

About the artists and works featured in “MERZ”

Yuji Akatsuka

I approach my work with paint and canvas as painting, but there are moments where things shift to a level beyond that. This is what happens every time I make a painting and like the way it turned out.⁽¹⁾

Feeling somewhat uncomfortable depicting preset ideas or subjects, Yuji Akatsuka has been constantly in anguish over the question why he continues to paint nonetheless, and explains how he eventually arrived at his reason for painting pictures by drawing lines tracing the different shades of colors that emerge as a result of earnestly rubbing paint onto the paper with his fingers.⁽²⁾ “Untitled” (1990) is one of the works made that way. Also in his later canvas paintings, Akatsuka catches glimpses of shapes by repeatedly applying oil paint on the canvas in a random fashion – sometimes almost as if throwing his whole body against it. Such discoveries are what he then instantly captures before they are gone. This may sound like a process that involves rather intense physical action, but as a matter of fact, the sensation is actually rather close to that of listening carefully.

Ari Ookubo

In my works, answers seen from a certain point of view are always suspended in midair.

These new works were inspired by the experience and memory of Ari Ookubo, who was an art student and aspiring artist back in the day when this space was still the “Wako Works of Art” gallery. One is a set of two pieces made to look like direct mail advertisements. The first one is a drawing Ookubo made from her memory of Mike Kelley’s one-man exhibition at this gallery in 1996, the other one a drawing to advertise her own exhibition “I won’t forget” that might be held in 2021. Arranged next to this work is a lava lamp reminiscent of Kelley’s colorful sculptures, along with a poster of an index of artists that Ookubo might have memorized as an art student, reading “Proposal for the 2021 / the future”. Originating from situations and realized by means of appropriation, these works interweaving reality and memory reflect Ookubo’s approach investigating the identity of an artist.

Bunshichi Kaihatsu

Even the tiniest thing is a universe in itself as soon as it possesses gravity, a center of gravity, and density.⁽³⁾

Throughout his career of nearly five decades working as an extraordinary ceramic artist, Bunshichi Kaihatsu has constantly been keeping in mind the mental state of a person who takes up a tea bowl and drinks from it, and the beautiful presence of flowers arranged in a vase. While adopting traditional forms, his works are rather inventive in terms of shapes, textures and colors acquired through processes that involve molding while incorporating arbitrary catabolic processes, and repeated firing at high temperatures in the kiln, which causes discoloration and sediments of ash on the surface. With its pronounced dents and holes, “Yohen Kuro Chawan (Discoloration of Black Tea Bowl)” (ca. 1990), a relatively early example of his tea bowls, is rather ruggedly shaped, but feels smooth in the hand. Its deep coloration is reminiscent of the boundlessly expanding color of an abstract painting, calling to mind the abstract works of Mark Rothko for example. “Different from other items of formative art, the beauty of a tea bowl in Japan is not so much defined by its visual aesthetic, but it certainly is a rather unusual case of priority being given to a spiritual kind of haptic aesthetic”⁽⁴⁾ As can be understood from this statement, Kaihatsu still values the mental quality that is projected through a bowl’s design, along with its purpose-based tactile sensation, as the origins of ceramic art.

Houxo Que

Transcendancy is the light that directly controls the act of ‘seeing’. Art that existed ‘between’ the visibility and invisibility of light again is something that is still ‘between’ the light.

Just like the graffiti style that represents his artistic backbone, the rationale behind HouxoQue’s work is to intervene through his own actions and the act of painting into environments where various people meet and mingle, expose the existence of that, and raise questions. “The Uncanny Valley” (2012) is characterized by the boldness and flow of brushstrokes with an intense notion of physicality that the artist developed on the street, and by the use of vividly colored fluorescent paint. The finished paintings are then replicated by the high-precision giclee printing technique. Through the images that emerge as results of this repeated process, HouxoQue examines what the human act of seeing is all about, and presents an updated take on the subject of invisibility and semblance in painting.

Akihiko Sugita

I’m paying attention to the tactile sensation acquired through the act of applying lacquer, including application in multiple layers, and traces of such processes

In his daily work as a lacquer artist creating mainly vessels and other daily life articles, Akihiko Sugita has been sensing beauty in universal aspects in history and culture, and in things that have been handed down among humans, and considers the work with lacquer that necessarily involves cooperation with others as an open creative process. In the two-dimensional works shown in this exhibition that were created based on the same kind of awareness, the aspect of sensual judgment in the act of applying lacquer especially stands out. In these works created by applying lacquer in ten-odd layers, Sugita attempts to project notions of expansivity and diversity through the qualitative characteristics of black lacquer, which changes its appearance depending on the light. This can be interpreted as a general consideration about the generation of images, about variability, and about currency.

Yosuke Nakagawa

Mechanisms like the beat of the heart are what motivates me to work out my programs.

“CRAMPS” is a work in which Yosuke Nakagawa adds by way of programming noise-like visual and acoustic effects to his previously filmed video footage. The photographs titled “cramps Flatness” (#1-#6) show images extracted from the single frames of the movie that the eye does not recognize but that do exist. The title “CRAMPS” reflects the artist’s interpretation of André Breton’s quote, “Beauty will be convulsive or not at all.” As a documentarist who observes the world through the finder of his camera at the various locations of his shootings, Nakagawa does assimilate the temporal and spatial physical limitations that apply when traveling and editing footage frame by frame, but at the same time, his works reflect his somewhat defiant attitude and will to motivate himself to creative work.

When Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948) had his first one-man exhibition in Berlin in 1919, a piece of paper in one of his collage works inspired him to use the word “Merz” – in this case a fragment of the term “commerz (commercial)” – as a collective name for his art. “Merz” thus has no meaning by itself, which Schwitters thought appropriate for expressing his position as an artist.

Merbilder [Merz pictures] are abstract works of art. The word Merz denotes essentially the combination of all conceivable materials for artistic purposes, and technically the principle of equal evaluation of the individual materials. Merzmalerei [Merz-painting] makes use not only of paint and canvas, brush and palette, but of all materials perceptible to the eye and of all required implements. Moreover, it is unimportant whether or not the material was already formed for some purpose or other... The artist creates through the choice, distribution and metamorphosis of his materials. (5)

After the defeat of World War I in 1918, and against the backdrop of political, economical and social ruin in the Weimar Republic that was established following the collapse of the Second Reich, life in early 20th century Germany was dominated by fear and confusion. However Schwitters saw in this state of chaos and destruction a glimpse of inevitable creativity, as expressed in his retrospective comment, “I felt myself freed and had to shout my jubilation out to the world.” (6)

... everything had broken down in any case and new things had to be made out of the fragments: and this is Merz. It was like an image of the revolution within me, not as it was, but as it should have been. (7)

Having been refused to join the Berlin Dada movement, Schwitters continued to work in the realms of painting (Merzmalerei), architecture (Merzbau) and publication (Merz magazine), dedicating himself for the rest of his life to art in the name of “Merz”. Berlin Dada was emphasizing and encouraging political activities and attitudes breaking with traditions and negating established values and systems since the defeat of World War I, whereas Schwitters in his solitary “Merz” activities absorbed pieces of everyday life and the political/social situation at the time, incorporating the credo of Romanticism, characteristics of Expressionism, and a variety of other existing styles. As art historian Dorothea Dietrich pointed out in her claim that “Schwitters’ s works bears testimony to the survival of tradition within avant-garde innovation,” (8) “Merz” was an artistic concept and practice formulating new (artificial) language and creativity out of fragments of existing things, while at once acknowledging the succession of tradition.

This exhibition is inspired by this history of “Merz” art. The artists featured here examine the stereotype ideas and values of the society they are living in while being part of it and regulated by its systems. They grasp and confront the materials, techniques and aesthetic values that have been handed down throughout history and cultural history, and treat them on a level with present-day phenomena, concepts and values, as they use their eyes and bodies to project images through their individually acquired skills. Like Schwitters, who took “Merz” as a part of something existing, and created from it a whole new term and art form that would define his unusual practice, these artists find inspiration for their work in fragments. Against the backdrop of today’ s information society where face-to-face communication or immediate physical perception is increasingly unnecessary, these artists seem to share a certain eye, a particular judgment and consciousness that directs their physical actions. That eye never fails to determine the moment of transcendence that occurs inside them. This is how art comes into being.

They (minor histories) must find their way into history via forms that already exist. (9)

Mike Kelley and Tony Oursler’ s joint “The Poetics Project” is a record of their activities with the band “The Poetics” that both played in during their time at the California Institute of the Arts between the late 1970s and early ‘80s. The project was realized in 1997, about 15 years after the event, mainly in the form of a multi-media installation, CD box set, and a Xerox fanzine-style book, and was eventually showcased at Documenta 10 and at the Watari-um, The Watari Museum of Contemporary Art. On the example of The Poetics, Kelley focuses on the “specific visual terms” and “formal conditions” for the construction of minor histories of particular subjects that “have yet found no need to be written,” which he calls “an examination of how a history is constructed” in his foreword in the exhibition’ s catalogue.⁽¹⁰⁾ According to the nature of this project based on musical elements, and the trends of its time, Kelley refers to punk as one of those minor histories, and closes his foreword by suggesting that the historicisation of punk was “a war for the control of meaning, a war that one can still fully participate in. This history is not yet etched in stone.”

An exhibition is not about “giving meaning” or “historicisation”, but it presents a “visual condition”. Furthermore, an exhibition means being in the state of becoming. On the other hand, verbalization is, in Kelley’ s own words, nothing but things being “colored by hindsight.” However just like in the case of “The Poetics Project”, I wrote this text for the “MERZ” show in the hope that it may help communicate to some extent the point of this exhibition.

Chieko Kitade
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Note.

1. Unless specified otherwise, the quotes that precede each introductory text are extracts from the author’ s conversations with the respective artists.
2. From the author’ s conversation with the artist in December 2016.
3. Bunshichi Kaihatsu, Kaihatsu Bunshichi II Works: Ka Ka Ka (Fire, Possibility, Flowers, Kasugayama-gama, 1997, p.47
4. From the author’ s conversation with the artist in February 2017.
5. Dorothea Dietrich, The Collages of Kurt Schwitters: Tradition and Innovation, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.17
Originally in Kurt Schwitters, “Merzmalerei,” 1919, in ed. Friedhelm Lach, vol. 5, DuMont, Köln, 1981, p.37; Translated by John Elderfield (Thames and Hudson, London, 1985, pp.50-1)
6. Op. cit., p.6
Originally published in Kurt Schwitters “Kurt Schwitters,” 1930, in ed. Friedhelm Lach, vol. 5, DuMont, Köln, 1981, p. 335. Translated by Werner Schmalenbach (Thames and Hudson, London, 1967, p.32)
7. Op. cit., p.7
8. Op. cit., p.19
9. Mike Kelley, Introduction in the catalogue for “Tony Oursler/Mike Kelley: Poetics”, On Sundays, 1997, p.3
10. Op. cit., pp.3-9

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