

Toward Tactile Immediacy

Shigenobu Kimura

A painting by Chiyu Uemae was used on the cover of the September 27, 1964 issue of Asahi Journal. Concerning this, he wrote:

“Since before history, human beings have lifted their eyes to the stars. Even now, when I behold that boundless field drawn in scattered points of light, the affairs of human society fall away, and I find myself wrapped in a quiet, graceful stillness.

Large drops of rain begin to fall, one by one, pricking dots across the black tin roof rising from the dry earth. Soon, the dimming air is filled with tens of thousands of translucent lines. Then a sudden gust drives them slantwise; the lines thicken into torrents, bursting into spray as they strike the roof. Each drop resounds like several machine guns fired at once, drumming fiercely against the metal sheets. At last the wind and rain subside, and the evening sun breaks through. When I step outside, the road is strewn with gravel of every size, their small faces peering up to catch at my feet. From the dense leaves of low trees, droplets spill and gleam like gold, falling into the shadowed tanks of a goldfish shop. A few among the cluster of red dots covering the water’s surface quiver, and their color grows all the more vivid.

No one had yet perceived the value of the dot. By turning away from literary elements, I began by placing a single dot.”

(“Words on the Cover,” Asahi Journal, September 27, 1964)

The scattered points of starlight, the pricking dots of rain, the stippled roof, the countless rain lines, the densely packed gravel, and the red dots of the goldfish described in this passage appear directly in Uemae’s pointillist paintings. His works are fundamentally based on patient hand labor built up over time. In these paintings, small fragments of oil paint are layered onto the canvas with a painting knife (Fig. 4, Work [Green, Yellow, Red, Pointillist], 1956). When yellow is layered over red, the color beneath seems to disappear and may appear wasteful; yet within the thickly painted surface, flame-like, indeterminate forms flicker.

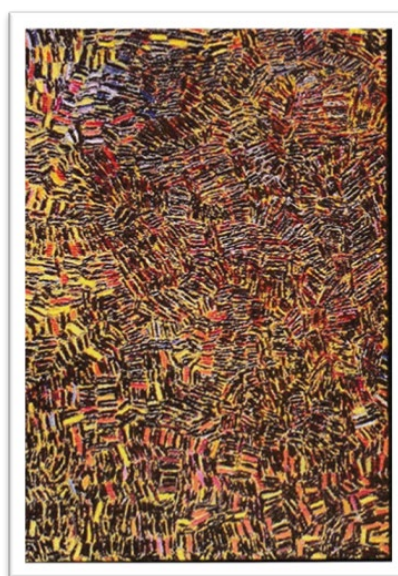


Fig. 4, Work [Green, Yellow, Red, Pointillist]

Around 1960, he began producing works using matchsticks (Fig. 5, Work [Gray, Matches], 1960). Paint was applied to the wooden shafts, which were then attached to the surface one by one. It is said that a single work required as much as fifteen “kan” of matchsticks (approximately 60 kilograms). Because of this extreme weight, the plywood panel used in place of canvas could not support it, so wooden reinforcements were fastened to the back, giving the work an appearance resembling marquetry. (Shimamoto Shōzō, “Wahaha Gutai 3 — Chiyu Uemae,” *Misho*, March 1974)



Fig. 5, Work [Gray, Matches]

From around 1976, Uemae began creating works through sewing (Fig. 6, NUI-stitching 43 [Yellow], 1990–91). This involved sewing thread into fabric stitch by stitch, with almost infinite minuteness. He called this nami-nui (“wave stitch”). He wrote:

“In my case, it began with being moved by the determination to live, even in poverty, expressed in the patched work clothes of field laborers.” (September 20, 1993)

He further explained:

“In works made through ‘sewing,’ for example, when a certain area is densely stitched with red thread on black cloth, the thread itself contains light and shadow, and through the tiny gaps between stitches, the black ground appears. The surface thus has subtle chromatic nuances. In my case, based on the experience mentioned earlier and on the idea that ‘oil paint and fiber are equally materials,’ I have refined this sewing into pure art.” (On the ‘Sewing’ Works, in *Contemporary Art: My Case*, 1988)



Fig. 6, NUI-stitching 43 [Yellow]

Uemae’s works embody an accumulation of almost unimaginable time and a powerful attachment to materials — oil paint, matchsticks, thread, fabric — in keeping with the fundamental philosophy of the Gutai Art Association.

