

Turned Upside Down, It's a Forest

Meruro Washida

Out of Disorder (Mountains and Sea)

There is a mountain of discarded laundry, stacked in a disorderly pile on the floor. Upon closer observation however, one can discern that thin threads have been pulled out of the towels and sheets to create intricate constructions of steel towers and Ferris wheels. The fine delicacy of the handiwork is indeed a cause for surprise, yet there is a further element of fascination. The crafted steel towers have the effect of making the stacked fabric as a whole appear like the contours of a natural mountain range.

Takahiro Iwasaki, whose works on this occasion will be exhibited in the Japan Pavilion, was born and raised in Hiroshima where he currently continues to base his practice. Hiroshima is a city that faces onto Setouchi, the inland sea that lies between the Honshu and Shikoku regions of Japan. Along the coast of Setouchi extends a gently sloping range of mountains that rise up from near the seafront. Those who have visited the Museum of Contemporary Art in Naoshima have no doubt had the opportunity to encounter this scenic landscape.

Steel transmission towers are artificial structures that have been inserted into a beautiful landscape. They are perhaps considered obstructions in landscape photographs that for instance are featured in guidebooks, however for those who ordinarily live in Japan they are commonplace structures that can be seen anywhere, not only limited to the Setouchi region, but simply when driving within the suburbs. What Iwasaki has selected as a motif for his works, are such ubiquitous landscapes that can be found throughout Japan's rural regions.

Iwasaki had enlisted these series of works with the title, "Out of Disorder." The very moment in which the pile of laundry in its unfolded and seemingly disorderly state appears to present itself like a natural range of mountains, it gives rise to a sense of beauty as seen in the blessings of nature. The title thus within it harbours the idea of how certain moments have the ability to transcend the simple dichotomy of order and disorder.

Against the awe and sublimity of landscapes that are born from nature, there is a tendency to view artificial structures such as steel towers as disrupting the beauty of the landscape. This is particularly the case in the context of landscape preservation. Nevertheless, for example, as can be seen in the "Nihon Tenkei [Quintessence of Japan]" series ¹ by the photographer Toshio Shibata, who had turned his lens to capture civil infrastructure such as dams and concrete retaining walls that are built along side slopes to prevent landslides, works that serve to question the dichotomy of beautiful scenes in nature

and the artefacts that disrupt them, had also begun to emerge, notably since the 1980s. Iwasaki's "Out of Disorder" could perhaps also be regarded as an extension of the history of such art practices that have been founded on the theme of artefact and nature.

The "Out of Disorder" series had in this way been initiated from a focus towards Japan's distinct rural landscape, yet had gradually developed into pursuing the meaning behind why such steel towers exist. Transmission lines serve to carry electricity from power plants to large cities that are major consumption areas. Power plants, whether thermal, nuclear, or hydraulic, are usually built in remote areas, far from large cities. In a country like Japan where resources are sparse, fuel is transported from overseas via ship, thus thermal power plants are built in coastal areas. Nuclear power plants are also built along the coast since they require large amounts of water for cooling. In 2010, the year prior to the Great East Japan Earthquake and the accident at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, although unrealized, Iwasaki had devised plans for a work that appropriated the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant as a motif.² I myself had initially observed Iwasaki's "Out of Disorder" from the perspective of Japan's rural landscape, yet ever since the accident at Fukushima's nuclear power plant in 2011, I have begun to consider it from the point of view of the relationship between nuclear power plants and cities. The Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant has been built on a site located 200 kilometres away from Tokyo by the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO). As Fukushima is an area whose electricity is supplied by Tohoku Electric Power, its inhabitants do not use the electricity that is generated at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant. The people of Tokyo make the people of Fukushima bear the risk of any accidents that may incur in generating the electricity that they use, however they rarely if ever are conscious of this fact when using electricity in their daily lives. On the other hand, such nuclear power plants create employment in the region, and at the same time these regions are provided with subsidies from the nation's government. What the accident in Fukushima had made me think about the most was this very relationship between cities and rural areas. It has ever since made me change the way that I look at Iwasaki's steel towers.

