. Although the large number of glass panes used can perhaps be considered a noticeable change in his most recent works, the way individual objects are grouped together share similarity with his previous methods. The focus this time also essentially remains on 'arranging' and 'layering/stacking' the objects, rather than 'combining/joining' the pieces together with nails or drawing pins. What remains unchanged too is the location of his exhibition - his own studio at home where his solo exhibitions have been held annually since 2019. Giving no titles to his works also remains the same. Seen from such perspective, in fact there are more continuing characteristics that have persisted through to his current works than the changing aspects.

Despite the enduring presence of continuity in Hase's latest works, what signals a profound change in its disposition is the way the objects are 'arranged' and 'layered/stacked'. In his sculptures, numerous objects are placed, considering their proportions of balance carefully without determining a concrete, preconceived final design in mind from the outset. Of course, given that this is an exhibition, one would expect the artworks presented to be in their final state, yet one should remember that their current appearance is not the ultimate, definitive interpretation. The arrangement of the objects is not only determined by the correlation between the objects, but also by the unique relationship between Hase and the objects themselves; for his innermost thoughts and

feelings while he continues to live his daily life have a significant impact on the way these objects are arranged. What renders it difficult to determine the final form stems from the fact that the relationship between Hase and society is transitory and subject to constant change as each day passes by.

Such fluid and amorphous relationships are articulated in elusive and diffusive nature of many of Hase's works, allowing him to leave more physical space for the objects to be moved around freely at a later stage. In contrast, his current works offer the impression that the objects are arranged in a relatively more organised manner. Of course, it is by no means indicating that this is due to Hase's thoughts and actions which are subject to constant change. According to Hase, his works have undergone substantial changes this time also during the production process. After all, the outcome this time has taken shape as such, just as a pure consequence on this occasion.

What is the reason for the change in the production process this time? We may find clues in Hase's own words in his invitation letter, which reads: 'since the end of last year, my dear ones have passed away one after another,' and 'as soon as I realized that I would never see them again, their existence took root deep within my heart. Needless to mention that the theme of death has always played an important role in Hase's artistic output throughout the years. As Hase's thoughts and actions in creating his artwork resonate and synchronise with his own life, and they are always interwound with the presence of death as his life unfolds. Therefore, although his statement above does not offer an ultimate cause for a changing outlook in his current works, it can still be acknowledged that losing dear ones close to him has somewhat consequently brought about changes to his current artwork.

As with Hase's past exhibitions, the area is divided into two spaces. In the smaller space to the left of the entrance, a dozen units of glass panes with various sizes, some with two layers, others with three, on top of each other to form a regular grid pattern on the floor. This arrangement is offering a firm impression of objects being arranged in an orderly manner, as the vertical and horizontal lines

of glass panes are running through each other, corresponding also to the shape and size of the room. Furthermore, the structure here consists of almost no straight vertical elements, while it is commonplace to associate vertical sculptures (e.g. standing figures) with the expression of vitality. If we are to take Henry Moore's reclining figure series as an example, the head is always positioned vertically while the body remains lying on the horizontal position. On the other hand, in Hase's works, the formation of the glass panes in the grid pattern on the floor evokes the impression and the image (i.e. grave pits) which is quite contrary to the image of a vigorous sign of life that vertical lines often represent. Attempting to find some allegorical meaning into his work may not be appropriate, yet the association with the imagery of death is reinforced by the bundles of withered chrysanthemum flowers laid flat on the bottom of each unit.

The works in the larger space on the right hand is divided into three sections. This clear division (or disconnection of the works) is indeed the very feature which most evidently marks a difference between Hase's most recent works and his previous productions.

In the foremost section, although a slightly taller materials are used, horizontality is the fundamental feature here. From the bottom to the top, thin iron sheets, chunks of wood, iron pipes, wire mesh, and glass panes are 'cohesively' stacked/layered on top of each other, but all materials except the panes of glass are old and used, as if their past history is encapsulated in those panes of glass.

In the middle section towards the left, four wooden pillars/columns are lined up on the front, the bottom of which are bordered by black vinyl sack, which serves its function as a boundary division. Looking behind them, the wooden planks leaning against the walls are high, and become gradually lower towards the centre of the room – in another word, the structure is transitioning from assimilation with the wall to assimilation with the floor. Since they fit within the width of the four pillars, the impression of 'cohesion/unity' is more distinct here than that of 'expansion/release'.

In the section at the far end, large wooden and iron boards are used with only few objects placed on top, giving a sense of vast spatiality in its expression.

Nonetheless, the subsequent impression here is one of 'cohesion'. The vertically placed wooden boards are positioned in relation to two perpendicular walls, while the horizontally placed ones are arranged so as to fan out in those two directions, unfolding only in the direction restricted by the wall.

However hard one may wish, all human beings, past and present, cannot escape death. This is the reason why death has always been a subject of artistic expression from ancient civilizations to Damien Hirst. Indeed, its expression exhibits diverse developments across different eras and regions. For instance, in his *Tomb Sculpture*, an art historian Erwin Panofsky distinguishes such artistic expression of death into two categories: 'prospective' and 'retrospective' art. Burial offerings in ancient Egypt and China are classified in the former category, while ancient Greek gravestones are in the latter. In the Middle Ages, the artistic manifestation of death was developed in Europe as Christian art in preparation for the Last Judgment; while in Japan, it took the form of Buddhist art expressing the desire for calm and peaceful passing to the Pure Land. As modernity loomed, the focus of art shifted from religious themes to secular subjects. During this period of transition, individual mortality became an important subject matter in artistic expression. Art depicting the themes of war has persisted since antiquity, and while earlier works typically glorified victors, representations of unreasonable and brutal deaths also emerged after the portrayal of Napoleonic Wars by Francisco de Goya, who was profoundly affected by the horrors of war.

Where would Hase's sculpture fit, in this broad historical context? Hase's works fundamentally differ in their character and nature from those works which are often seen to be carrying the symbolic theme of death. Indeed, without his statement mentioned earlier, it would not have been clear whether his works pertained to death. His works themselves do not represent death, nor is death the subject of his productions (we may note, his current works neither bear titles).

Hase's work, whatever the form it takes, is not a medium for conveying a message.

What Hase continues to articulate today remains unchanged: meditating the relationship between the self and society through the relationship between the self and objects. When someone passes away, the survivors are forced to reconstruct their relationship with society without the deceased. As has always been in the past to the present day, the mourning of the deceased has always embraced such process of reconstructing and reconfiguring relationships. Let me reiterate, death is not the main subject theme of Hase's sculptures this time. It is rather that Hase's artistic expression has always intrinsically reflected his relationship with the deceased.

(Translated by Jun Itoi)