

Advent of Spirituality – “Windswept Women: The Old Girls’ Troupe” by Miwa Yanagi

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aspects of the universe on the poster and let the old girl, the embodiment of spirituality, guide us into the huge incarnation of darkness, the unprecedented gigantic tent which would entirely envelop the Japan Pavilion.

The entire world shared a fleeting, extraordinary moment when the sun disappeared from our sight in the very summer Miwa Yanagi made a triumphant appearance with her “Old Girls’ Troupe” in Venice. This didn’t happen all of a sudden. People had sensed the awesome breath of black wind that had started with far-off claps of thunder, whipped up every street and narrow pathway and penetrated the Piazza San Marco. They had even been terrified by the roaring sound of the sea, which seemed to be ascending back to the heavens, embracing the screams of those who had been lost to the waves. A lingering feeling of anxiety, foreboding something enigmatic, pervades the Venice summer.

What I secretly sensed in that seemingly fearful moment, however, was the advent of some sort of spirituality long lost to the world; the Gospel finally returning to us.

On the very day of the total solar eclipse, I looked up into the sky to witness the earth-shaking phenomenon, our mighty sun gradually shrouded within several tens of minutes, which for me seemed to be an instant. The luminous entity, the origin of all creatures, was instantly embraced by the moon, with the world deprived of light, as though we were thrown into everlasting night. It was then that I found myself nursing a sense of hope rather than despair. A corona. The radiant ring encircling the pitch-dark sphere of two overlapping celestial bodies. It was this halo of light which gave me hope, as it looked exactly like the one which had encompassed the “Old Girls” in the posters distributed all over Venice like prophecy boards. They were for Yanagi’s “Windswept Women: The Old Girls’ Troupe,” designed by Sansei Kimura, Yanagi’s partner.

There are two contradictory aspects in the principle of the universe, which are shown as young and old in this “Old Girl.” They are pulled to each other by some spiritual force to be merged together, when death and life are transposed and equally blessed as one, to reveal the true nature of the dark universe. Noticing Yanagi had reached this truth, I quivered with a sense of hope.

In a profound sense, hope does incarnate itself as sheer darkness. However, it is just a transient appearance when death and life transpose. Yanagi, never ruffled by the nightly perturbation in Venice, quietly lay the two polar

What in Miwa Yanagi intrigued me so?

My Grandmothers is one of her most outstanding works. Yanagi visualised someone’s “ideal self after 50 years,” where she questions our imagination and the meaning of the outcome of our life 50 years later. I have been deeply impressed with her awesome spirituality hiding behind the superficial employment of feministic attributes.

This series is not about female-specific remembrance, rather about a third gender beyond the definition of man and woman, here described as an old lady. Behind a show of happiness lay the old lady’s inward darkness, her deep-seated solitude, which we may share in the future. It is this darkness that is truly blessed and will save us in the future, but is definitely not a never-attainable perfect happiness. Since I sensed it in this series of works, it has always been on my mind.

Let me introduce an episode that assured me of her spirituality.

Last May, I received a telephone call from the Japan Foundation requesting my participation in a competition to select a commissioner for the Japan Pavilion. While I was given an explanation, an inspiration occurred to me that my selection should be non other than Miwa Yanagi, with a vivid image of her back view standing in front of a photograph of a young lady who has been living in a leprosy sanatorium until aged today.

All this stemmed from several years ago, when I was thinking of exhibiting some works painted by the inhabitants of thirteen leprosy sanatoriums nationwide in the international exhibition “ATTITUDE 2007,” to which Yanagi was invited as one of participating artists.

As a part of the preparation for the exhibition, I visited Yutaka Naruse, one of the inhabitants of Matsuoka Hoyou-en in Aomori Prefecture. We had interviewed him regarding how he felt about painting while fighting against despair, and were about to excuse ourselves, when his wife Teru, who had been immersed in our conversation, determinedly took out a photo from her closet and bashfully showed it to me. It was a cabinet-sized monochrome photograph, in which Teru posed like a fairy enwrapped in a dance costume, under cherry blossoms in full bloom, in the northern

part of Japan. I got her permission to remove the frame and found the date on the back, 29th April 1959. She was only twenty years old then. Almost 50 years younger than today. Suddenly sadness filled in me. In this long fifty years, how hard it must have been for this same person to have longed to live her own life as her original self in the picture, while her appearance had been unnaturally transformed. The cruelty of time, of "50 years," penetrated me. Now you might understand what hit me during the conversation with the Japan Foundation. It was the vivid image of the enlarged photograph of Teru on that day, and Miwa Yanagi standing in front of the photo, with her back to me, in the exhibition venue of "ATTITUDE 2007."

