

Marginal Artist : EIJI OKUBO 1973-2024

July 13th – September 23rd ,2024
The Tokushima Modern Art Museum

Foreword

The Tokushima Modern Art Museum will be holding a special exhibition, " Marginal Artist : EIJI OKUBO 1973-2024."

Land Art is the term used to describe the creation of artworks that use the earth or nature as a stage instead of canvas, and materials such as branches, leaves, feathers, soil, stones, metal, and cloth instead of paint, as well as various other ingenious methods.

Eiji Okubo (1944-), one of Japan's leading land artists, has developed distinctive creative activities that make nature and walking as important elements. He is best known for his project (1998-99), in which he walked around Shikoku 88 temples pilgrimage and created many art works and the "Eurasia Art Project" (1999-2001), which took place in Japan and Korea.

However, this is not all about his art activities. This exhibition follows Okubo's footsteps with over 170 works, including drawings, paintings, objects, installations, collages, and prints, from his unknown early works that have rarely been exhibited to his new works. From the perspectives of "TIME", "NATURE", "HISTORY", and "SITE", this exhibition pursues the essence of Eiji Okubo's work over the past 50 years.

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to Eiji Okubo, who kindly exhibited his precious works, and to all those involved for their support and cooperation.

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1. Thoughts on the ancient times, history, and time

"To pursue art, I have to study history and culture*." Okubo has been working on his creative activity with this thought in mind since early days when he decided to become an artist. In many land art projects, including Shikoku 88 temples pilgrimage (1998-99), he has been deeply involved in the local area, based on his exploration of its history and culture, and has produced many works that are meaningful precisely because of the place.

Okubo's thoughts on the ancient times are also incorporated into the paintings he has been actively producing in recent years. "Gen-shitsu (Burial Chamber : Time of Gen)" expresses the deep atmosphere of uncertainty in time and space when entering the stone chamber of an ancient tomb where the coffin of the deceased is placed. It is a mysterious sensation in which front, back, left, right, up and down are unclear, as if covered in mist, and the flow of time is unclear. "Symbol of Gen" is a group of works inspired by primitive symbols that are said to have been painted in Ice Age Caves of Europe. Furthermore, "Ritual and Peaches" is a work that is inspired by the large number of peach seeds unearthed at the Makimuku ruins (Sakurai city, Nara prefecture). These peach seeds may have been used in rituals and influenced the Yamatai-koku controversy.

*Shinichi Tomoi ed. "The Chronological Record of Eiji Okubo"
Bulletin of The Tokushima Modern Art Museum No.18 2017. P.9.

2. Marginal Atmosphere

Since 2022, Okubo has had an atelier in Takatori Town, south of Asuka Village in Nara. Place names from all over Japan, such as Tosa, Satsuma, and Kibi remain in this area. These are remnants of the time when people from all over gathered and settled in Takatori to support Asuka, which was the center of Japanese politics and culture from the Kofun period to the Asuka period. Although Takatori is adjacent to Asuka, it was not in the center, but on the periphery that supported Asuka. Okubo focuses on the periphery away from the center in this way and considers it as a Marginal*. This leads to the awareness that Japan itself is the marginal area located at the geographical edge of Asia, and that in art, it is also on the marginal area with respect to Western modern art. What is the positive meaning of a marginal Man who is always conscious of the center and is confused by its influence? Okubo tries to approach this important questions of what art is, what Japanese is, and what history is as a Marginal Man.

The "Support" stands against the background of the Ichio-Hakayama Kofun in Takatori Town. It is displayed on a photo panel in the lobby. The large stone at the top center of the work is supported by the surrounding thin wooden logs. It symbolizes the relationship between the center and Marginal Man. The fact that it is located in Takatori is of great significance to this work. In this chapter " Marginal Atmosphere " there is an installation art made up of several object works using farm tools such as hoes, spades, and sickles that have been used in Takatori. These were left behind in the barn of an old private house that is now Okubo's atelier.

* Tatsuru Uchida. *Japan in the Periphery* Shinchosha 2009.

3. Early period: Trial and error, 1970s to early 1980s

Now, we will trace his work from his early period to the present, in chronological order. First of all, we look at his early works. After he graduated from Nippon Sport Science University, he taught at a school for disabled children and eventually became a self-taught artist. He started with representational painting and then moved on to abstract painting. And he continued to pursue fundamental questions such as "what a point is, what a line is, what a plene is", producing a large number of drawings and prints while continuing his trial and error process.

Works include endless lines of small squares, copperplate prints with a large number of freehand lines, woodblock prints made by repeatedly engraving with a chisel and printing in multiple colors, acrylic paintings in which layers of paint are created and then ground down to reveal the layers underneath, drawings in which envelopes are opened and filled with lines, or drawings made by rubbing pastels by hand. All of these contain the idea using only simple methods of expression reveals time and actions. During this period, he also participated in several public exhibitions and competitions, but many of his works were unpublished.

In the context of art history, these works fall under the category of Minimal Art, which reduces expressive elements to a bare minimum. There were many other artists creating works like this at the time, but Okubo, who was self-taught, was unaware of this at first. After learning about it, he became more conscious of his own individuality. His "Transcription" series, which was created using a unique transcription technique, was highly acclaimed and has been included in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum in the UK and the National Museum of Art, Osaka.

