

CRAFT CONSCIOUSNESS

by April Kingsley

My four years at the American Craft Museum seem to have dented my esthetic system: I see craft where the intention was art. But this time such a viewpoint may be appropriate, since all of the work I saw for this review is by Asians. In Asia a long and powerful tradition of making exquisitely crafted art and non-art objects still holds sway and you can see it in force in *The First Steps: Emerging Artists from Japan* at the Grey Art Gallery. Even though the works are a "cultural composite" of East and West, according to Curator Junji Ito, their beautiful crafting overrides considerations of influence and cultural borrowings.

Takayuki Katahira's 1995 series, *LIMPID EXISTENCE AND FLOATING OSCILLATING DOMAIN, ARE SO BEAUTIFULLY SENSUAL THEY CAUSE AN ESTHETIC MELTDOWN*. Made of gossamer fabrics shaped over fine wires and flawlessly stitched, they are attached to their satin-surfaced wooden enclosures by brass eyepins as though they were butterflies. They seem to be fluttering, like seeds carried on the wind, or floating, like transparent undersea plants or creatures, and to be glowing and pulsating. Their shapes have equal likeness to a number of things from balloons to clouds, and flowers, including parts of male and female anatomy, but they are so delicate and flawlessly chaste they make Georgia O'Keefe, Hannah Wilke, and Judy Chicago look crass. I think Marcel Duchamp, who tried so hard to encode sexual content in abstract transparencies, would have loved Mr. Katahira's work.

Scrupulous and labor intensive crafting characterize the photography in the exhibition as well. (I will not discuss the three video artists, since that is outside of my realm.) Kazushige Aoshima manages to embed his simple monochrome images of a flower and a woman's upper torso into washi paper in a way that makes them seem to emerge from the brownish darkness like golden sculptures. The woman is viewed from the side, her head thrown back, her chin an extraordinary distance from her nipples. Dark curves over her shoulder and up under her arm as if enveloping her body. But the images aren't extraordinary; we have all seen flowers and naked women in photographs before. It is the quality of the light, and of the rich surface of the work which has such a marvelous

density and depth, and sense of having been worked intensely to have become so textured. The photo emulsion seems to have soaked deeply into the fabric of the paper, almost creating a relief.

That sense of the physicality of the photograph is what is missing in Manabu Yamanaka's seven nude, gelatin silver portraits of old women, *GYATEI*, 1995. Though life-size, their fastidiously uninflected and incidentless white surfaces have a perfection deliberately at odds with the wrinkled and sagging flesh of the subjects. The antiseptic anonymity of the women — all the particulars of their life having been removed with their clothes — posed standing frontally with arms at their sides (except for one woman lying on her side) carries gas chamber implications. Yet a hint of coyness here, of humor there, on the women's faces makes them seem to laugh at their nakedness and the state of their bodies. It is as if they are saying how unimportant the flesh is, it's the spirit that counts. The artist found that only pictures of women about 90 years of age faithfully depicted "the last physical body of a human who is just vanishing away," that expressed the Buddhist concept of age he was after.

Both frightening and cute, the contextless, immaculately presented women are disturbing, not the least for their silence. Hironori Murai's *JAPAN NOISE GRAND PRIX "USO 800 (TELLING A LOT OF FIBS)" CLASS*, 1996, was disturbing for diametrically opposed reasons, except for the anonymity which they shared. At the cue of a cacophony of noise (an audio ROM of songs, gradeschoolers digging potatoes, a live report from a car race, etc.), a group of still, black, hooded, but legless figures with white numbers on their torsos lying prone on the floor suddenly start to move. They shift, rise up on oversized hands and squirm right to left (as if rooting around for something with their mouths) for a while before collapsing back with the cessation of sound. Animal like, robotic, and humanoid, they are helpless, but menacing. Perhaps a comment on the Japanese education system, perhaps on the uniformity of the lifestyle, but whatever its subject, the work was perfectly executed, all parts impeccably put together and fans, speakers, timers, etc. functioning without a hitch.