Yanagi's *My Grandmothers* is our future self "50 years later," and Teru's photo is her past self "50 years ago." The back view of Yanagi came to me to reveal her spirituality that made this *My Grandmothers* series a harsh attempt to show the authentic wealth of life. This series is definitely not a superficial idealism that promises hope for our old age, but demonstrates a sincerely valuable state of life. Like Teru did, keep living on and on whatever may happen in your life, and accept even bitterness or future death as a joy, since we live in the "present" where life and death, future and past transpose and merge together.

I told Yanagi of this episode and my concept for this competition, then commissioned her to produce a new work for Venice. I entrusted all the contents of the work to her and never interfered. I just resigned myself to the hands of her spirituality and waited for its advent to come.

In response to my abrupt request, a flicker of surprise crossed Yanagi's face. After a little while, she told me, "I will try." She had no idea what kind of work it would be, but would consider the meaning of Venice Biennale and try to give the answer to my request. After a short preparation period of only one month, she finally presented a plan for a grand festive installation, entitled "Windswept Women: The Old Girls' Troupe."

I couldn't resist feeling triumphant of my belief in spirituality. Although we were still in the planning phase, I felt as if already exposed to the spiritual light Yanagi would unveil in the middle of the immense, deep darkness which would soon appear in Venice.

One year passed. As though I had remained in stasis there, I was looking up into the icon emanating spiritual splendor that seemed to absorb all of the dazzling Venetian light. The installation was the perfect materialization of Yanagi's initial inspiration.

A mountainous black tent envelops the Japan Pavilion. It

is a contradictory connotation that suggests the origin of exhibitions was a small tent show, as well as a presentation to reveal the pavilion's political nature. She wrapped up the Japan Pavilion, constructed as a symbol of national prestige as well as a container of exhibitions, in the form of a non-exposing soft shielding, shrouding and nullifying the object. The Venice Biennale was born against a background of political hegemony which was disguised as a culturally-fit international exhibition. In fact, 77 nations represent countries in venues all over the Venetian Islands, creating an impression that the Biennale is a battlefield of artistic conflict controlled by illusory nationality.

However, Yanagi's way of protest against camouflaged nationalism is so pliant. A tent, fabric material, is a metaphor for an individual's delicate mind which has been giving in to the power of ideology. These delicate fabrics are woven together to form a cloth with the touch of human skin that embraces nationalism, or ideology, to melt its hardness.

Looking back, all through *Elevator Girl*, *My Grandmothers* and *Fairly Tale*, Yanagi has loved the fabric texture of protagonists' costumes. Were the huge tent to imply a gigantic erotic skirt, the sexual nature of nationalism would be revealed, which would abruptly confront us with essentially political questions that are consistently seen in Yanagi's works. Yanagi used cloth in her young days to cover the entire solo exhibition venue. She again used cloth, fabric material, to bring to life her monumental artwork in Venice, as if to show her determination to live as an artist in her struggle. I sensed her subtle spirit that had affirmed her entire life as an artist.

The tent softly, strongly and deeply transmits polarities such as life and death, past and future, inside and outside, or macro-micro, to form the skin of a dark sphere that generates chaos. It bestows light-out-of-darkness not only to the Japan Pavilion, but also to the whole Giardini, the main exhibition venue of the Biennale. Now, our time has come to build up the courage to get sucked into the dark universe encapsulating light particles.

Endless transposition. Longing for chaotic darkness. As soon as we are engulfed by the huge dark sphere and pulled into the tent-covered Japan Pavilion, we feel transposed to find ourselves facing yet another agitating black tent. Left between macro-microcosms, we are to be deprived of our assumed-self. That is to say, this darkness for transposition is a nesting device to transform us into our original self and bring us back to the outer world. However, that's not the end of the transposition. When we cautiously bend down to get into the smaller tent, the inner screen shows

a staggeringly vast expanse of wilderness, another outer world, which has brought in the old girls in the halo of the poster, as if inviting them for an endless journey through a infinite world.

