

Existence—The Sculptures of Masa’aki Maruyama

The sculptures of Masa’aki Maruyama possess an innate gravity-like force that draws the viewer in. Among the pieces on display at this exhibition, I look at a bronze sculpture, which, at first glance, is a cuboid. My gaze, captured by this moderate size sculpture, moves across its surface discovering its organic, soft aspects. The structure comprises surfaces with slight slants and rises, seemingly defying gravity at times. The lines that create the surfaces quietly define the totality of the sculpture. Many of the pieces on display are bronze sculptures with this kind of geometric form, and constitute Maruyama’s main work produced since 2000. The sculptures, with their grooves, dimples, gradations that imply slight variances, bent cylinders and numerous other morphological features appearing ostensibly intrinsic to the work, produce the relation between the sculpture and the space that surrounds it. Maruyama has created form-specific human sculptures, in the past, however, in pursuit of the essence of existence, he simplified their form. With his semiabstract *Suwaru onna* (seated woman), which is different in nature from his other works, the areas of the body have been reduced to their geometrical forms and reconstituted. This work is a transitional work from the concrete to the abstract and evokes the organic and soft surfaces of his cuboid work—it is like a cocoon incubating his later work. Moreover, his flat work is also on display at this exhibition. With flat work, one might imagine a sculptor creating a rough sketch to conceive of a 3D work; however, Maruyama creates these with thought given to the mode of expression for the medium being used (paper in the case of this exhibited work). He draws mainly with Indian ink, and the smudges, blurs, shading and blank space born of the relationship with the paper are placed deliberately, producing a rich pictorial space. The surfaces of the sculptures are marked with scars, colour changes, depressions and protrusions, and traces of his hands, revealing a complex form seemingly trapped in time. Considering that this is a form of expression in a bronze medium, in terms of surface character, both his flat work and sculptures are independent works existing on the same level.

Masa’aki Maruyama was born 1952 in Toyoshina town, Nagano Prefecture (present day Azumino city), and studied under Churyo Sato in sculpture at Tokyo Zokei University. After being imprisoned in Siberia, Professor Sato returned to Japan and later created *Gunma no hito* (Gunma man), an image of an earnest yet rough townsman. During his harsh life in captivity, it’s told that he developed a visceral understanding that the only people he could truly rely on were the regular people. (1) This was to be the first Japanese face sculpted by a Japanese national. Maruyama threw off his mode of expression and travelled to Italy in search of a new way. During his four years studying at Accademia Belle Arti Brera in Milan, compelled by a need to re-examine Japanese culture, he took up the subject of Noh for his graduation thesis. He still maintains that, “the method of expression in Noh, as a very basic theme, imposes restrictions on the actions of the players through a double-layer of constraint (male actors play the role of an elegant female by performing in stiff Noh costumes), and they must use a form of expression that extracts the essence of the role in a simple way. Moreover, the actors on stage must be kept to a minimum, with the presence of the lead actor strongly projected, while, at the same time, the space vividly portrayed.” (2) He refers to this as being linked to the mode of expression of sculpture. Maruyama’s reconsideration of Japanese culture in Italy serving as the crux

of his current work neatly overlaps with Sato's re-discovery of the Japanese persona. Sculpture, Sato said, "is the interplay of action and reaction on a fine form." (3) Sculpture applies force to the earth, and the earth returns an equal amount of force back; this connects to Maruyama's understanding of how sculpture *emerges*. He continues: "When, in contradistinction to the basic axis or direction of force expressed by a sculpture, an opposing or different axis or direction is visible, then the work maintains a subtle balance, and it's there that its beauty becomes perceived." (4) This delicate balance is also visible in Maruyama's work, the essential commonalities can be found by transcending the differences with Sato's mode of expression. Maruyama entered group exhibitions in Milan during his time at Accademia Belle Arti Brera, and, after graduating, held individual exhibits at an Italian city museum of art and a city gallery in Germany. He subsequently spent eight years in Stuttgart, Germany, and displayed in numerous exhibitions there. Irmtraud Schaarschmidt-Richter, the art critic, pointed out that Maruyama pursued the essence of the Japanese arts even while he was influenced by the European arts: "Japanese culture from a Western perspective is completely alien, and their priorities are entirely distinct. One can see the atmosphere and emotions evoked, as well as the balance of form and surface, and the features of the honed sensitivity that goes into these; yet, a balance born of the tense relationship between these forces is maintained. This balance is also a spiritual expression. This is the true unchanging essence of the arts in East Asia and Japan, even in the contemporary era." (5) His work is not to be seen as conflicting with the receiving of Eastern and Western culture, but rather as an approach to create after a merging of two opposites.

Maruyama began exhibiting his work in 1975, with this year marking his 45th; during this time, he has created his work travelling back and forth between Europe and Japan. The half century of Maruyama's artistic work will have spanned the fifty years between the World's Fair exposition in Japan in 1970 and its scheduled next exposition in Japan in 2025. Maruyama has observed, in parallel to his work as an artist, the various societal problems brought about through the growth and maturation of the economy symbolized by these two World's Fairs. And now, in 2020, we have seen the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Society has been upended, and the future remains uncertain. Maruyama queries the need for the individual to approach society. What is it that we ought to do? If I were to choose a punctuated moment in the half-century long career of this artist, it could be right now with this exhibition, in its position to cast light on the next five years of uncertainty. Something is certain to change, and there are some things that certainly never change. The gravitational force of Maruyama's sculptures draw us close, as they make quiet queries into human existence.

Nakajima Minoru, Curator Koumi-Machi Kougen Museum of Art
Translation Japanese-English by Adam Goodwin

(1), (3), (4) Okuta, Shiro; Michika, Yoko (eds.) (2003). *Chokoku no <Shokumin> Sato Churyo Shajitsu no Jinsei o Kataru* (Churyo Sato, the Sculpture Craftsman: Recounting a Life of Realism). Kusanone Shuppankai.

(2) Pictorial Catalog (2019). *Shinbizumu 3- Shinshu Myuujiamu Nettowaaku ga Eranda Sakkatachi Ten.* (Shinbism 3-Exhibition of Authors Selected by the Shinshu Museum Network).

(5) Pictorial Catalog (2003). *Maruyama Masaaki Sonzai=Kankei* (Masa'aki Maruyama Existence=Relationship).

