

Are Paintings a Means?

Paintings (and other pictures) are depictions of the shapes and figures of things on a flat surface, using lines and colors. Their production is regarded as an activity unique to human beings, and their history reportedly goes back to prehistoric drawings made on the walls of caves. We hardly need to go into the related art history here to recall that the things depicted on paintings have undergone various changes, deconstructions, and reconstructions. Could paintings also be some sort of transmission method? Today, appreciation of pictorial art seems to be excessively focused on figuring out the nature of the “something” drawn or painted on the canvas etc. We certainly feel reassured when we understand something, and by endeavoring to grasp and make sense of the artist’s intentions, we get something like a sense of accomplishment that we came to grips with the work. “Something like.” The painting is there, and the entity that is this “self” of all sorts confronting it attempts to somehow outline the unfamiliar subject in this way. It may be that, finding an outline of the “self” per se, we call it “appreciation,” however.

The art of Daisuke Takahashi came to the fore in the first half of the 2010s, particularly for his abstract paintings rendered voluminous by impastos. In exhibitions in more recent years, he also attracted attention for his series of works with ideographic characters scattered over the canvas and *Toy* series with big depictions of playthings. One work contains the characters that stand for the names of periods (e.g., Jomon, Yayoi, Kofun, Asuka) and eras (Showa, Heisei, and Reiwa) of Japanese history. The *Toy* series takes up articles that little children play with, such as toy animals and cars. Takahashi also chooses ordinary, everyday items as motifs, including cakes and pineapples painted in a diagrammatic, simplified manner using circles and triangles, as well as a frying pan and an extreme close-up of a one-yen coin. He has nevertheless even remarked that everyday things “cannot become paintings.” By this, he may mean that paintings of them will lack appeal, or that they literally cannot be transformed into paintings. For an art-lover who believes that paintings have a messaging potential, it will definitely be no easy task to face those of an artist who has suggested that their subjects cannot become paintings. In the first place, it would hard to escape the conclusion that characters and other representations are transformed into paintings by being drawn on canvas with pigments, even putting aside the theoretical aspect. At the same time, I cannot help thinking that to ponder paintings by breaking them down into assemblage of lines, fields, figures, colors, and other elements would be an insincere or unrealistic way of confronting Takahashi’s works.

In his book *On Representation*, the French philosopher Louis Marin (1931 - 1992) asserted that the representation of reality requires the existence of paintings (and other pictures) as surfaces/media. When our eyes try to “read” a painting, that painting acts as a mirror and lets our selves capture the world as an image. If our desire to understand a painting is the act of acquiring a world through “something like” it, then representation is performing a proxy function for something. This corresponds precisely with the artistic challenges mounted by the Impressionists and Cubism. Takahashi’s works transitioned from impasto-laden abstract paintings exuding massiveness and in fact providing nothing concrete to be read from them, to works in which the concreteness of characters rests on pigments and the supporting medium, and further to toys painted apparently with a view to separating their materiality and the texture of the pigment. The different stylistic shifts and vicissitudes suggestive of major changes and turning points were, of course, probably big changes for the artist as well in certain ways. In actuality, however, considering the difference of routes encouraging us to grasp the world (e.g., effects of expression on vision, traces, and mass), the pictorialization of precisely this “something like” itself may very well be what Takahashi is dealing with in his works. In the process of his production, he makes meticulous plan drawings and checks them as he paints. He replaces what were originally photos of building walls with colors, and organizes his thoughts using characters. Through these actions, the world first becomes a painting under his hands. The effect of comprehension is born by forgetting the very order of text and canvas, and writing and painting. We are in attendance at this world.

What are paintings? The application of pigments to a canvas stretched over a frame or to an undercoat on a panel. Paintings are born of this activity unique to human beings, and we still cannot give up viewing them. Takahashi’s works by no means apply “diverse” techniques and methods of expression; instead, they tell us about paintings in an extremely straightforward manner.

- Yuji Oshita (Associate Curator, Nakanoshima Museum of Art, Osaka)