

Voices from Artist to the World

No.8

Nobuko WATABIKI



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.

--We hear that you continue to be active based in Hamburg, Germany, since 2008 when you stayed there for 1 year as an overseas research fellow in art sent by Bunkacho.

W (hereafter referred to as W): One year was over too soon. While I had to come back to Japan in spite of that I became acquainted with some people there, I got ambitious, feeling that I didn't want to miss chances to do something meaningful.

--So, you once came back home and soon returned to Hamburg. Are there some advantages for you in working overseas?

W: Nobody knows me in overseas, which is a new and interesting thing to me. That makes me feel that I possibly could work harder there once again. In Germany I'm as if I were all alone for life, but it's also a good chance to think over myself again. Those days I had much

time for working deep in concentration.

--Did your work also change in the new environment?

W: Yes. I expected to take a new challenge if living in Germany at all, not making the same old work. Europe is a place of canvas culture, so I tried to use canvas as a material.

--As a result, you made a work using cloth stitched on canvas.

W: I firstly intended to do oil painting on canvas, but as I thought that it would take much time to get a satisfactory result, I started to work using cloth in which I thought I could touch canvas while waiting for the result. Of course, I hope to create oil paintings that will make myself satisfied with in the future. I mean by work using cloth that German cloth is used in color areas of a picture. I got an idea of using old clothes that I got in Germany, and



"Each day broke" panel, oil pastel on washi 60.0 x 40.0cm

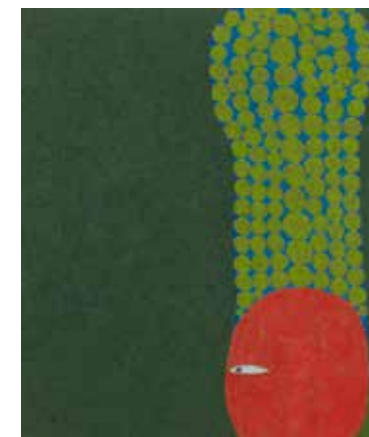
hoped that I could successfully incorporate cloth typically characteristic of Germany. The clothes is not necessarily old. Colors of T-shirt, for example, are extremely diverse. Seeing T-shirts of various colors make a line like color pencils at shop, I again got an idea that I could use those T-shirts for paints as German color. But, as T-shirts are used as a mere material, the essence of my work doesn't change so much. Always stitching simplified shapes of human figure's head or hand, I'd become to feel like drawing pictures in oil pastel on washi.

--Did you bring oil pastel and washi from Japan to Germany?

W: Yes. I didn't think that I must soon do something new in the first year of staying in Germany. As usual, not straining myself,

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



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



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

viewers, European people had a keen interest in that manner. In short, oil pastel is a Japanese color. Drawing with the material, I would often be told that the color has absolutely Japanese taste, which keenly interested viewers. The more I drew pictures in oil pastel in Europe, the more I realized once again that it has a taste of Japanese color. So, I consciously would try a combination of colors typically or unusually in Japanese or European taste, through which I think my work has gained in breadth.

-I'm afraid that drawing a large work in oil pastel, not with paintbrush, is very hard.

W: It takes much time. But, using oil pastel is fine in that drawing a picture moving my hand synchronizes more or less with thinking. I can even say that the both speeds are the same. On the other hand, I can quickly do stitching, but, luckily or unluckily, with closer look of stitches, I'd often find something a little bit wrong. In that case, I can correct it by cutting cloth as I want. But, this can't be applied to washi, so I work slow and carefully when using washi.

--Living in Germany, you've technically developed into a new phase. Did that make you change in how you see things?

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.

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.



View of Works by Nobuko Watabiki



View of the exhibition "Women In-Between: Asian Women Artists 1984-2012"

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.

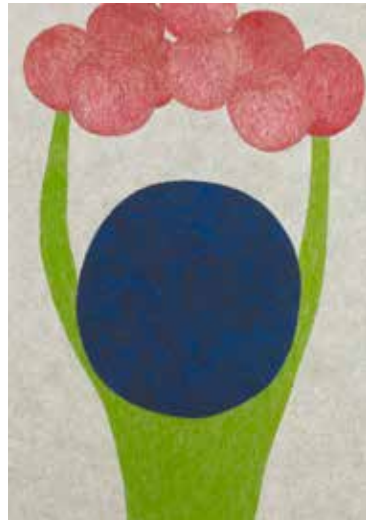


Reiko Kokatsu, curator of the exhibition

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: I had significant experiences through the project -- some people asked me, "What on earth can art do?" or "Can art change society?" As an artist having been active for long time, I have a strong belief that there's something art can do and so art is necessary for us, even at the time of the disaster. It's true that such a statement was variously criticized and people have different ways of thinking, but I only



"Raising hands at the height of hands," panel, oil pastel on washi 100.0 x 70.0cm

thought that I must do the project for bringing together Japanese artists' voices.

