

Overview

Katsura Funakoshi

A Plank in Venice

Katsura Funakoshi, who was born in Iwate, Japan, in 1951, was one of three artists representing his country in the 1988 Venice Biennale. Critic Tadayasu Sakai, who was in the Japan Pavilion when the show was being installed, later recalled "a startling and thought-provoking" incident: "Suddenly there was Katsura Funakoshi, dragging into the hall a dirty plank, smeared with coal tar and oil. Wondering what had come over the man, we watched as he installed it, of all places, under his sculpture, *Slanting Cloud!* ...I had thought artists mostly created each individual work with such loving care and became so attached to each one that they took little interest in how it would be displayed. This notion was banished in a moment by Funakoshi's inspired contrivance."

Here is Funakoshi's account of the same incident: "We were still in the process of setting up the exhibit in the Japan pavilion when I went over to have a look at the British pavilion. It was completely ready—

there was only one artist involved, Tony Cragg. Excited by the quality of his works and the effective way they were displayed, and overwhelmed by the immense gap between that exhibit and my own humble contribution, I trudged back to the Japan pavilion.

"I was so bowled over by what I had seen that for quite awhile I could not bring myself to get on with the preparation of my pieces for display. I realized that I couldn't just line up the pieces I had made and let them speak for them-

selves—it wasn't enough. Then I remembered a plank that had been left at the stairs near the entrance to the Japan pavilion, and my mind kept going back to it.

"At first, I didn't connect the plank to anything. It was simply something that had entered my field of vision and left an impression on my mind. Still, from the time I noticed it, I thought, 'that might be useful, you know.' After passing it by several times, I finally decided to bring it into the exhibition hall. It was about 2 meters long, 40 centimeters wide, and rather dirty, with leaves clinging to it. I put the plank in my display area.

"Once before, I had arranged three pieces on a table made of old timber, so I tentatively put the sculpture of the man in the white shirt on the plank where it lay on the floor. It seemed that the space occupied by the work subtly changed as a result, so I thought, 'this might lead to something.'

"My seven pieces were already in place, their positions fairly well determined. But the overall effect was not right. I put the plank

on the stand for the man in the white shirt, and with a feeling half of expectation, half of apprehension, placed the statue on the plank. I tried not to look at it again as I backed off, and then raised my eyes. The whole space had been transformed in that brief moment. The man in the white shirt, finally settled on the plank, sat nearly at the center of the exhibit, and it provided a pivot for the seven pieces. The plank had made the exhibit whole, and then I knew it was ready.



Katsura Funakoshi, 1993

"In my journal that day I wrote: ...I don't think I could say with complete accuracy that I discovered the plank. Thinking back, I distinctly recall it seeming to shine out at me as it lay on the floor at the side of the entrance. It really appeared to me that the board was emitting light."

I've quoted this passage almost in its entirety because it describes something about creativity. A creative sequence for an artist often begins with contact with other art or artists. There is a moment of self-doubt, but the mind is alert and something occurs to the artist, a new thought but usually with a relationship to something he's done before. He tries not to notice the thought at first, but holds it, then tentatively pokes it, then is decisive, and finally separates himself, becoming like someone else looking at it. If the idea succeeds, he knows why, and, after-the-fact, carries out an analysis which proves to him something he already knows—that the work is finished. Sometimes others participate in the analysis—probably in Venice the critic Sakai expressed his delight—but their approval isn't really necessary. The last stage of the sequence, for the artist, is relief, joy, and maybe the feeling that something supernatural or magical was involved.

I've seen this sequence demonstrated in different ways many times, because I've been around a lot of working artists. The sequence isn't different in artists of different backgrounds, though the ideas they come up with are.

Against Nature

In 1989 Funakoshi participated in a touring exhibition in the United States of the work of ten Japanese artists, all born between 1949 and 1957. The show was called *Against Nature* after a remark by one of the artists that he was against the idea that Japanese artists have a special sensitivity to and connection with nature. The show had four curators, two American and two Japanese, and to create a

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Katsura Funakoshi, *Irregular Caesuras*, 1993, manipulated aquatint with flat bite and drypoint; paper size: 40½ x 30½"; image size: 29¼ x 21¼", edition 45.



Katsura Funakoshi, *The Guest of Winter*, 1993, manipulated aquatint with flat bite, spitbite, softground and drypoint; paper size: 26½ x 22½"; image size: 17¼ x 14¼", edition 30.