The same was true of the non-electrical mechanics that

went into Hisaya Kojima's *SOME WENT TO THE N. POLE. SOME WENT TO THE S. POLE*, 1995. Focusing and amplifying a light source across the space through a magnifying glass onto a refrigerated metal sphere jutting out from the wall caused condensation on the sphere which gathered, but didn't ever seem to drop onto the heated circular dish aligned a few feet below. Atop the silvery sphere strides a tiny woman, her skirt billowing back, holding a vessel or light in her hands as if she just caught it or is offering it up. On the edge of the coppery dish below sits a tiny figure of a man posed pondering. (They are less than an inch high, but fully detailed as to features and dress, which you can see by looking through the magnifying glass.) The perfect pitch of the work's scale and its ultra-refined crafting make magic out of its mysteries.

The only woman in the exhibition, which is comprised of the top 10 prize winners in a national Japanese art competition selected by 9 international jurors, is Miran Fukuda who literally and figuratively deconstructs Western painting. A very large portrait in 18th century French style is cut into 12 rectangles pulled slightly away from each other. Another painting of the Three Graces is "cleaned" (actually cut through the surface slightly), to reveal a Disney cartoon of Snow White. The four registers of a color print of a Caravaggio fruit basket are rendered as if each one was the whole picture including frame and they could be physically pulled apart. A Hudson River style landscape has been silk-screened on vinyl so that it can be applied like a sticker on any wall surface. It is as if the artist wants to get inside painting and see what makes it tick. In *CLARIS, FLORA, AND THREE GRACES AS SEEN BY ZEPHYR*, 1992 we have zoomed into the middle of Botticelli's painting with Zephyr who is reaching around us to grab one of the maidens. Though all are amusing as well as thought provoking, and all are well executed, the most iconographically complex and effective as well as amusing painting is *DISAPPEAR*, 1996. Italian Baroque figures have been improbably brought together from many different religious scenes. Among those we recognize are Saints Sebastian, Peter and Jerome, the two Marys, and Jesus in the manger. The throng of falling angels and flying putti swirling overhead (to which all eyes are turned as if at an Ascension), is either not yet fully painted in or disappearing under white paint. Either reading underlines the artifice of the craft of painting.

At first there doesn't seem to be anything particularly remarkable about Tetsuya Kawa's 142 little black and

white drawings scattered on the gallery walls. They look like pictographs or calligraphs for the 21st century. But when you realize they are photocopies, and yet the blacks are so rich, you begin to wonder how he got that depth of color without darkening the whites. The density of black in the originals must be very great.

For marvels of drawing density, make a pilgrimage to **Art Projects International** on Broome Street where **Il Lee**, a Korean-born artist is showing a large group of his ball point pen drawings for the first time (*Line and Form: Drawings 1984-1996*.) Captivated by the announcement card, I went down for a preview. Though the drawings are mostly recent, one initiating work from 1984 is included — a startling row of five black, hairy-looking ovals which seem so physical you'd swear they were removable. Figure/ground interaction is far more complex in the recent work. My favorite, *UNTITLED #9613*, 1996 has three black vertical massings, or two white columnar forms supporting something, depending on which way it is read. Playing sharp edges of solid black against the linear tangles zooming off other sides of a form he bends it in space. Manipulating the density of lines crossing white space he molds it into curving shapes. We see the activity as crosshatching and think shading, but no recognizable imagery disturbs the infinite motion of his force fields.

The larger drawings are more activated all-over and are often dominated by ovals, whereas the smaller ones are sparser and more geometrical. He studied in Korea and at Pratt during the heyday of Minimalism, and it shows in these drawings. (He has also done a number of drawings containing only hard edged forms which have not been included.) But the furious energy in most of the work, and the obsessive nature of his approach, drawing line over line to build up the blacks, is not minimal at all. I was able to see one unframed so the directional linear massings were visible and I could get a sense of the surface of the Arches paper, which is miraculously smooth given the repetitive pen attacks made on it. Though not velvety, it does look fibrous, which of course it is, and matte. Lee has developed all sorts of techniques for controlling the paper given atmospheric changes and using its tendencies to his advantage, but then he is obviously a master of his craft.

The First Steps: Emerging Artists from Japan at the Grey Art Gallery through February 21, and *Il Lee Line and Form: Drawings 1984-1996* at Art Projects International through February 28.