As a key work that represents Iwasaki's practice, I had contemplated building the exhibition around the "Out of Disorder" series. In developing the presentation concept, the square window in the centre of the floor of the exhibition room (which is also the ceiling of the piloti) had served as another opportunity to alter the means for presenting this work. In the building of the Japan Pavilion, the rectangular volume of the exhibition room is elevated from the ground, supported from beneath by a piloti. For this occasion, the window in the exhibition room floor is appropriated as part of the plan, with a set of stairs provided in the piloti enabling visitors to climb up and emerge from the beneath to gaze up at the work in the

room. In doing so, visitors are able to view a single work from various perspectives. The appeal of Iwasaki's works lies in the different impressions that they provide depending on the perspectives at which they are observed. Normally, when trying to view a work that is placed on the floor from a low position, all one can do at best is to crouch down. There are indeed few opportunities for the viewer to look at the work from a perspective that is almost in line with the very ground. By utilizing this window, viewers are able to observe the works more closely from the same perspective level as the floor. In this manner, the floor is treated like the surface of the sea. Emerging from the piloti side would provide a 'fish-eye view' from beneath the water, and from the main floor would enable a 'bird's-eye view' from the sky.

Japan as a nation is dependent on importing its resources, and thus industrial zones are built along coastlands for reasons including convenience of transport and the easy acquisition of land by means of landfill. The Setouchi region is also an industrial zone referred to under the name of the "Taiheiyo Belt Zone [Pacific Belt Zone]" that had seen the development of the heavy and chemical industry in the 1960s. While these factories had supported Japan's high economic growth, they simultaneously gave rise to problems such as pollution. With the shift in the industrial structure from heavy to service industry and then onto the information industry, these factories are now facing decline and are in fact attracting interest as subjects of nostalgia. In 2014, Iwasaki used a dirty dust cloth to produce "Out of Disorder" that based its motif on the factories of the Kawasaki region.

For the exhibition at the Japan Pavilion, a series of factories were created along the hole (window) side of the floor that is approached from the piloti. In this respect, when the work is viewed from the exhibition room or the "land" side, it appears like a pastoral range of mountains and the factories are hidden. On the other hand, when viewed from the piloti side, or in other words, from beneath the "sea," a landscape of begrimed factories can be observed. The places where people live tend to be located slightly more inland from the coast, and therefore in our ordinary daily lives we are seemingly unaware of the presence of such factories. The exhibition here depicts the same structure that draws from this sense of unawareness, of using electricity in one's day-to-day without consciously thinking about where it is in fact generated. This means of presentation that uses the opening in the exhibition room floor encourages a way of looking at Japan from a perspective that is different to that of ordinary life.

Reflecting upon the education he received in Hiroshima since his childhood, Iwasaki mentions how he had always been taught about the dangers of science.³ Such education articulated that science and technology are things that do not necessarily bring happiness to mankind. One suspects these teachings to have been based on the experience of the atomic bomb. Even in this regard, Iwasaki's works that also serve to

convey the negative aspects of chemical factories can be seen as forming connections with the history of Hiroshima.

That being said, Iwasaki by no means simply labels science and technology as a bad thing. The image that Iwasaki had initially considered for this work was a bay-like form that appeared to encompass the opening in the floor. Its form was based on the *View of Ama-no-Hashidate* that had been painted by Sesshu. Ama-no-Hashidate is located in the northern Kyoto Prefecture, and is famously recognized as one of the “Three Views of Japan” (a list of Japan’s most celebrated scenic sites). Sesshu was a prominent Japanese master of ink and wash painting from the 15th century. Legend states that when Sesshu was young he had been bound to a pillar as he was always engrossed in drawing and had failed to read his Buddhist scriptures, yet the painting he created at this time using his tears and his feet was so spectacular that it impressed the priest who thereon forth gave him permission to paint. The *View of Ama-no-Hashidate* is one of Sesshu’s representative works. Ink and wash paintings are painted using ink, yet Iwasaki points out that ink is in fact made of the soot produced from burning wood that is combined with oil and hardened.⁴ In other words, if one considers soot as dirt, then the *View of Ama-no-Hashidate* which is considered a masterpiece, becomes nothing but a piece of paper that has been soiled with soot. If one were to think in this way, the dirt of the dust cloth that Iwasaki uses as a material for creating the factories not only form ties with the pollution that these facilities produce, but also with ink that has played a role in shaping the history of oriental art.