New Editions

Katsura Funakoshi

Irregular Caesuras was inspired by a violin player friend of the artist's. The word "caesuras" means a pause in the flow of sound. In the print, Funakoshi has used delicate tints of color — pale blue, tan, and a light red blush around the face and hands. Color is also used in an understated manner in *The Guest of Winter*.

During this project Funakoshi concentrated on the idea of manipulating the rosin powder used for aquatint. He applied the loose powder, then distributed it with a brush, and melted it with a blow torch to adhere it to the plates. He also heavily scraped and burnished after etching. The process gives each of the seven, largely black and white, prints a unique texture and dimensionality.



Katsura Funakoshi, *The Teachings of Winter*, 1993, manipulated aquatint with flat bite, aquatint reversal and drypoint; paper size: 40½ x 30¾"; image size 29¼ x 21¾", edition 30.



Katsura Funakoshi, *The Old Mirror*, 1993, manipulated aquatint with flat bite and drypoint; paper size: 30 x 22½"; image size: 11¾ x 11¾", edition 30.



Katsura Funakoshi, *Carrying Words*, 1993, manipulated aquatint with flat bite and drypoint; paper size: 26½ x 22½"; image size: 17¾ x 14¾", edition 30.



Katsura Funakoshi, *Words on the Wall*, 1993, manipulated aquatint with flat bite and drypoint; paper size: 40½ x 30¾"; image size: 29¼ x 21¾", edition 30.



Katsura Funakoshi, *To Keep Watching the Town*, 1993, manipulated aquatint with flat bite and drypoint; paper size: 26½ x 22½"; image size: 17 x 14½", edition 30.

Notes

Tom Marioni will be showing three-dimensional photograms, which he calls "Objectgrams," at the Margarete Roeder Gallery in New York from February 11 to March 20, 1994.

Markus Lupertz has an exhibition at the Michael Werner Gallery in Cologne, through January 14, 1994.

Anish Kapoor will be showing his sculpture at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery in New York, through January 8, 1994.

Francesco Clemente has a painting exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery, through January 6, 1994.

Vito Acconci: Print Retrospective will be showing at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, February 4 through March 11, 1994.

José Maria Sicilia will have an exhibition at the Galeria Soledad Lorenzo, Madrid, Spain, in April, 1994.

Ink, Paper, Metal, Wood, an exhibition curated by Kathan Brown, will be at the Akron Art Museum, Akron, Ohio, January 29 through March 27, 1994. A complete schedule of the exhibition's tour will be in the next newsletter.



Katsura Funakoshi, *Quiet Summer*, 1990, soap ground etching and drypoint; paper size: 41 3/4 x 31 3/4"; image size: 26 1/4 x 19 1/4", edition 30.

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catalog text the four held a discussion. Thomas Sokolowski of the Grey Art Gallery and Study Center at New York University said they had been trying to find out from the artists "what in your life, in your culture, in your sphere of influence, and the influences prevailing upon you, made you make this thing the way you did?"

Kathy Halbreich of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts told an anecdote to demonstrate what happens when curators ignore questions like that and judge works only by the way the art looks to them. She said she and one of her "preeminent colleagues" saw in a small Tokyo gallery a painting by the Gutai artist Kazuo Shiraga. The Gutai Group worked in Japan in the 1950s with concepts of Performance and Action. Shiraga had painted that particular work with his feet. Halbreich's companion labeled it "Grade C Abstract Expressionism" while Halbreich, who saw it in its historic context, found it "an extremely muscular, passionate declaration of that artist's struggle to maintain a sense of connection to Japan during the post-war upheavals."

The "Grade C Abstract Expressionism" in this case was created in the mind of the viewer. Though artists now travel from place to place and share ideas with fellow artists around the world, there are still many curators and critics who see everything through the New York lens. Europe has recently come into that lens's focus, but Asia (and some other outlying places like California) remain largely uncomprehended by critics like Halbreich's companion. The curators of *Against Nature* do not bemoan the existence of such critics, but rather simply point out that people in Japan see things differently, and if we want to enrich our own experience, we might try to see their art from something like their point of view.

