The Wings of Miwa Yanagi

Miwa Yanagi has wings, and she flies easily across the borders of different art genres. She majored in textile dyeing in her school years, but shifted to contemporary art, creating photography and video work using computer graphics. Since 2012, she has been a professor at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Kyoto University of Art and Design.

The next place she landed at was theater. In the past four years, she has been organizing many plays based on modern Japan, as if excavating hidden voices of people buried in history. In 2014, she introduced the Taiwanese moving stage (stage trailer) to Japan for the first time. Together with students of Kyoto University of Art and Design, Tohoku University of Art & Design, and Taipei National University of the Arts, the moving stage they made in Taiwan will be “drifting” to various places after “landing ashore” at Yokohama Triennale. A pilgrimage and tour begins with “Wings of the Sun,” a road novel by the late novelist, Kenji Nakagami.

What does this touring performance mean to her? As Miwa Yanagi is on a quest to find her ideal expression, we too chase after her as she continues to fly on the artistic stage.
School days devoted purely 100% to art making.

I got to know the state of contemporary art in Japan. Had my solo exhibition in Tokyo, but it also was a good experience since I came to know about myself. It was a very tough time when I suddenly was totally isolated from information. In such environment, I was able to work only on things I liked. I had three solo exhibitions during my university? I made in university, so I had to throw almost all of them away at a convenience store in a suit that I hated wearing but had to. There, I couldn't really create any artwork. I couldn't store all the large works I made in university, so I had to throw almost all of them away at graduation.

What were you doing when you were 20 years old?

I studied traditional crafts until second year, and from fourth year, I was mainly working and not making art. It was clearly representing a time when I seriously wanted to make theater costumes. I thought I would work as an apprentice with Emi Wada, so I visited her with a letter of reference. Eventually, I was turned down. That was when I decided to go to graduate school. So graduate school was when I started learning about art.

Did you start your career as an artist right after graduation?

There is a period of time after graduation when I didn't create or exhibit anything. I had three different jobs, six days a week, and there were times when I had to work in all Kita-ku areas (Kyoto, Osaka, Kobe) in the same day. It was hard making a living in my twenties, so I couldn't really create any artwork. I couldn't store all the large works I made in university, so I had to throw almost all of them away at graduation.

Were your ideas in your school years related to the works you make now?

I made a photography series of usher girls in my late twenties when I was working in small offices and classrooms. Compared to that, my next work, My Grandmothers, is a lot more open because I made it while communicating with the models. In my works, melancholy and emancipation, reason and chaos, appear in confrontation with each other, so theater is a great medium for me.

Was there a reason why you stopped working in crafts?

It's because there was a time when I stopped making art and worked. I studied traditional crafts until second year, and from fourth year, I was mainly working and not making art. It was clearly representing a time when I seriously wanted to make theater costumes. I thought I would work as an apprentice with Emi Wada, so I visited her with a letter of reference. Eventually, I was turned down. That was when I decided to go to graduate school. So graduate school was when I started learning about art.

So what made you go back to making artworks?

It was frustrating. I think the last thing you want to do is an art student who has stopped making art. One day, on my way to work, I stopped by at a convenience store in a suit that I hated wearing but had to. There, I met my classmate wearing a work suit, obviously because they were busy working on their artwork, and I was super jealous...No, that's a joke (laughs.) For me, the reason I started making art again was because I could see it from the outside. In the end, I rented a gallery and held an exhibition, almost obsessively. It was performance art, not a picture, where a real life elevator girl sat still and smiled all day long. People around me must have been bewildered because I had been working in crafts all along. Well, people are still surprised now, since I'm started in theater all of the sudden (laughs.)

Was there a reason why you stopped working in crafts?

It's because there was a time when I stopped making art and worked. I studied traditional crafts until second year, and from fourth year, I was making large-scale installations using fiber. Then I got caught up with this material I created. I wasn't good with words, so I wasn't able to develop my ideas, nor did I have the patience to persevere. After stalling for a while, I pulled myself away, got a job, worked for three years, experiencing and observing society, then I came back.

What were your ideas behind Elevator Girls?

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You often use women in your pictures, but the main characters in your plays are always men. Why is that?

I might make a play with a woman as the main character, but at the moment, women play the role of “storytellers” in my plays. Women don’t perform but narrate instead. Some usher girls explain, act, and explain again once in a while. In my concept, men perform tragedy and women perform comedy. Women always have to perform “storytelling and comedy.” Of course, it’s not about which is superior. A grand tragedy where a hero is tossed about by fate and a comedy born from the everyday pathos of ordinary people – these are inseparable, and so it is with men and women.

Is there a connection between you always changing the media you work with and the “ability to persevere” that you mentioned earlier?

Giving up is very important. Even if you want to give up, that part of you that doesn’t hastens what comes ahead. We have to keep moving on because art itself never comes to an end.

Was working in theater an intuitive choice? I still like photography and am actually working on a new piece, but it’s just that drama better suits me physically. For example, comparing museums and theaters, although it’s difficult because the length of history of each is so much different, I think it is easier to breathe inside the theater. I prefer a dark room rather than the beauty of a bright room where everything is all white. I want to question the meaning of forcing light into a dark box in a scientific way. In drama, the weight of the body in the time frame of a play basically hasn’t changed from thousands of years ago. The aim of a theater is not to preserve plays until the next millennium, but to realize this moment and place. When I think to myself, what kind of landscape I want to see at the very last moment of my life, I think I want to see a primitive chaos, like at an open-air theater surrounded by natural phenomenon and various noises all coming together as one.

Are there any other media that you want to try and work in?

I’m pretty busy enough with just drama and photography, but maybe storytelling would be interesting. I want to do more of it. Karaoke and pole dancing too.

Pole dancing…?

I bought a stage trailer and furnished it with a mirror ball and a pole, so I have to make use of it.
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One of the themes of Greek tragedy is the idea that it is often people who are meant to suffer, and that when they do, it is often for a reason. This is true of ancient Greek theatre, where tragedies often focus on the idea of the fates of individuals, and how they are meant to suffer for the greater good.

From the top of the stage, the actor is meant to be the central figure, the focus of the audience's attention. This is true of ancient Greek theatre, where the actors often wear masks to help them project their voices and hold their own as they perform. This is also true of modern theatre, where the actors often wear makeup to help them project their characters and hold their own as they perform.

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