Another characteristic of this work is that it has been made using a towel – a familiar object that we find in our surroundings. Using everyday materials to create art instead of those traditionally appropriated such as canvas, oil paint, marble, and bronze, is something that many contemporary artists have engaged in. In Iwasaki’s case it initially had in part been due to material costs and acquisition routes,⁵ however these means of appropriating one thing to represent something else proves effective in slightly extending the margin of meaning. In order to implement this “figurative representation” in an effective manner, the difference between what is actually in front of one’s eyes and that discerned beyond it, or in other words, the thing that is being figuratively represented, must indeed be great. Using everyday items serves to increase this difference. Furthermore, the mundaneness of everyday items disrupts the sublimity of nature as well as the sacredness of Sesshu’s artistic practice.⁶

Nevertheless, Iwasaki’s use of everyday objects also relates to Hiroshima’s history. The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum houses numerous artefacts that convey the instantly distorted and changed forms of daily necessities as a consequence of the atomic bomb. Iwasaki mentions how these objects had indeed influenced him.⁷ This is the very

factor that distinguishes Iwasaki from other artists who use everyday objects in their work.

Out of Disorder (Offshore Model)

This exhibition introduces another work from the “Out of Disorder” series. Made using petroleum based rubbish such as plastic trays, which is presented on top of a table, is a work centring on the motif of an oilrig that stands above the ocean. Oilrigs are structures with facilities to extract process oil from undersea oil fields. In Japan as a nation surrounded by the ocean, the concept of the borderline is not something that is often consciously thought about. In terms of oilrigs however, in oceans far away from ordinary daily life, borderlines are being disputed over things that could be considered as both island and rock. In this work, the surface of the table figuratively represents the surface of water. In devising the ratio of the table, Iwasaki had drawn reference from the “Karesansui” (Japanese rock garden) in Ryoan-ji, a Zen Buddhist temple that is located in Kyoto. This garden is famously renowned for its portrayal of the Zen spirit, and the word “Karesansui” means to express the rippling surface of water without using water itself, rather, through means of a carefully composed arrangement of gravel that is raked to create a striped pattern. It could thus be considered as a form of “figurative representation.” The patterns created in the gravel are disturbed or disappear due to wind and sweeping, and therefore they are recreated over and over again. Since the garden in Ryoan-ji was established over 500 years ago, these patterns have continued to be recreated throughout the course of its history. Although the patterns are not fixed, they have thus been inherited over a long period of time in correspondence to human activity. The water itself that is constituted is an entity subject to change, yet the means to represent water in its state in which it retains the same form has been a significant theme in art history. Amidst this context, Iwasaki is engaged in pursuing expressions of water in particular, by drawing inspiration from such stone gardens.

“Reflection Model”

“Reflection Model” is also a work that deals with the surface of water. Japanese traditional architecture such as shrines and temples, as well as their reflection upon the surface of water, is intricately created through the use of Japanese cypress. Two works are presented in this exhibition, one taking its motif from the Itsukushima Shrine that is near Hiroshima, and the other from the five-story pagoda in the grounds of Ruriko-ji, a temple located in the city of Yamaguchi, approximately 100 kilometres away from Hiroshima. “Out of Disorder” that uses everyday materials and motifs of ubiquitous mundane landscapes, and “Reflection Model,” created with cypress and based on famous traditional buildings that are considered

national treasures, at first glance appear as completely different types of works. Nevertheless, their commonality lies in the fact that both works draw inspiration from the theme of “the surface of water” and “fleeting moments.” In “Reflection Model” the surface of the water as a substance in itself is not created, but instead the presence of the water is indicated through conveying the reversed reflection of the image. Ordinarily, the image reflected upon the water should appear as if fluctuating due to the very fluctuations in the water’s surface. In “Reflection Model,” however, the section that stands above the water and its reflected image are created in the exact same manner. Consequently, the work gives rise to an uncanny sense of time and space that does not exist in reality. In comparison to looking at an image reflected in water directly with one’s very own eyes, it indeed appears to be more clarified when that very moment is captured through the lens of a camera. When he first begun producing “Reflection Model,” Iwasaki himself had not been conscious of this temporal quality, or in other words, the “fleeting moments” conveyed within the works. He mentions coming to recognize this as a theme over the course of developing the series.⁸