Their point of view, according to Shinji Kohmoto, Curator of the National Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto, is not absolute, but rather accepts the existence of many values, which they believe can be active at the same time. Kohmoto points out that the Japanese language is not analytical and has few adjectives and many nouns. "When a Japanese person faces an impressive landscape, he simply describes exclamatorily how impressive it



Katsura Funakoshi, *The Book Half Read*, 1990, soap ground etching and drypoint; paper size: 26 1/4 x 20 1/4"; image size: 15 1/4 x 11 1/4", edition 30.

is; he does not try to analyze it or to order its attributes," Kohmoto continues. "He expects people can share his impression and aesthetic consciousness, through the training of their senses and intellect."

Art in traditional Japan, according to Kohmoto, encompassed a wide range of objects, some of which look like kitsch to us. "Art was related to style as a mode of living which results in Formality. Formality helps us to acquire a certain stage of spirit. Art works operate as elements which create a particular space and mood; they were not personal artistic statements and they were not a method of defining meaning and ideas. Our main concern was not to produce or have objects, but to experience daily the different stages of the mind."

The American curators were amazed at the mix in Japan of refined, highly aesthetic things and vulgar things, side by side. Everything is acceptable. Fumio Nanja, Director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Nagoya, says "the Japanese generally are not afraid of losing their identity. We have not even thought of it. We were rarely in contact with or confronted by other countries, and we were never invaded. That's why we are not concerned with 'loosing' our identity. If you don't think of losing your identity, you don't think of insisting on it either." He goes on, as the discussion continues, to relate this thought to art. "We quote motifs from

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different cultures and art styles and make a completely new thing. It's a collage method."

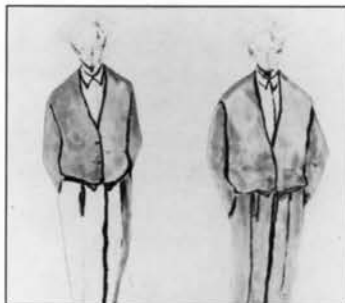
"Westerners always are concerned with originality," Nanja continues. "It is based on their notion of the avant-garde and individualism as derived from modernism. But can that be the only criterion by which to judge art? That is the question so many artists here and abroad are asking, isn't it?"

That Wooden Person, What Is He Thinking?

If originality is not the only criterion by which to judge art, what is another one? Technique, along with discipline, in Asia has been considered important, but only as the doorway to something else. Often we say, figuratively speaking, we look for "life" in a work of art. Funakoshi has taken this idea as nearly literally as is possible, setting his mind on bringing to life the person he is drawing or carving. In searching for life rather than originality, he arrives at work which is unique and original.

He is a kind of realist. Sometimes he works from photographs he has taken of people whose looks appeal to him. But sometimes he just starts to work, and a person emerges. "I never like to copy exactly what a model looks like anyway," he says. "Usually it's just a starting point, it takes on a life of its own."

In the etching studio he likes best the processes which give the most flexibility, and he moves the materials around a great deal before etching a plate. After etching he frequently re-works and etches again. I remember his drawing over and over various proofs, making paper shields, particularly over the eyes, so he could re-draw on them,



Katsura Funakoshi, *After Mirror Reflecting Fingers*, 1990, sugarlift and spit bite aquatint with drypoint; paper size: 23 3/4 x 32 3/4"; image size: approx. 14 1/2 x 11" overall, edition 25.

then scraping the eyes out of the plate entirely and re-doing them, several times. "Until the person appears," he said, "I am not finished." Later, after he is finished, he gives the work a name. Not a descriptive name, but a poetic one like "The Book Half-Read" or "Quiet Summer."

In his studio Funakoshi makes sculptures of wood, usually depicting just

Calendar of Exhibitions

San Francisco and New York:

January 6 - February 12, 1994

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February 10 - March 13, 1994

Group Exhibition

the heads and shoulders of his subjects. He adapted his approach from traditional Japanese wooden temple sculpture in which the figure is hollow and the head is carved separately, then fastened to the body. In ancient wooden temple guardians, he says, crystals were used for eyes, so the evil spirits would be afraid of their fierceness and alertness. He makes the eyes of his sculptures with marble orbs. He opens the back of the hollow head, then puts the marble eyes in behind the already carved lids. Then he paints the eyes. The clothing, skin, hair are also painted, lightly so the wood still shows. "What do you use for brains?" a friend asked. He laughed and tapped his own head. "My brains." Then he added, "But I always wonder: that wooden person, what is he thinking?"

— Kathan Brown

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657 Howard Street
San Francisco, CA 94105
415.974.6273
FAX 415.495.4220

568 Broadway
New York, NY 10012
212.226.5476
FAX 212.966.7042