

NA KAMURA

* „o lala,
von was für
glänzenden
liebhabereien
ich träumte!“

BAZON BROCK

EXTERNAL IMAGES – INNER LANDSCAPES

MAKI NA KAMURA'S THOUGHT PAINTING

LEAD-IN

It behoves the art historian, aesthetic, philosopher, or religious and cultural historian, intent upon accessing artworks for others, to be wary of interpreting such works in terms of explicit statements or messages. Such an unequivocal interpretation would unnecessarily restrict the viewer. The imminent task is, much more, to find correlatives for the works by developing appropriate expectations of them. This text refers to the horizon of expectation that Maki Na Kamura predetermines by her use of explicit allusions to literary and poetic concepts. This particular cast of ideas and thoughts via expectation is known as the “creation of *topoi*”. So, the obligation is to accumulate the *topoi* that generate the most robust, most intense expectations of the paintings.

Maki Na Kamura applies this process to other peoples' works rather than to her own: a marble bowl, possibly attributed to the school of the Berlin sculptor Christian Daniel Rauch, is set between the poets Stifter and Mishima, whom she specifically quotes. By means of an empathetic appreciation of the bowl, the onlooker is expected to develop an empathy for manifestations of the most subtle nuances in the solid marble. The basic ornamental egg-and-dart pattern around the edge of the bowl; representing the connection of larger elements to an extremely fine thread, sensitises the viewer to the sculptor's masterful achievement of dematerialising the marble as far as is humanly possible. It is

the consummate correlation between craft and intellect. Likewise, Maki Na Kamura wants to guide the viewer's attention to her own work, without necessarily furnishing him with the concept that either these writers' texts or the Rauschian marble represent immediate correlatives to her paintings. She thus offers him compositional analogies, notional correspondences and catalytic associations. This text pursues the painter's pointers and provides an example of the potential view of Maki Na Kamura's works in general.

FROM SEEING TO LOOKING

At some point, we have all experienced the sensation of our eyes drifting into a sustained, contemplative state while regarding an urban landscape or garden. The state is almost one of looking through the elements themselves. This contemplative, meditative eye even has the power to penetrate solid walls or canopies of branches. Ever since Goethe, this transition from seeing to perceiving has been known as ›Schauen‹ (to look, to watch) in the German language: "Zum Sehen geboren, / Zum Schauen bestellt", (For seeing, I am born / For looking, employed).

How does seeing transform to perceiving when, for example, one is not looking at a natural landscape but, rather, at an image of it; namely a painting? These paintings already result from a transformation of seeing into perception. How can the view of a vast, infinite, natural world be captured in the comparatively tiny finitude of a painting? This very act of arrest is accomplished by the artist's ability to open up the delimited field of the painting to the infinite scope of the inner eye, imagination or vision. The painting literally reflects our experience of perceptive, contemplative viewing. The painting intensifies, or, as it were, duplicates our estimation of the world through the very act of looking. As Marion Dönhoff revealed, whilst riding through East Prussia in 1941: "Paintings create more reality than all our

actions put together – it is not what has happened that forms and transforms us, but what we have looked at, what we have seen.”

CONSIGNING TO THE SIGN

This insight corresponds to the diverse historical attempts on the part of various cultures to capture that transient moment and time's inexorable change in a formal harness of some sort. All forms of capture are effectively acts of “consigning to the sign”: all signs are forms of capture and thus part of the process of being captured. Paintings captivate us, musical motifs fascinate us, lyrical and poetic renderings bind us in their spell. Maki Na Kamura refers to this practice when, captivated, she quotes authors such as Adalbert Stifter or Yukio Mishima. She highlights the issue, raised by Stifter's *Indian Summer*, that all art is bound up with subject matter geared to the communication of ideas and concepts. What is the relationship between the idea and its representation as a sign or symbol that, in turn, is a material object in the world? Maki Na Kamura is clearly preoccupied with the question, generally found within the arts, of how to minimise a dependency on ideas, intuition, thoughts, upon their reification in paint, clay, stone and metal et cetera. It is not the physical reality of the material that constitutes the reality of the painting, but the power and effect that thoughts and ideas can realise. Maki Na Kamura stresses Stifter's differentiation between the subjectmatter of the artwork and the work itself as a vehicle for ideas.

BODY AND SPIRIT

These thoughts relate to the question, at the heart of neuroscience, as to whether a disembodied, non-reified spirit can exist? The Western answer is typically: no. However, the development of signs and symbols does allow for a form of

communication of spirit and its potential mode of manifestation. If a thing is related to a sign, then it is understandable that the sign itself is not what is significant but, rather, the thing that it designates and refers to. However, if in the interest of what is being signified, signs are given a striking form, then they, too, draw our attention and even detract from the intended referent. The perception of signs without reference to their meaning is considered a purely formalistic interest in the texture of symbols per se – be it a poem, a painting, architecture or music. Artists have been, and indeed still are, interested in the purely formalistic organisation of a work as a texture of symbols. Others, such as conceptual artists, take the radical approach of attempting to reduce the material component of the artwork to its bare minimum.