For Iwasaki, who was born and raised in Hiroshima, the concept of “fleeting moments” hold a profoundly significant meaning. The entire city had been transformed in an instantaneous flash. The very moment the work presents itself in a different perspective in “Out of Disorder,” and the fleeting moment that is captured in “Reflection Model,” are for Iwasaki inextricably connected to one another through Hiroshima’s experience of the atomic bomb.

Furthermore, *Reflection Model (Ship of Theseus)*, based on the motif of the Itsukushima Shrine, built upon the ocean in a bay in the Miyajima region, can be described as capturing a fleeting moment within another measure of time, that is to say, the tides of the ocean. Throughout the day, the ocean experiences moments of high tides and low tides. This phenomenon, which is caused by the relationship between the Earth and the gravitational forces of the Moon, constantly changes the relationship between the building of Itsukushima Shrine and the surface of the water. During low tides, the sea level decreases so much that people can walk to the Torii gate. The work that Iwasaki has created, however, conveys the shrine and its reflection during a time of high tide: one could say that it serves to capture a fleeting moment within the day.

Iwasaki first created a “Reflection Model” based on the motif of the Itsukushima Shrine in 2013. The “Reflection Model” presented in the Japan Pavilion is a new work that captures the same shrine in its state of dilapidation after a typhoon. The idea of creating it in its broken form was something that the artist had considered from earlier on when he had first begun to present his works.⁹

The current Itsukushima Shrine had been built over 800 years ago. As the region is

often prone to the passing of typhoons, the shrine was built on a site that is protected by the mountains behind it. Despite this however, the shrine often suffers the effects of such typhoons, and at times certain areas receive severe damage. That being said, the most important part of the shrine, which is the main hall, remains safely intact. This is due to the fact that its structure that stands closer to the sea than its main hall has intentionally been built to destroy easily when inflicted with external force, thus weakening the effect and eluding any substantial damage.¹⁰ For example, the width of the floor surface is made so that it extends wider than the length of the waves, enabling it counteract their force in times of high tide during a typhoon. In addition, small gaps are provided between the floorboards to allow the water from the tide to spout through, thereby dispersing the buoyant force that is inflicted on the boards. Moreover, the floorboards themselves have not been fixed to the columns, and thus when the entire building is exposed to buoyant force, they come apart, preventing the columns and the building structure from being affected. In this way, there are numerous mechanisms incorporated into the building to disperse any external force that it is exposed to. Instead of firmly building it so that it repels the forces of the tide, the shrine has been built in a way that it naturally confronts nature, absorbing the force while breaking away in the process, allowing the most important part to remain. Iwasaki's decision to create "Reflection Model" based on Itsukushima Shrine in its broken state after the typhoon was a result of his interest towards this very way in which the shrine confronts nature and its surrounding environment.

The title of the work, *Ship of Theseus*, is derived from the paradox that raises the question of whether an object that has had all of its components replaced is able to maintain its identity. In Itsukushima Shrine, many of its components have also been replaced by new ones since the time of its original completion. The "Karesansui" garden is able to maintain its identity as a garden despite the changes in the placement of gravel, through means of repeatedly recreating the wave-like patterns on its surface. While interested in this relationship between matter and form, in the very same way within the context of producing his works, Iwasaki draws out and gives form to the hidden sense of order that is embedded within the materials he encounters.

Japan's coastlines, in particular within industrial areas, have been landfilled and bedded in concrete. The tsunami caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake had resulted in significant damages across a wide range of coastal areas, and thus there are places with massive seawalls built during the reconstruction. In such context, it would not at all be irrelevant to revisit through Iwasaki's work the past means by which Japan had attempted to confront and coexist with nature.

