

Rashomon

Works of Yoi Kawakubo at Yamamoto Keiko Rochaix

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I/body/ghost installation view
Midas Hill, 2018

image: Alexander Christie

In his solo exhibition *I/body/ghost*, Yoi Kawakubo examines the identity and attempts to redefine it; themes include individual and collective activity within society, collective consciousness and physicality of one's body. While these are frequently the focus of many contemporary art exhibitions in the West, Kawakubo presents a perspective that is inclusive, both on physical and conceptual planes. Having engaged with the show, it reminded me of the film *Rashomon* by Akira Kurosawa, which tells a tale from various points of view where there is no single truth but multiple truths for every event.

Midas Hills, the largest work featured in the show, demonstrates the historical, as well as the future profit levels for UK companies, essentially seen to continue its rising trend. While the work seemingly rejoices over the economic growth, one is soon awakened to its pessimism upon reading its title. Kawakubo suggests we have created a monster, the Mammon, who obtained eternal life as the result of accumulation of our individual insatiable greed. It can no longer be captured within the realm of human intention, or indeed control, but this global monster now acts as an autonomous and self-propagating system. Collectively we have secured eternal life as a part of the system, however, Kawakubo suggests that in exchange, as individuals, we have ironically become 'ghosts'.

This is reflected not only in the title given to this body of work, but in how it is created. The walls are sanded to make the older layers of the paints apparent, and as the result of this procedure, the colour we see is not saturated but merges its white background and emerges in a ghost-like state

which is neither completely present nor absent, rather a disembodied in-between. Though the artist invites viewers to touch the surface of the work which is unexpectedly and pleasantly smooth, it is only a single facet of the integral whole that one sees and can have physical contact with. The essence of its existence is almost metaphysical, beyond physical reach. The act of touching the work, therefore is analogous to the brink of non-existent self. In the middle of this wall installation work is a 70cm-side square hole, exposing the structural brick wall of the building, and the void, which might lead us, as ghosts, to see yet another face of the monster.

Facing *Ares Vallis (The Valley of Ares)*, another wall installation work created for the current show, one is struck by the vast emptiness sandwiched between yet more mountains of un-saturated colours. According to the artist, the work is deeply political, capturing the twenty-year cycle of catastrophic nuclear disasters, the fluctuations unmistakably resonating in the foreign exchange markets. This work features the German Mark to British Pound exchange rate which forms the peaks and valleys of the blue mountains. These indices and numbers, however, seem to place a veil over the essence of the work, blurring my vision and diluting my attempt to grasp its core. The blank gap between the blue mountains, or the void, is created due to the emergence of Euro and the accompanying demise of German Mark in 1999, and the pessimistic forecast that Euro be abandoned giving German Mark a renewed life in the 2020s. It is this void that gives me the sense of absolute helplessness. Rather than the specific events that eventually shapes the movement of the chart, the resulting feel of nothingness is what helps me understand Ares. Contemplating the blank, white wall, I see myself almost transformed into the Greek god of war, quietly waiting for his destiny, the verdict to be pronounced in a trial after he committed a murder.

It may provide us with intriguing insight to investigate art works from entirely different epochs and culture and compare them with the works of Kawakubo, including *Ares Vallis (The Valley of Ares)*. In this short essay, I would like to take up two examples, the back panels of the *Modena Triptych* by El Greco (1568), and *Fūjin Raijin-zu* of Tawaraya Sōtatsu (16th century). The back panels of the El Greco's early period triptych depict pilgrims on their way to the Saint Catherine's Monastery with



El Greco, *Modena Triptych* (1568)

the backdrop of Mount Sinai at its central panel, with the Annunciation featured on its left-hand panel, and Adam and Eve on its right. The Mount Sinai, undoubtedly one of the most symbolic

mountains for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, emerges from the earth with vigour as if to pierce heaven for unity. A viewer may see violently erotic connotation in the holy mountains, which adds to its dynamism and the sense of destructive but also powerful renewal force that a radical change calls for. Kawakubo's *Ares Vallis (The Valley of Ares)* also alludes to the dynamism and power that destructs but also brings about new order to the world. He expresses it by way of nothingness, while the Spanish painter makes it known through highly expressive visual manifestation to highlight the ultimate climax of events. However, we should not forget that the panel is the back side of the religious object, therefore normally placed out of sight. That it cannot be seen but it does exist, is a recurring motif employed for the current show of Kawakubo, giving us a surprising similarity between the two works of art.



Tawaraya Sôtatsu, *Fûjin Raijinzu* (16th century)

The second example is a pair of screen paintings *Fûjin Raijinzu* or Gods of Wind and Thunder, featuring Gods of respective natural phenomenon, by Tawaraya Sôtatsu. It is suggested that each panel was placed at either side of a statue of Buddha, or simply placed at distance from each other with empty space in between.(note) Therefore the work is a triptych on a conceptual level, ingeniously conceived to present the central image by way of void, and exactly because it is the void we concentrate on, it drives us to the absolute, the state that is inclusive of everything. This brings us back to *Ares Vallis (The Valley of Ares)* and the state its viewers experience: to engage with Kawakubo's works is to try to see what is not depicted. Kawakubo and his compatriot, though five centuries apart in age, share the similar procedure of presenting, or not presenting, what is essential.

In the current exhibition, Kawakubo rigorously explores identity on physical and conceptual planes, and during the process, he makes the viewers aware of his/her own physicality and non-physicality, providing the rare opportunity where the physical self is invited to vanish, but exist in the form as a ghost, the state in tune with the oeuvre that surrounds them.

note:

Murase Hiroharu 村瀬博春, 'Design Thinking on Tawaraya Sotatsu's 'Gods of Wind and Thunder': Creativity as Novel Implication' 俵屋宗達《風神雷神図》にみられるデザイン思考—意味の新規性としての創造性(in Japanese), *Cognitive Studies* 認知科学, bulletin of the Japanese Cognitive Science Society, 17(2010), 3, p.563-571.