4. Land Art: Around 1982 to the 2000s

In 1981, Okubo left his teaching job to devote himself to being an artist. Around this time, he began to walk along the coast and create works with natural elements such as driftwoods, leaves, feathers, and stones. And he learned eventually that this kind of works of art is called Land Art.

At the time, Okubo left the following words:

“Stream of Nature. In the stream of nature things are born and return to the earth. At one moment in that ever repeating pattern, am I, linking one thing with another.: as if in one frame of a slow-moving video. As did the ancient people long ago, I want to express the strength of ordinary things around us in their natural state.*”

This became an important way of thinking for Okubo's Land Art. And he eventually began to attract attention in Europe, for example, an exhibition at the Orchard Gallery , Londonderry, Northern Ireland, in 1991.

Around 1990, "walking" has become an important factor. He has energetically walked many places, including Shikoku 88 temples pilgrimage (1998-99), the footsteps of predecessors such as MOKUJIKI (2005, 2007, 2015) and BASHO (2009), the mouth of the Yoshino River in Tokushima Prefecture (2013), from Osaka to his hometown Okayama (2014), the Five major roads in Awa (2015-16), and the suburbs of Daegu Metropolitan City, Korea (2016).

At first, he created many outdoor works using natural objects. But his recent walking works have become increasingly compact, and he has created artists books in the form of folding books and scrapbooks collaged with soil and photographs. His means of expression have become even more refined.

Many of Okubo's outdoor works, created with local materials, have already disappeared. This exhibition exhibits OBJET art such as ”Wave”and “Water drop”which made from paper clay made from newspapers and driftwoods painted black, ” Shadow Series” which shows time through naturally cast shadows, and “Memories of Water” which sees time, place and events in a large collection of disposable lighters washed up on the shore.

Works of art that relate to nature and the earth are sometimes viewed from the perspective of nature conservation and environmental issues, but this is not the case with Okubo. The basis of Okubo's work is the pursuit of fundamental questions common to his early works, such as "what point,line and plane are", "what vertical and horizontal are", "what time is " and "what site is"

* Eiji Okubo. *A WALKING MAN-OKUBO* 1990 年 Kodama Gallery pp.1-2

5. Playfulness and exploration, towards Re-Creation

From his early works through to his Land Art, Okubo's works give an ascetic impression, with carefully selected elements of expression. However, his natural face is surprisingly childlike, creating freely and carefreely as ideas come to him.

This is reflected in the many drawings he has accumulated from his early days to the present, even without the opportunity to exhibit them. He draws his favorite motifs over and over until he gets tired of them, and sometimes draws with non-dominant left hand. There are also works similar to his early works, such as drawings on open envelopes and transcriptions.

At first glance, these may seem like a repetition of the past, but there is a desire to Re-

Create, always seeking "Newness," such as re-examining the meaning of drawing on an envelope, practicing the idea of addition, where an accumulation of lines becomes a plane, verification the method of transcription using different materials and papers, and attempting to see if it is possible to draw without thinking about anything. This "Newness" for Okubo is connected to the haiku spirit of BASHO, whom Okubo greatly admires: "Newness is the flower of haiku." Okubo's driving force is his attitude and actions of pursuing "Newness" without losing his sense of playfulness and humor, and without ending it as just play.

6. Daily Walking: Collages 2010s-

Since around 2011, Okubo has been creating collages almost every day using objects he picks up during his daily walking. Day by day, he is currently creating more than 500 of these "Daily Walking" series in a year.

The "objects" he picks up while walking become objects themselves that are freed from the site, context, and meaning they were originally from. At that time, the objects lose their inherent characteristics and become nothing, and acquire a kind of universality and internationality that is common to all sites. Nevertheless, it seems that the objects he picks up are deeply imprinted with individuality and locality that cannot be severed from their site. This is because Okubo's walking goes beyond just walking and is deeply connected to the culture, people, history, and indigenouness of the site. Okubo's walking, objects, and collages teach us that universality can be found in the local, and that there is an internationality that can only be reached by starting from the local. The "Daily Walking" series, made from objects he found while walking, is the essence of Okubo, who has long been creating works that involve nature and the earth.

However, these collages tell us more than that. Okubo has long been creating difficult and silent works, far removed from the "fake images" that make them look real and the "original creations" pretending to be true art.

In comparison, if you look closely at these collages, you can feel the joy of tracing the image, the comfort of the composition, humor, and the delicacy and freshness of the works, and they are talkative. There you can catch a glimpse of the relaxed side of Okubo's natural face. Each of these collages, born every day from the rough and experienced hands of an athletic and self-taught artist, may be each cell that makes up the person that is Eiji Okubo. Here is the current state of Eiji Okubo, in progress.

Epilogue

In the spring of 1993, Okubo walked around Tsushima, a border island about 50 km from Busan. At an observation deck on a mountain pass at the northern end overlooking Korea, Okubo said: "The sea was hazy and I couldn't see Korea, but as I stared at the sea, I felt like I could see it, perhaps because of a feeling.*"

Can we see point and line that only exist conceptually? Can we see time, memory, history, culture, or even wind and sound? This romanticism of "trying to see the invisible and the ineffable" has runs through Eiji Okubo 's artistic career for 50 years.

* Eiji Okubo. *Tsushima: A Country Between Borders*, Kodama Gallery 1994 p.15