Japan is a nation surrounded by sea, and since ancient times, its sea has seen the

arrival of various other cultures. Nature, through typhoons and tsunamis, can cause great damage to people's lives, but is also a place that brings rich blessings and opportunities for exchange. Historically, the city of Venice had also served as Europe's window that opened out onto the Orient. In this setting in Venice, I hope that viewers to the exhibition will take the opportunity to observe and feel the sense of this traditional Japanese way of confronting and living with nature.

Tectonic Model (Flow)

The final work presented in the exhibition is entitled *Tectonic Model (Flow)*. On a round antique table are many books that have been stacked in an unstable manner. When approached more closely, one can see that the bookmark string has been made into a crane. As a result, the book begins to appear like a building that is currently under construction. The use of an everyday object like a book, the intricate delicacy of the bookmark crane, and the effect of "figurative representation" by which the book begins to look like a building, are features that share commonalities with the "Out of Disorder" series. In "Tectonic Model," there is the additional enjoyment of observing the title and cover of the books that have been selected. They concern subjects such as the mechanisms of earthquakes, science and technology, as well as those relating to issues of energy. The word "Tectonic" in the context of a building is used to describe their "construction method," yet on a larger scale can be used to define a "change in the earth's crust." The title of Iwasaki's work incorporates both meanings. The books in "Tectonic Model" have been stacked in an unstable way, through it implying the image of the Tower of Babel which is inevitably prone to collapse, and the instability that is harboured within the earth itself.

If the earth was to be observed over an extremely long time span, it is evident that it is constantly changing. In the event of the earthquake the earth had experienced "liquefaction," and thus, despite its seemingly firm appearance, in the long run it is something fluid. After the Great East Japan Earthquake, Iwasaki has produced several "Out of Disorder" works using exhibition cases.

In the lower half of the transparent exhibition case he stacked layers of cloth to form a terrain, and upon it he created an arrangement of small steel towers. From outside the transparent case, one can observe the layers of the earth in its cross-section. Thus, this work also focused on the earth's liquidity. The representation of the water's surface is an important theme in both "Reflection Model" and "Out of Disorder," yet the flux of the earth as explored in "Tectonic Model" could be described as an attempt to capture the fleeting moment of an entity that exists in a liquid state.

Looking from Upside Down

If one were to consider the earth in “Tectonic Model” as a water surface of sorts, it indeed means that there are numerous water surfaces that coexist within the exhibition room that has been devised as a single and unpartitioned space. There are the floor upon which *Out of Disorder (Mountains and Sea)* is presented, the table surfaces in *Out of Disorder (Offshore Model)* and *Tectonic Model (Flow)*, and then the invisible water surface in “Reflection Model.” Furthermore, if one looks beyond and outside of the exhibition room to consider the building of the Japan Pavilion, the exhibition room is suspended in midair by means of a piloti. In ascending the stairs provided in the piloti for one’s head to emerge through the opening, viewers would experience a sensation as if rising from beneath the water. Furthermore, Venice’s very ground upon which the Japan Pavilion stands is an artificial land that has been built on an infinite number of stakes driven into the lagoon, and is surrounded by the sea and its glimmering water surface. As there are various water levels presented within the exhibition room, when observed from each respective level, the perspective of viewers is at once above the water and submerged beneath it. Viewers will go back and forth between a bird’s-eye perspective and a fish’s-eye perspective – in their mind, fluctuating between various different scales.

The title of this exhibition “Turned Upside Down, It’s a Forest,” was determined in hopes to convey this imaginary journey. This is a phrase that also appears in a book written by the Venetian novelist, Tiziano Scarpa.¹¹ As we said, the city of Venice has been built on an infinite number of stakes driven into the lagoon. Scarpa poetically articulates that if Venice were to be turned upside down at its boundary with the water, it would indeed be a forest comprising of countless wooden stakes. Iwasaki’s works invite the viewers to explore and engage in imaginative ways of looking – changing one’s perspective to look at something differently as to how it is usually observed.

