

Chiyu Uemae: Focus on Touch

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In 1956 and 1957, I was in Paris, living in the Japan Center in a college town. Hisao Domoto and Toshimitsu Imai were staying in the same lodgings, and through them I became acquainted with the Informel art movement. I was overwhelmed by how these artists ignored existing forms and created forceful works by hurling fresh paint on the canvas. Gradually I found myself becoming captivated by this movement.

In those days, avant-garde artists in Paris and other places throughout the world were struggling in the same manner, seeking to create pictures with a life force. Prominent examples included the Pacific School in the U.S., Cobra in Northern Europe and the Gutai Art Association in Japan. Estene referred to these new movements as Tachism. Tachism is a method of creating a picture using intuitive, spontaneous brush strokes to create tache (spots), with a deliberate lack of concern for composition. In this way, the creative process returns to the movement of the human body.

Tachism began as an attempt to break through the impasse faced by modern art and achieved its full flowering in the activities of the Gutai Art Association. Gutai artists held experimental exhibitions one after another, outdoors and on stages; in the words of Alain Cabreau, many events held by Gutai were world firsts. Gutai exhibitions were held yearly not only in Japan but in the United States and Europe as well.

In the Gutai Art Declaration, Jiro Yoshihara says the following:

"In Gutai art, the human spirit and the material shake hands while remaining in opposition. The material is not assimilated by the human spirit. The human spirit does not force the material to be subordinated. The material remains a material that begins to tell its story as its essence is revealed, at times even shouting at the top of its lungs. Giving full life to the material is a way of giving life to the human spirit." (Geijutsu Shincho, December 1956)

He also says:

"We are violently opposed to work such as the so-called 'modernism'. We want tasks that are more forceful, more assertive. We feel that what is most important is not the result but the process of leaving one's mark on the material." (ibid)

Not the spirit but the material, not the subject but the object. In line with this kind of realism, Sadamasa Motonaga hurled paint against the canvas. Kazuo Shiraga painted with his foot. Shozo Shimamoto threw paint-filled bottles at the canvas.

But Chiyu Uemae was different. Starting from about 1954, he began using a pallet knife to create tiny fragments of oil paint and produce paintings of microscopic detail. Moreover, the work that went into creating these works was extremely elaborate. "He would paint dots of paint, creating layer after layer, one on top of the other. He painted dots of red paint and then dots of yellow paint so the bottom color disappeared. To the conventional way of thinking, this would appear to be wasted effort. But Uemae would paint layer upon layer of dots, one on top of another. The layers below cannot be seen, but these works communicate with a completely different forcefulness from those that are more straightforward." ("Uahaha Gutai 3 - Chiyu Uemae" by Shozo Shimamoto, in *Mishyo*, March 1984)

As a result, this type of Uemae's work is the so-called "auto-part" (thick painting). It is extremely practical, emphasizing the creation of an object rather than the expression of a concept. Thus Uemae, who thought of painting not as something to be calmly viewed but as a life-force to be expressed, aimed for the tactile rather than the visual, for object rather than concept. This is in agreement with the view of Jiro Yoshihara expressed above.

In 1956, when Uemae considered leaving the Gutai Art Association, he received the following letter from Yoshihara.

"Are you all right? Suddenly you stopped coming, so I'm a little worried. How is the piece for the second Tokyo exhibition? You shouldn't feel that you have to change your style all of a sudden. It would be best if you didn't do something like you did for the Ashiya exhibition. I think your usual oil painting like that looks like scraps of string that you've been doing for a long time would be fine. People can't change that easily, and I don't think there's any reason for you to do so.

"Or have you decided to quit Gutai? If that's the case, then it can't be helped. But you should know that you're the only one who doesn't have opposition from anyone. If you must leave, please tell me the reason. We plan to make the second exhibition a good one, so we've been

counting on you to do your best and submit a good piece. So that's why I'm writing this letter." In this letter can be seen Yoshihara's high regard for Uemae's work.

And, in fact, Uemae's works were highly regarded by Michel Tapié, who introduced the Gutai group overseas. Of the Chiyu Uemae solo exhibition held in 1966, Yoshihara writes the following:

"...Chiyu Uemae is one of the oldest members of the Gutai group. His style of painting has remained remarkably consistent and on-track. Yet he has not simply continued in his own style. Time and again, in his own unique way, he has known the pain of artistic growth and, each time, his work has increased in depth. I recall that, at the World Exhibition of New Art held by the Gutai group, Michel Tapié singled out Chiyu Uemae's work as one of the most important. Without going to excess, Uemae continues to move sure-footedly, step by step, along his own path."