Where are we now? What are we looking at? What is our original self? What on earth are those old girls?

Being unsure if the Venetian roaring scream is emanating from the old girls or the wilderness, and with the sound lingering in the ears, we squeeze out of the tiny tent. There prevails the overwhelming spirituality of five old girls.

Behold! Encased in a monolithic 4 meter tall frame that evokes the halo surrounding the darkness stood the incarnation of spirituality, the saintly old girls, who would transform the gale of wilderness into a force to bless creatures and control Gaia, thrusting up into the heavens. Here, finally, is the advent of spirituality.

In *Elevator Girl*, *My Grandmothers* and *Fairy Tale*, Miwa Yanagi has embraced "death" through her young girls and old women tricksters. She has affirmed the human existence, living in the maze of the "past," "present," and "future." Yanagi touches upon "death" like the commander of a brigade that is marching through the labyrinth of "death" while paradoxically attempting to find the real meaning of yet unborn "life." It is the eternity of life that Yanagi seems to discover in the mobility and fluidity of unending death. Her work being allegorical, based on visual "stories" that are extremely easy to understand for anyone regardless of age or place of origin, flooding the retina with the same degree of purity, her world of sensation – in which children become adults, adults become "super-adults," and "super-adults" become "hyper-adults," until a transposition occurs where the "hyper-adults" read to their children – has generated an ultimate smile, when we touch our spirituality.

Touching our spirituality will not be possible without getting through to the ultimate affirmation of one's existence that naturally induces the ultimate smile. I am sure it was a deathly endeavor for Miwa Yanagi to manifest the spirituality that now permeates these old girls. The female models in their 10's to 70's are shaking their false breasts madly, as if neutralizing their actual age. They are the old girls, who had travelled to retrieve primordial life, affirmed the existence of every creature between life and death, and been through relentless transposition from infant to old, from old to infant, until finally reaching Venice. They are the embodiment of Yanagi herself. Their brave figure of the advent resembles a monument of a soldier letting out a high-pitched roar after a fierce battle. The false breasts connote a gender beyond just being female under sub-

stantial categorization: the third gender. Bearing a certain hardness, these breasts deny to be equated with those soft ones for feeding babies and sating men's desire, but assert themselves to be the attribution of the third gender. All the marginal aspects – life, death, gender – have been scraped off the core purity of her spirituality that is now presenting the untamed human state, with certain substantiality. Soothed, we can commend our existence to the spirituality, discard our assumed self, and aspire to retrieve our original self, as if praying for absolution and resurrection. There is no denying that we are at first startled, lost for words, awestruck. However, hope's flame keeps burning, as we would in the end smile a little smile in the face of the advent of her spirituality. We would then realize this little smile is the ultimate wealth that can change even future death into a joy, which has been animated in all her art works.

An underlying Venetian reminiscence is resurrection through death. With due respect paid to the history of the Venice Biennale, Miwa Yanagi shows her determination to act up to her belief; to remain viable, or to persevere to "keep living" on and on, to prove her spirituality. Her strong message in "Windswept Women: The Old Girls' Troupe" will be of historic significance. The jubilation filling the Japan Pavilion is now spreading throughout the whole Venice Biennale.

At this very moment, some portions of spirituality may be wandering each appointed land. Yanagi's spirituality must have been destined to appear in Venice. I believe the power of art should be devoted to provide people with courage to believe in spirituality, which in truth is a faint, delicate force that exists even when the sun disappears, nay, can be recognized only when the sun is shrouded.

Yanagi's spirituality is always responding to this delicate force and will stay radiant, like the corona swaddling the pitch-darkness. However, what we regret most is that Yanagi will quietly take off for another journey without leaving a trace of an afterglow. All we can do is to listen to the voice of our innate spirituality and wait for another advent to occur. If it is promised just as the day Yanagi's spirituality alighted, our day will definitely come to wear a little smile.

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