--I think that you've done something significant.

W: Through the project, I had chances 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.

Profile: Nobuko Watabiki
1958 born in Tokyo

2008 stayed in Hamburg, German, as a overseas research fellow in art sent by Bunkacho, and since then, lives and works there
2011 following the great east Japanese earthquake on March 11, started the project "TEGAMI -- Postcards from Japanese Artists" in Germany, for which more than 360 works by more than 250 artists were collected. Thereafter, has continued activities, including 1 year-long exhibition at Japan-German Center Berlin

Solo or group exhibitions:

- 1985 "The posture best adopted from my position," Gallery Hinoki, Tokyo
- 1986 "The 6th Art on Trial -- International Small Art Festival," Yamanashi Prefectural Museum of Art
- 1987 "The 4th Pusan Biennial," Pusan City Hall, Korea, and "Artist Network Expanded 1987," Fukuoka Prefectural Museum of Art
- 1991 "Kaze no Zokei Exhibition," Sumida Riverside Hall Gallery, Tokyo
- 1994 "Contemporary Images of Man -- 'Watashi' or Identity of Myself," Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art, Sapporo
- 1997 "Exhibition VOCA," Ueno Royal Museum, Tokyo, and "Exhortation to 'Watakushi' Art -- Why is 'Watakushi' being drawn?" Itabashi Art Museum, Tokyo
- 1998 "Exhibition VOCA," Ueno Royal Museum, Tokyo
- 1999 "A Thought in Conjunction with Noontime Meditation," Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts, and "A Prospect for Contemporary Nihonga Paintings," Tokyo Station Gallery
- 2003 "city-net asia 2003," Seoul Museum of Art, Korea
- 2005 "life actually -- Love, Solitude, and Laughter," Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, and "Various Viewpoints 146," Kawasaki IBM Citizen Cultural Gallery, Kanagawa
- 2007 "trauma-interrupted," CCP, Manila, Philippine, and "Exhibition of the 5th Anniversary of BTAP," BTAP Annex, Beijing, China
- 2009 "stadtindiane in Jenischpark," Hamburg, Germany, "FRISE," Artist's House, Hamburg, Germany, and "gAlerie!," organized by Galerie Der Zukunft, gymnasium Alle, Hamburg Germany
- 2010 galleria kioskin, Helsinki, Finland, "Velada Santa Lucia 2010," Santa Lucia Maracaibo, Buenos Aires, "Innocence -- Art towards Life," Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts. RuArts Gallery, Moscow, Russia
- 2011 "Every man has its own shape," MOB museum of alternative art, Tochigi. Museum of Contemporary Art, Florencio de la Fuente, Spain
- 2012 "DOMANI," National Art Center, Tokyo
- 2013 "Women In-Between: Asian Women Artists 1984-2012," Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Okinawa Prefectural Museum, Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts, and Mie Prefectural Museum of Art. Hamburg City Hall and Hamburger Rathaus

Apr.17-23

"A Heart in Palm -- Paintings by Nobuko Watabiki," Art Gallery at 10th floor, main branch of Odakyu Department Store, Shinjuku, Tokyo

May 15-June 3

"Works by Nobuko Watabiki," 1st Floor of Karuizawa New Art Museum, Nagano



Artists at "A-UN"

"A-UN," Feb.8-Mar.31 at the 1st floor at Karuizawa New Art Museum

"A-UN," an exhibition of 18 artists, such as Masataka Ohyabu, Toshio Arimoto, Kei Shibusawa, and Masaaki Miyasako, was held at Karuizawa New Art Museum from Feb.8, 2013. In the afternoon on March 2, some of the artists who exhibited there gathered at the museum. "A-UN" is originally a group show voluntarily organized by the artists who studied with Masataka Ohyabu of design division, Tokyo National University of Arts. The exhibition aims at open operation by the artists on a basis of equality, an idea proposed by Masataka Ohyabu: "Artists are all equal regardless of one's senior or junior to someone." Ohyabu's proposal seems to reflect current art scene facing bottled-up feeling in the rigid social situation that clings to whether one is senior or junior to someone. We hear that the artists at "A-UN" will flexibly organize various exhibitions, based on a principle that they should all work hard together.