Contrastingly, Maki Na Kamura belongs to those artists who, through the refinement of their representational means, try to cause a balance between dominant ideas and statements and the necessity of embodying ideas symbolically. In this regard, there is a discernible dynamic in the alternation between both poles in her paintings. The viewer oscillates to and fro between the apprehension of the painting as both a material entity and a symbolic reference to psychological activity. This engenders an inspirational, animating effect when regarding her paintings.

PERMANENCE IN CHANGE

Maki Na Kamura quotes the following passage from the essay *Never-ending Garden* written in 1967 by the Japanese poet, writer, ideologist and political activist, Yukio Mishima: “If you allow your gaze to wander [into the garden] just half a degree, then a whole new world opens up. [...] The innumerable wandering glances allow the viewer to experience an infinite number of world views.” Mishima describes his view into a particular garden which is set apart by its deviation from the layout of a traditional Japanese garden, “a garden

like a butterfly on the wing that has tendered its shadow for a brief moment [...] an uninterrupted garden stretching into the distance". He writes of a garden with no fixed boundary and, accordingly, refers to the remarkable fact that the horizon is created by the spectator's eye rather than a material or physical demarcation.

Maki Na Kamura's landscapes and their Western counterparts represent an induction to this experience; for landscapes have only existed since the time that artists began to suffuse nature with their particular ways of seeing. This transformation of nature into a landscape through the eye of the painter is one of the most important achievements in the history of painting. Both the concept and comprehension of landscape has only existed in Europe since the beginning of the sixteenth century; commencing in the works of, say, Albrecht Dürer and Albrecht Altdorfer. Landscape painting reached its zenith in the works of Nicolas Poussin, Claude Lorrain, Jacob van Ruisdael, Caspar David Friedrich and the numerous masters of classical modernism, who not only successfully transformed primarily natural phenomena into landscapes, such as forests, lakes and mountains, but also taught us to view factories and the industrial, urban sprawl as landscape. What is particularly significant is that, in the case of the eighteenth century English garden, paintings were actually rendered back into actual parks and parkland. The eighteenth century English garden is a painting turned reality. In comparison, the eighteenth century French garden was geometry turned reality.

Mishima's way of seeing, which clearly fascinates Maki Na Kamura, was shaped by cultural and religious factors. He was a hard, tough man; a thinker and a warrior; an intellectual engaged in combat. Hard, in the context of being hardened though systematic self-control, because, according to Eastern traditions, he not only subjugated his surrounding external, natural world, but also his own physical tendency to such defining, ever-shifting transformations. Through his attempt at shaping his ideas and the inner world of his

imagination through rigorous physical exercise, Mishima manifested as a thinker. The parallels between physical and spiritual activity that characterise artistic work reached an apotheosis in the Informel movement and Action Painting during the 1950s. Here, the spectator is compelled to recreate, both for and within himself, the unity of spiritual and physical energy of the artistic activity involved. As we know from the ground-breaking discovery of mirror neurones at the beginning of the 1990s, our brains are particularly well suited to this enterprise.

BRIDGE BUILDING

Mishima takes the image of a bridge to refer to the bridging of the gap between the painting and the viewer. He stresses that the rivers and streams which flow through the garden he looks at do, indeed, demarcate a border between the here and now and other-worldliness. Bridges clearly exemplify constantly changing positions in the overall toing and froing. This forms a counter image to the accepted ideas of rivers, such as the Styx, which separate the world of the living from the abode of the dead. Across this river flows only one-way traffic; from the banks set in this world to those set in the afterlife. Crossing the Styx means extinguishing all memory of life on earth. For Mishima, however, the bridge is a symbol of the reversibility of “there and back” – such as; from vision to reality, from thought to deed, from the future to the past and back again. In his poem *Permanence in Change* Goethe refers to this permanent toing and froing. He understands the power of repetition as the only form in which we can experience permanence or eternity. Goethe calls this phenomenon “permanence in change” or that inevitable, ineluctable change which he sees as fundamental to the human experience. This experience is shaped by means of the ever-changing seasons, the ocean tides or the cycle of birth and death, of bloom and decay. This position has found philosophical expression in Nietzsche’s theory of the

“Eternal Recurrence of the Same”. Mishima demonstrated the currency of this notion in our contemporary world when, in 1970, in accordance with Samurai traditions, he committed ritual suicide. Mishima’s death ought not to be classed primarily as a reaction to the failure of his political mission. Over a long period, he had endeavoured animating a section of young officers to react violently, and thereby earnestly, to the loss of Japan’s cultural traditions, in the form of capitalism, at the hands of Western Imperialism. Through his suicide, he transformed both himself and his work into a captivating testament which, to this day, still endures for many artists: the power of images as an indissoluble unity of thought and deed, of will and imagination, as well as, of physical reification and artistic idea.

