

Kamei Toru — the Apex and the Nadir

Introduction

In Japan, the tradition of applied arts such as craftsmanship and disciplines like architecture, design, or even photography is more deeply appreciated and stronger than that of fine arts, conversely to what is found in the Western world. Even today, the vision of art as a continuation of philosophy has difficulties to be fully understood in Japan—although it has been flourishing for a few decades in other Asian countries such as China, Korea and Thailand. In the Western tradition, art has slowly been raised up from the hand to the head, from craftsmanship to philosophy. Starting from the motto of the Italian Renaissance, “*ut pictorial poesis*” (“Art is at the same level as poetry”), this endeavor culminated in the 19th century with the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), who defined art and aesthetics as fully belonging to the intellectual sphere and as a continuation of philosophy. This shift was indeed at the core of modern Western art and was fully reified with the “*avant-gardes*” of the early 20th century and further on with the development of conceptual art and post-modernism. To exemplify this close link between philosophy and art in the Western world, we simply need to mention that the Russian painter Kazimir Malevich, the founder of Suprematism and non-objective painting (cf. “*Black Square*”, 1915), considered himself as much a philosopher as a painter and felt that his writings were as important as his paintings. Also, closer to our time, we simply need to recall that the American philosopher Arthur Danto was the first to recognize the genius of Andy Warhol and wrote an essay in the *Journal of Philosophy*... However for most Japanese contemporary artists using either classical or post-modern techniques, art is still a way to express and depict what they see or feel rather than to address issues linked to society, politics, metaphysics or ontological questions...

Interpretation and Open Works

The work of Kamei Toru is therefore very different from most other contemporary Japanese art. He produces complex and intriguing paintings which can be interpreted in many ways and connected to both Western and Eastern art histories, echoing forgotten memories of the Baroque times or the Meiji period, which are however re-mixed with several layers of contemporary sentiments and questions.

Kamei's paintings are indeed figurative and relate to various narratives taken from mythology, allegories, folk tales or religious texts. But their meaning is left ambiguous,

open, flexible and polysemic. If his *vanitas* are hidden self-portraits, some other paintings are clear self-portraits, sometimes reusing stereotypes from Buddhist or Hindu imagery. But he always depicts himself naked, so as to eliminate all references to culture, time and space. Just a human being, naked, extemporal but ephemeral. The very presence in most of the paintings of Kamei himself, either as a recognizable self-portrait or as a simple skull, shows that this is not just a normal story or a simple “*istoria*”, the so-called domain of narrative painting considered as the highest genre of painting in the Italian Renaissance¹. Most of Kamei’s paintings could in fact be metaphorically considered as *concave*, that is, hollowed inward, waiting for a spectator to project himself into it to definitively fulfil the whole story. Each artwork is unmistakably a sign that refers to its spectator and calls on him as a witness. It is a concave sign of sorts, lying in wait for a human presence, one who will be taken on an uncertain journey toward the disturbed landscapes of his own consciousness—as if only a “thought from the outside”² could circumscribe the new modalities at stake in our contemporary society.

Marcel Duchamp declared that “ce sont les regardeurs qui font les tableaux” (the viewers are making the paintings). Although he said this catchphrase in a difference context, this sentence could indeed be applied to Kamei’s works, as every spectator, depending on his own personal history and immediate feelings, can see in the paintings something different but deeply intimate.

In some sense, Kamei’s paintings can be seen as a visual counterpart of the textual paradigm that has been defined for modern literature with the concept of the “open work” and of the “*lector in fabula*”, i.e. cooperative interpretation in narratives³. The text is seen as an “open” structure in need of the reader’s cooperation for interpreting narrative blanks so as to build up the final story. Narratives can therefore be seen as modal structures based on “possible worlds” which can be defined in formal logic as Kripke-model semantics.

Vanitas vanitatis et omnia vanitas

¹ Cf. the seminal book of Leon Battista Alberti, “De Pictura” (On Painting), 1435.

² I refer here of course to the notion developed by French philosopher Michel Foucault in “La pensee du dehors”, 1986.

³ Umberto Eco, “Lector in fabula”, in: *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Indiana University Press, 1979. See also *The Open Work*, Harvard University Press, 1989 (original Italian edition: 1962).