In this way, Uemae continued to seek clear evidence of the material. Finally he departed from conventional painting materials, discovering new materials such as match sticks and string and cloth and creating new works with these materials, from that point making no distinction between vigorous painting and sculpture.

Uemae began creating works with match sticks in 1960, but the tenacious process of creating [these works] is an extension of his previous pointillist oil paintings. Referring once more to Shozo Shimamoto's writings: "Among his more unusual works are those made using match sticks. They have the same feel, but he applied paint to the tips of the wooden match sticks and fastened them together one by one. The total weight of the match sticks alone that were used for a single work was about 60 kilograms, so it must have taken an enormous amount of effort, using the same method that he used to whittle away the mountain in Maiko. [Author's note: when Uemae leveled the land in the mountains to build his home, he had no money. Therefore, even to remove one tree stump, which would have been done almost instantly by a bulldozer, took him an entire day. It took seven years to build the house.] The work was so heavy that the plywood he used in place of canvas could not support its weight, so he nailed wood to the back for a truly elaborate backing resembling parquetry." (Shimamoto, op. cit.)

The Gutai Art Association was known for comrade-like unity centered around its leader, Jiro Yoshihara. However, Yoshihara himself essentially was more partial to action than debate, so the theorist members quit one after another. Yet they often had furious debates on new

arts. Once in 1956, when not a debate so much as a furious shouting match had occurred and an awkward mood had settled over the group, Uemae suddenly let loose a casual fart. This delighted everyone, and for some time thereafter the phrase "Gutai means to let one loose" was popular. This episode is actually quite meaningful; the view that art is catharsis has been passed down since the time of the ancient Greeks, and many such cathartic elements are present in the works of the Gutai group.

Starting around 1976, Uemae began unveiling works created through stitching. These were made by carefully sewing threads one by one into cloth. Uemae called this "wave-stitching," but of course this word is not listed in any dictionary. Uemae experienced this stitching during an apprenticeship when he was a boy. As he puts it: "It started when man first learned to walk erect; in the beginning, he wore things made of fibers to preen himself. Or at least that's how I imagine it. During medieval times, warriors wore flashy armor that resembled the clothing used to dress the bodies of the dead. And in the palaces, the ladies of the court wore gorgeous ceremonial robes. All of these were created through the process of stitching. In my case, I began by being moved by the tenacity of people who patch work clothes that allows them, no matter how poor they are, to live." (September 20, 1993)

In his paintings up to that time, even when there was a distinction between the outside subject and the inner concept, he always used the material as a means of expressing this. However, in Uemae's stitched works, the natural subject had shed any ideas, concepts or other inner elements from the outset, so what was expressed was the cloth and the thread themselves. In other words, the cloth and thread complete each other, with no other objects or ideas that support them, and so they are not a means but an end. Thus Uemae worked hard at stitching as if he were patching work clothes. If we follow the words of Jiro Yoshihara noted earlier, what was important to Uemae was "not the result but the process of leaving one's mark in the material."

In paintings that express a natural subject and an inner concept, the form is emphasized, but if one sticks too closely to form, any living content tends to be shut out from the work. Uemae resisted this kind of painting that emphasized form, preferring material rather than spirit, pathos rather than logos. He emphasized the material and expanded his materials from paints to match sticks to cloth and thread, striving to create new works.

In the conventional intellectual view of art, forms that emphasized not "object" but "content" were considered to be the most important, so the senses were also apt to be viewed from an

intellectual perspective, and the fact that the senses have a pathos-like realism tended to be discounted. As a result, the visual, the sense like pure consciousness, was emphasized, while the down-to-earth sense of touch was de-emphasized. Yet the sense of touch is one of life; while the visual experience is wide, the tactile experience is deep. As Uemae puts it: "Even a single piece of pottery has a real tactile presence, a wordless message to the present day that touches our hearts." (Letter of invitation to private exhibition, 1992) This is the reason that, in the original German, the verb tasten (to touch) is synonymous with fühlen (to feel), and Tastsinn (sense of touch) was used in the same meaning as Gefühl (emotion). Uemae, who resisted the enlightened world view that says that all world views should be embraced, emphasized the vital and realistic tactile over the enlightened and pure consciousness of the visual, and so inevitably he favored the material.

From the outset, Uemae did not confine himself to stitching flat surfaces. Even after that, he changed to oil paints, to three-dimensional works of wood with the bark left on, to three-dimensional works of stitching, and starting around 1992 he began creating oil paintings with a large number of quadrilaterals arranged on the canvas.

Yet, amazingly, the feel of all of these works has remained constant. This is because he was not searching for a sense of rapture, nor was he striving for a balance between an inner vision and an outer material. Rather, he was striving to strip away a specific meaning covering the material from the outside in order to show the bare material itself, and by doing so create a concrete "object."

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