“THE SORROW OF PERFECTION”

Why does an artist such as Maki Na Kamura expressly cite the self-evidently extreme poles of Stifter and Mishima in her catalogue, i.e. the still, quiet world of abiding moments and the Eastern world of eternal change as a form of permanence? The philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, who taught in Japan for many years, clearly elucidated the meaning of the polarities of the abiding moment and the enjoyment of change. With its religious connotation, the formulation “for it is written” pointed him in the direction of the “nunc stans”, the eternal now. The correlative here is the success of an action or sense of completion having achieved a goal. Human vitality manifests itself in the ability to act between the stasis of the abiding now and the movement towards completion. All artists, including Maki Na Kamura, feel compelled to conform to both these central forms of activity. They have to develop each work with a view to completion and then derive an impulse from their achievement in order to focus upon the next work. To paraphrase one of Goethe’s famous verses, this would mean: “And ever I to the individual work shall say: I will tarry with

you, you are so beautiful!” – i.e. perfect – “then I will put my life behind me” – i.e. stop being an artist. Thus, there can be no tarrying in contemplation of the individual work, however well it may have turned out. To a certain extent, one might say that many artists come to terms with this pathos-filled, sorrowful valediction to the completed work by making every subsequent work “merely” represent a new or perhaps further approximation of completion.

IDEAL LANDSCAPE

For the Western viewer, the *topoi*, to which Maki Na Kamura’s large landscape paintings refer, belong to the general field of “Arcadia”. This particular *topos* is derived from a reinterpretation of a somewhat inhospitable tract of land to the eastern side of the Peloponnese, north of the Kingdom of Sparta. This territory had been known as Arcadia since antiquity. Its elevation to the term “Arcadia”, synonymous with an idyllic pastoral landscape, is primarily due to the transference of key terminology from agricultural vocabulary to Christian theology. Thus, for example, the “good shepherd”, in the figure of the pastor, becomes the caring, protective authority of the Christian community. Christ himself was seen as a “good shepherd” who defended his “flock” against land-grabbing “wolves”, the depredations of war, famine and spiritual confusion. Spiritually, Arcadia is something akin to a Paradise Regained before the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven. Having transcended its actual geographical co-ordinates, Arcadia now encompasses the South Sea shores and other highly desirable tourist destinations. The *topos* is veritably omnipresent and omnipotent, which is all the more striking in view of the fact that the historical circumstances of human existence – typically toil and struggle, sweat and indigence – were justified precisely by the Fall and man’s subsequent banishment from Paradise. Written in the wake of the Thirty Years War and published in 1667, John Milton’s epic poem, *Paradise Lost*

expressed a shift in mental focus upon the loss of peace, livelihood, good will, piety and sheer joie de vivre. Only within the context of this historical starting point, can the significance of the invention of Arcadia be measured. The aristocracy sought refuge in Arcadia as a territory free from the central power of the king. Aristocrats cultivated their country estates with full awareness of their autonomy; as Europe is exemplarily described by Virgil in his *Georgics*. This leads to our concept of “culture”; a word derived from the farming or tilling of the fields, namely “agricultura”. Unhappy wives at royal courts also withdrew to Arcadia. Marie Antoinette had a pastoral community, the village of Hameau, created in the Park at Versailles so that, free from all conventions, she could gratify herself directly (in a presumably non-alienated form of peasant labour) with the surplus erotic pleasures evident in an abandonment to the delights of the quotidian.

BANISHMENT TO ARCADIA

The topos of Paradise Regained is highly conspicuous in the iconography of Maki Na Kamura’s paintings. She focuses the viewer’s attention prominently on two female peasants, who are bent double gathering fruit from the ground. It is an allusion to the motif of the potato pickers and corn gleaners in French painting; in particular that of Jean-François Millet. In the second half of the nineteenth century, this motif had animated painters in two specific ways: on the one hand, they were able, via their artistic treatment of the subject, to assuage their individual social consciences by elevating the misery of humankind – which up to that point had not been a worthy subject for art – to the epitome of the universally human. On the other, the discrepancy between the depicted misery and the patent beauty of the painting was a clear reference to human answers to man’s expulsion from Paradise by his divine creator. To be banished or expelled entails eking out an existence in indigence and drudgery, hunger

and thirst. People's answer to this wholly unreasonable demand was to create their personal paradise by dint of their own labour. Coupled with the artistry of writers, poets, painters, gardeners and architects, the image of man-made Paradise was created. Naturally, painting played a decisive role in the development of ideas about a new world, a new mankind and a new existence. For every painting, when juxtaposed with external reality, has always been akin to a vision; in the sense of the act of looking being a fusing of a given natural scene with hopes, feelings and desires.

Joie de vivre means sensing the anticipation of change in every concrete dispensation of our everyday existence. We live in hope of this change. With its focus upon real, existential plight, the painting per se proffers the illusion of that Arcadian essence. It doesn't become an abstruse visual world, a phantasmagoria, because, in this particular Arcadia, the memory of existential plight is ever visible; that is to say, upheld. Poussin's much-quoted use of the Latin phrase "et in Arcadia ego" sums this up most appositely – even with the most wonderful conceit of a happy life, Death cannot be eluded. By ingeniously including corn gleaners in these ideal landscapes, Maki Na Kamura has effectively found a topos worthy of Poussin.

Maki Na Kamura's landscape paintings prompt the viewer to think of the origin of pictorial motifs, indeed, to veritably ›think‹ the paintings; simply because one can only see what one knows.