After having experimenting with various media, Kamei decided to use oil painting, which can be seen as a classical Western medium, but one should not forget that there is also a tradition of oil painting in Japan. Indeed, once introduced in Japan after the Meiji restoration in 1868, it took less than a decade for Japanese painters to master it, as exemplified by the realism of Yuichi Takahashi's *Salmon* in 1877. But such an historical lineage is, whatever some might say, less important than questioning the aim of using it. Why choose oil painting? Why should realism be so important in painting?

Kamei finds it difficult to express personal feeling and believes that information is better conveyed through vision, hence the importance of realism. Mastering realistic representation with oil painting was the key that enabled him to give shape to feelings and emotions, and somehow to go deeper than abstraction. However, using one particular technique or another is not so important; the key point is the ability to communicate, the opportunity of dialogue that is created through painting. Peculiar for an artist of the 21st century, and even more for a Japanese artist, Kamei launched in 2004 the series *all the flowers and insects*, which is his own reinterpretation of the *vanitas* (“vanities”), a Baroque genre originating in Dutch paintings of the 17th century. The original *vanitas* paintings were allegories of the vanity of all things on earth and aimed at making the spectator aware of the omnipresence of death in the material world and therefore of the importance of the eternal, spiritual world. Kamei has always been interested in the theme of death in European Middle Ages religious paintings, e.g. in the Dance of Death or the *memento mori* (“remember death”) frescoes from the 15th century, which were the ancestors of the later *vanitas* genre. In his series *all the flowers and insects*, Kamei depicts a skull, representing himself, surrounded by flowers, insects and eyes. Interestingly, the fact that the paintings of this series are mainly reduced to a skull reminds us of the words of Russian painter Kasimir Malevich (1878 – 1935): “Man’s skull (...) is equal to the universe for in it is contained all that he sees in it”⁴. Again, Malevich’s style is the complete opposite of Kamei’s, but maybe both painters are trying to reach similar goals, i.e. to express in the most direct way the thoughts imprisoned in one’s brain...

In the structure of Kamei’s *vanitas*, a central skull is encompassed and partly hidden by various kinds of flowers. Flowers are of course present in Baroque *vanitas* paintings, as they represent ephemeral beauty, but Kamei uses them in a different way: they represent another form of life and are attracted to the skull in order to somehow provide a symbolic shelter. His other paintings of animals completely covered by flowers, as if to deceive the spectator or hide from him, continue along the same lines. Eyes have also a

⁴ K. Malevich, *Essays on Art*, Troels Andersen, New York, 1971.

special meaning in Kamei's paintings: they represent a life-form stronger than human beings, and there is thus a contrast between the fragility of life and the power of those abstract life-forms. He says that he sometimes feels as if he is being watched while he is painting and that he wanted to represent such a feeling on the canvas.

The Baroque and the Contemporary

The Baroque period in Western art (roughly from the second half of the 17th century to the end of the 18th) is an interesting twilight period that followed the bright masterworks of the Renaissance. Baroque however is less about perfection (the original adjective “baroque” denotes pearls that are not round, and therefore imperfect) and more complex, enigmatic, and even obscure. Darker times were coming, wars and religious fights were endemic, as were natural calamities (e.g. plague). Sophistication and decadence thus intertwined, for the best and the worse. Good and Evil, light and shadow, life and death were the daily protagonists pictured in the art world, through complex allegories and sophisticated formal structures in which curves and serpentine lines replaced the square, chessboard-like compositions of the High Renaissance.

French philosopher Christine Buci-Glucksmann⁵ has pointed out the relationships between the Baroque period and the European contemporary art of the late 20th century, and we need not further explore this in this essay. It is therefore interesting to note that in the early 21st century several young Japanese artists are investigating similar issues. Shall we see in our contemporary decadent world an echo of these equivocal Baroque times? Does it therefore mean that Kamei's *vanitas* are much more contemporary than they seem? We must let the reader answer these questions through his own experience ...

