

## Visually Versed Poetry – Transformation of Perspectives

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For those who enter Natsuki Oshiro's exhibition space, where paintings and objects are shown along with painted gallery walls as part of her works, the experience may feel like a walk inside a landscape. In fact, Oshiro's creative process is closely linked to landscapes and emotions of a specific person who has witnessed it. However, this fact may not be simply revealed from the abstract artworks in pastel hues which may be far from those found in nature. Oshiro's works are crystallization of numerous layered *mitate* or metaphors arising from transformation of perspectives, originating in traditional *waka* and other forms of poetry—that is to say, sceneries woven together with words. Oshiro explains her artistic attempt is to visualize the sceneries found in literature and to develop it.

Upon her creative process, Oshiro reads poems and explores movements and sense of space found in their details such as the order of words, transition of scenes (in *waka*, this usually occurs between the former part and the latter part) and the described landscapes and emotions. Then she abstracts them and draws imaginary solid figures based on them. In addition to the literary scenes and rhythm, she considers the poem's context and the poet's background and abstracts them as well to create a patterned drawing. Also, symbolic motifs of the poem are figuratively and repetitively drawn like a wrapping paper design by using printing machine and laser engraving. Her initial piece consists of several elements created from this process, abstract yet original in ways of reproducing and metaphorizing the poems.

The piece makes further development as the artistic process continues. From this phase, her works begin to focus more on visual features by extracting details from the initial piece then change its color and shape, or change its composition to displace the metaphorization. At times, she reexamines the poem to search for new structures while working from one piece to another in response to the prior as she goes back and forth between the world of poetry and the works to develop them in a complex manner. The final series of works, which may number five or six, can be described as a visual *renga*, or linked-verse poetry by a single artist.

Let's take a look at the works in detail. "The moon was tilted" series is based on the following *waka* by Kakinomoto no Hitomaro.

*In the eastern field I saw the light before sunrise.*

*Looking back, the moon was still in the western sky, about to set.*

The piece is rhythmically composed by color plane which seems to be a glowing light of the dawn and a silhouette of an arcing moon, as if it expresses the movement of someone turning back. Meanwhile, I would like to regard the context of the poem and the background of the poet. It is a renowned fact that this *waka* by Kakinomoto not only portrays the actual landscape but overlaps social affairs back then, too. The poem is said to have been composed by Kakinomoto, a court poet who accompanied Prince Karu or the later Emperor Monmu. It metaphorizes Karu's late father Prince Kusakabe as the setting moon, and young Karu as the rising sun, to praise and pray for the glorious reign. The magnificence of those in power is likened to the cosmic scale of the sun and moon while the passage of time is likened to the celestial cycle. Again, I would like to make remarks of the patterns depicted in the artwork. The laser-engraved motifs are traditional Japanese literary combination which also appears in the *Man'yōshū*, such as tachibana orange and lesser cuckoo, bush clover and deer—each are symbols of seasons, the former of summer, the latter of autumn. By coinciding different seasons on a single surface, the piece may be perceived as a metaphor for the passage of time as reigns change, and a simultaneous view of the sun and moon representing day and night.

Lastly, it is necessary to explain why Oshiro deals with literature, classical poetry in particular, as her artistic subject. Oshiro's answer to this question is clear enough—she says her interest lies in what moved the people at the times of *Man'yō*, more than a thousand years ago. Thus, "seeing" the scenes from that time through words alone, as no images of the exact moment exist, expand imaginations of people today. The moon we see tonight after enjoying a *waka* about the moon might look different from the one we saw last night. Through her artistic practice Oshiro pursues to appreciate and express the process of restoring delight into contemporary life—when we are rarely aware to even look at landscapes whether it be nature or urban—and conveys this to the viewers. *Mitate* or metaphor is the act to shift one's perspectives, reobserve a subject, and to interpret it. The perspective of others that we learn through literature, whether it be ancient Japan or foreign, gives us a new perspective on our daily lives. What Oshiro's work shows us is the continuous transformation of perspectives, and perhaps the day-to-day contentment that they bring.