There is a work by Yukinori Yanagi¹² whom Iwasaki considers as his teacher, which consists of a flag made from a world map that has been reversed from north to south. In Iwasaki’s attitude of looking at the world from upside down, one can see a certain level of influence from Yanagi’s work. In contrast to Yanagi who continues to present works with political undertones in a straightforward manner, Iwasaki does not overtly communicate his opinion about social issues. Instead, he encourages us to recognize the existence of different perspectives within our daily lives, at times incorporating playful elements of humour.

In the same way as one might suddenly turn the island of Venice upside down in one’s mind while walking its streets, Iwasaki’s works speak to us in a soft and gentle whisper, presenting the possibility of how various ways of looking can exist within our everyday life.

(translated by Kei Bengler)

Notes

1. Toshio Shibata, *Photographs by Toshio Shibata*, Asahi Shimbun Publishing, 1992
2. Statement in the apply paper for "Voyager / AIT Artist Support Program" (unpublished)
3. Takako Masumi, "Artist interview," *17th DOMANI: The Art of Tomorrow*, Tokyo: Agency for Cultural Affairs, 2014. Exhibition Catalogue. 6.
4. Yoshiko Nishizawa, review of "17th DOMANI: The Art of Tomorrow" exhibition, Office I Ikegami blog, accessed Feb. 20, 2017, <http://geijutsuhiroba.com/blog/?p=1532>
5. Hiroyuki Hattori, "Opening the Door to the Utopia Beyond," *trans x form*, Aomori: Aomori Contemporary Art Centre, Aomori Public University, 2014. Exhibition Catalogue. 30
6. "Figurative Representation" is a technique used in Chinese and Japanese poetry, and is a means of likening one thing to something else. In the context of selecting tools for use in a tea ceremony, there is also a tradition in Japan to use things that are not ordinarily considered tools through means of "figurative representation." The Kabuki researcher Yukio Hattori, raises three key points to consider when using figurative representation: 1.) the balance between what is in front of one's eyes and that which is being represented, 2.) the thing in front of one's eyes and that which is being represented come together in an eccentrically novel manner, and 3.) the thing in front of one's eyes destroys the value of what is being represented. Cf. Yukio Hattori, "'Mitate' kou [Thinking about 'Mitate']" *Henge Ron* [Theory on Mutation], Heibonsya, 1975, 176-192.
7. Takako Masumi, "Artist interview."
8. Hiroyuki Yamaguchi, "Kumitaterareta jikan [Assembled Time]," *Numéro TOKYO*, no. 89 (September, 2015), 244-249.
9. Previously in 2001, Iwasaki produced and exhibited a small-scale work based on the motif of Itsukushima Shrine destroyed by a typhoon. *Art Crossing Hiroshima Project 2001 Spring*, Hiroshima: Art Crossing Hiroshima Project, 2001. Exhibition Catalogue.
10. NHK "Sekai Isan" Project, Atsunori Kawamura, *Nihon no Sekai Isan: Himerareta Chie to Chikara*, Tokyo: Nihon Hoso Shuppan Kyokai, 2005
11. Tiziano Scarpa, *Venice is a Fish: A Guide*, London: Serpent's Tail, 2009 (first published as *Venezia è Un Pesce*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 2000), 4.
12. Yukinori Yanagi (1959-) is an artist born in the Fukuoka Prefecture who participated in the Venice Biennale in 1993. Yanagi served as an Associate Professor at Hiroshima City University's Faculty of Arts, where Iwasaki had concurrently served as a part-time assistant professor. Iwasaki was involved in organizing the Hiroshima Art Project in which Yanagi had served as the director.

Meruro Washida, curator at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, was born in Kyoto in 1973. He Completed the Master's program in art history at the University of Tokyo. Washida plans contemporary art and architecture exhibitions based on themes such as local communities and participation. Major projects include Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa / SANAA (2005), Atelier Bow-Wow (2007), solo exhibitions for Jeppe Hein (2011), Shimabuku (2013), and Mitsunori Sakano (2016), and group exhibitions such as Kanazawa Art Platform 2008 (all of which were under the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa).

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