Jirō Yoshihara wrote in the Gutai Art Manifesto:

“In Gutai Art, the human spirit and material shake hands while remaining in opposition. Material does not become subordinate to the spirit, nor does the spirit dominate material. When material remains material and reveals its characteristics, it begins to speak and even cry out. To give life to matter is to give life to the spirit.” (Geijutsu Shinchō, December 1956)

Where earlier painting treated material as a means of expressing either external objects or internal ideas, Uemae discards not only natural subjects but even inner concepts and designs. Material itself becomes expression. Material does not serve some hidden subject or idea — it completes itself. Thus, material is no longer a means but the work itself.

In painting that sought to represent natural subjects or inner ideas, form was given the highest priority. Yet an excessive attachment to form often forced artists to exclude the vital content of life from their works. It was in reaction to such form-centered painting that Uemae turned from form toward content, from logos toward pathos, and, through an emphasis on material and the expansion of its possibilities, moved toward the creation of a new kind of painting. For this reason, Uemae’s work increasingly takes on an object-centered character, leaning toward the formation of “things” rather than the depiction of “events.” The description of events is visual, whereas the formation of things is tactile. Touch apprehends the thing itself, while sight apprehends only the surface of the thing. In this way, touch is always tied to material as a sense of reality, while sight, passing through illusion, is tied to form. For Uemae, who regards painting not as an object for detached contemplation but as an expression of life, it is only natural to place greater emphasis on touch than on sight, and on “things” rather than “events.” As he says, “Even a single shard of pottery is something that exists tactilely and materially; it presses upon our hearts as a silent message from the present.” (Solo exhibition leaflet, 1992)

In traditional intellectualist views of art, form centered on “events” was treated as the primary issue, and sensation was often understood from an intellectual standpoint, while its pathos-filled and immediate reality was undervalued. As a result, a purely conscious, visual mode of perception was given undue emphasis. Yet touch, rather, is a sense of life. Visual experience may be broad, but tactile experience

is deep. In older German usage, *tasten* (to touch) was synonymous with *fühlen* (to feel), and *Tastsinn* (sense of touch) was used in the same sense as *Gefühl* (feeling). In other words, to feel was to touch, and feeling itself meant a tactile experience. Resisting a rationalistic worldview that attempts to subsume all ways of seeing within itself, Uemae places greater value on the sensuous and real experience of touch than on the intellectual and contemplative experience of sight, thus inclining toward material.

As a result of this pursuit of the evident reality of material, Uemae moved beyond oil paint to discover new materials such as matchsticks, thread, fabric, and sawdust, turning toward the formation of new objects. For him, therefore, conventional categories of abstraction and figuration hold no relevance; material alone serves as his foundation. He does not seek sensory intoxication, nor does he attempt to harmonize an inner vision with external matter. Instead, he strips away the specific meanings imposed upon material from the outside and, through material laid bare, advances toward the creation of “things.”

Viewed in the context of postwar international art, Uemae’s work can be seen as akin to all-over painting without a compositional framework, such as that of Jackson Pollock; to accumulation art of everyday objects, like that of Arman and Louise Nevelson; and even to the automatism of Surrealism. Consequently, a variety of elements swirl within Uemae’s work, making it difficult to situate within any single movement. Rather, it encompasses all of these tendencies.

After the flat “sewing” works mentioned earlier, he went on to produce black-wood sculptures and three-dimensional sewn pieces. From around 1992, he also began making oil paintings in which numerous rectangles are arranged across the surface. In addition, he devoted considerable effort to printmaking, which he had long pursued, creating densely structured spaces through a variety of patterns. This constant shedding of skin, transformation, and leap forward represents the true essence of Uemae as an avant-garde artist. Yet, remarkably, his distinctive qualities remain consistently intact throughout.

Excerpted from the latter section of “Two Avant-Garde Artists Born in Tango City” by art critic Shigenobu Kimura, published in the exhibition catalogue Tango Avant-Garde: Gentaro Komaki and Chiyu Uemae (issued September 26, 2014).