Voices from Artist to the World

Dream Project Series Interview

Nobuko WATABIKI No.8

Artist Nobuko Watabiki makes paintings of an individual texture in oil pastel on washi. In Germany, her work has developed into the expression using cloth.

In 2008, Nobuko Watabiki shifted her working base to Hamburg, Germany, as an overseas research fellow in art sent by Bunkacho (the Agency for Cultural Affairs). Since then, she lives and works there. Featuring a uniquely simplified figure in oil pastel on washi, her work has shown a new development in Germany. In addition to oil pastel work, Watabiki lately creates canvas work using old clothes. The change in material with her usual motif gives a subtle nuance to the expression of her work.

I have a strong belief that there's something art can do and so, art is necessary for us.

I thought I wanted to do possible job using washi and oil pastel. So, I brought oil pastel and washi from Japan. When I showed the materials to persons around me in Germany, they took great interest in them, firstly in washi. There's a museum of ethnology in Hamburg, and its first director is a great collector of Japanese Art. The museum takes pride in the enormous collection. So, people often have a chance to see the collection and know well about Japanese Art. But, the manner I tried of drawing in oil pastel on washi seemed to have been refreshing to their eyes. Drawing with the manner makes washi look slightly napped according to strokes. As with Japanese "Each day broke" panel, oil pastel on washi 60.0 x 40.0cm

"What have you done? 1" panel, oil pastel/sumi/watercolor on washi 20F

"I intend to do something new in the first year of staying in Germany. As usual, not straining myself.
Nobuko Watabiki was chosen as a participant in the exhibition "Women In-Between: Asian Women Artists 1984-2012," organized to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the foundation of Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts.

The exhibition, organized by curator Reiko Kokatsu of the museum, has significance because it has captured the very contemporary situation of society. Influenced by feminism spread in Asian countries from 1980s through 1990s, women artists made appearance in art scene and vividly developed their artistic activities. In this exhibition, the works by those artists were categorized into 5 chapters and were shown according to each thematic category: "women's body," "women and society," "women and history," "technique and material" and "women's life." Presented were about 110 artworks by 48 artists from 16 countries and areas, such as Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Vietnam, China, and Korea. Such an exhibition as investigating feminism through artworks with a broad viewpoint must have probably never been held before. Japanese artists include Hiroko Inoue, Chiharu Shioda, Kumi Machida, and Nobuko Watabiki.

"Artist Nobuko Watabiki had already appeared in the 1980s when women artists came to the forefront of the scene, but not a few artists among them left the scene. Since women artists can never avoid marriage, childbirth, etc., it's difficult for them to stay active as an artist with motivation. I selected Watabiki as an artist continuing to explore the forefront expression of contemporary art in 2000s. I think that the work by Watabiki, currently active in Germany, can apply to "diaspora" -- those who leave their birth place and continue to work in overseas -- categorized in the 2nd chapter," says curator Kokatsu concerning the choice of exhibits. Watabiki's works include "Expecting casually," a canvas work using cloth made in Germany.

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"Supporting ground and supporting sky"  
cloth, watercolor on canvas 166.5 x 165.5cm

-W: Early in my stay in Germany, I'd be always conscious of difference or similarity between German and Japanese people, but as I stayed there longer, I found we are both human beings, though there's difference between the two cultures -- everyone laughs or cries. In this way, I seem to have grown to be able to overlook things. But, in overseas, I'm still apt to be conscious that I'm Japanese in every moment from day to day. And, foreigners see me firstly as a Japanese, next as an individual. The message that I'm Japanese is more important for them. Walking on the streets, I'm recognized as an Asian rather than as an individual. Through things like that, I seem to have grown to be able to overlook myself in a bigger frame -- from myself based on private emotions to the other side, that is, to myself as a Japanese or an Asian or a stranger.

-I wonder if such change is reflected on your work?

W: I don't think it easy to overlook my work as if to see others' work, but, when I was told by a reliable friend of mine that your work has become more observable or obvious than before, I thought that my work seems to have become observable in a bigger frame away from things private. This might mean a success for me.

-By the way, following the great east Japanese earthquake on March 11, 2011, you started the postcard project.

W: That day, I happened to be in Takao, Tokyo.
The big earthquake was greatly shocking, and the disaster was as if it were a complete destruction of Japan. Two days later, I came back to Germany, and there I saw almost everyday tsunami pictures sent from Japan on TV. The pictures only made me struck dumb with surprise. Various people in Germany were kind enough to be anxious about me. And, I was interviewed for a newspaper on the earthquake. But, I was then wondering if I could have properly talked about things representing Japanese people. I became aware of difference between people not safe in Japan and people, like me, safe in Germany. Then, I thought about what to do anyway, and found that the best thing I should do was to do something about art -- a field where I've been long involved and where I can make the most of my ability. I couldn't help doing something using art. Thus I organized the project for collecting Japanese artists' direct voices for people in Germany, and one month later, I started to invite artworks in which they expressed their real emotion or thought right after the earthquake, and carried out the exhibition for people in Germany.

--I think you made a swift reaction and did the project.

W: Through the project, I had changes to talk with so many people in Germany, which brought me a significant understanding that there are totally different ways of thinking among people, though it took much time to complete the project.

--By the way, I hear that you are scheduled to develop several activities, including solo exhibition at city hall, Hamburg, and the installation project of your three-dimensional work at a park.

W: In addition to them, I'll have a joint production with the handicapped, which is one of things that I newly started in Germany. I now have a wish to work more in Germany.

--We hope to see the new three-dimensional work.

W: I hope the work to give me a challenge.