The Apex and the Nadir

An interesting idea shown in very recent paintings by Kamei is the equivocal point of view that he uses to depict some objects and make them intelligible. A small painting dated 2008*fig1 represents at first sight a strange full moon with deep mounts and valleys depicted in a variety of yellowish tones (an April moon?), but the spectator slowly realizes that this is in fact a skull seen from below, and the whole painting can then be understood. This “bad moon” has been reused in a larger painting also dated 2008*fig2, where Kamei depicts in very cold tones a skull fallen aside and covered by

⁵ See for instance her book “La folie du voir”, 1986, translated in Japanese as 見ることの狂気—バロック美学と眼差しのアルケオロジ— (単行本), 1995, or more specifically on the Baroque period her previous book “La raison baroque”, 1984.

flowers, as if blown away by a cold, ghostly wind. The frontal organization and homogeneous lighting of previous work of this series, *all the flowers and insect*, is now disrupted; only a moon/skull therefore shades a very dramatic light cast over a lost and abandoned scenery. When the apex is the nadir, there is nowhere to hide, nowhere to shine; let's simply try to survive in an hostile and devastated world.

Another recent painting dated 2009*fig3 depicts a skull turned upside down and its reflection in a horizontal mirror or mirroring surface. The reflection is easily understood as a skull, while the original object is not. Therefore Kamei plays with the key position of the objects and their relation to the painter (and thus the spectators) to find a point of view where everything makes sense. Kamei here operates, most probably unconsciously, a reinterpretation of a concept that could be traced back again to the Baroque period: the problem of finding the perfect point of view from which to make something intelligible, which was a key paradigm in both Baroque science and philosophy.

This can be best exemplified in the work of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), well known for both his fundamental work in mathematics (for instance the discovery of the infinitesimal calculus) and in philosophy (his metaphysics and monadology). For Leibniz, if there are as many ways of perceiving reality “as the multiple perspective views of a city”, corresponding to different “truths”, there is always a particular point of view from which to better understand the whole thing. For instance in geometry, this means the apex of the cone, from which all the conic curves are intelligible. This idea of a specific viewpoint is also at work in Baroque perspective paintings such as the famous ceiling frescoes by Andrea Pozzo in the Church of Sant’Ignazio in Roma (1691-94), which are to be seen from a special point indeed inscribed in the floor of the Church. If the spectator is in a different location within the church, the illusionist architecture depicted in the ceiling frescoes goes into incoherent strands and seems close to falling down. Some authors have proposed a detailed analysis showing why this perceptually differs from classical perspective paintings on canvas⁶. But what is important here is the presence of a precise point from which everything is in order and takes sense. This point where the illusion is perfect might be the point where one understands the lure of representation and maybe the fragility of reality.

Are we lured in everyday life by the very nature of reality ?

This is a key interrogation of contemporary art that Kamei investigates by using century-old painting techniques and the venerable genre of *vanitas*.

⁶ Michael Kubovy, *The Psychology of Perspective and Renaissance Art*, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Conclusion

Japanese audiences have difficulties to cope with Kamei's paintings and to understand the real meaning (or meanings) of his works. Some people even consider his *vanitas* paintings to be "cheap horror movies". Aware of such misinterpretations, Kamei says that he would be happy if only some of the spectators connect and appreciate his works.

These paintings are "post-productions", in the sense intended by French philosopher and curator Nicolas Bourriaud ⁷, because Kamei's paintings are complex remixes of various influences from tradition and modernity, East and West, culture and nature. They somehow create a bridge over time and space, as the global themes of life and death, identity and self-consciousness, and sanity and insanity are recurrent and reappear in various moments and locations, as the most basic of ontological questions.

This is very different from the main trends in late 20th century art, such as those encompassed by the "relational aesthetics" approach⁸, which is very interesting but still within the limits or the mimicry of the current post-whatever consumer society. Even if in our daily information overload we now consume signs, bits and trends rather than products and ideologies, nothing has really changed since the society of the Spectacle of the second half of the 20th century.

Kamei Toru's work is indeed beyond these limits and reminds us that the construction of meaning is both a personal and social issue, as has been stressed by pragmatist philosophers such as C. S. Pierce: "One man's experience is nothing, if he stands alone ... It is not 'my' experience but 'our' experience that has to be thought of; and this 'us' has indefinite possibilities"⁹.

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⁷ See his book "Post-production", 2002.

⁸ Nicolas Bourriaud "Esthétique relationnelle / Relational Aesthetics", 1998.

⁹ Charles Saunders Pierce, *Collected Papers*, Harvard University Press, 1931-35. Cited in John Dewey, "Pierce's theory of linguistic signs, thought, and meaning", *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. XLIII, no. 4, 1946.