

Interview between curator Sarah Suzuki and artist Merio Koizumi (August 2012)

Projects 99: Meiro Koizumi

Sarah Suzuki: In June of 2012, Meiro and I met in Tokyo to discuss an upcoming collaboration in New York. Over a really expensive fruit plate in a hotel lobby, and later over multiple courses of delicious tofu in a cozy restaurant near Shibuya Station, we talked about family, art, life, and projects and interests past, present, and future. Several months later, we conducted this interview, by e-mail, on the occasion of his exhibition at Burgos.

SS: I always find it interesting to know about an artist's origins, so let's start with a little background. Where did you grow up?

Merio Koizumi: I grew up in a suburb city called Maebashi, which is located 100 km north of Tokyo. There is nothing special about this city, but now they are building a contemporary art museum there, which is very exciting.

SS: What did your parents do?

MK: My father was a professor at a university. His specialty was the history of education, and he also taught philosophy. My mother was a housewife. Both of them are committed Christians, and go to protestant Christian church every Sunday. Until I left my parents' house at 16, I had to go to church every Sunday.

SS: Sounds like church on Sundays was not your favorite thing to do! My boyfriend's parents made him go to church every Sunday, but he hasn't been once since he left their house for university nearly 20 years ago. Their religious efforts had no effect on him. Do you feel it was the same

for you?

MK: Wow, I do feel the same! But if I look at it from another angle, their religious efforts actually had a great impact on shaping who I am. Ever since I was a little kid, I've kept asking myself this ultimate question: is there a God? I had difficult time with this question when I was a teenager; I got emotional before being able to think rationally. When I later studied religion at university, I finally acquired a way of thinking that allowed me to deal with this question more rationally, more objectively.

Now as an artist, I have come to realize how important this phase of my life was. I am never satisfied with my work unless it touches this layer, this ultimate question, in some way. And for years, I couldn't identify myself with many other Japanese artists of my generation because I thought these kinds of heavy questions were missing from their work. Without my parents religious effort, I would be someone who had no interest in religion. Thanks to their effort, I am now a serious atheist.

SS: What interests and hobbies did you have as a kid?

MK: My biggest hobby was to make my own Manga cartoons, and I also tried a few times to write detective novels. I also made quite a few card games. I really loved making my own system and rules.

SS: It's interesting that you were a storyteller from a young age. Did that translate in your academic interests? What were you like as a student?

MK: I was a creative kid. In seventh grade, I was making a series of manga that my friends fell in love with. So I drew an episode during each class, and then distributed it during the next break. The drawings were horrible. I was never good at making drawings. But it didn't matter. That was the first time that I felt I had success with my work.

SS: It's funny you should say that about your drawings, because when I see them, I always think they have great energy, and give insight into your process. How would you describe the role of drawing in your practice now?

MK: Drawing is a very important aspect of my art making. Many ideas for my videos arise when I am making idea drawings. I usually spend one or two hours a day with a pen and a sketchbook, trying to find an image in my deep consciousness. Sometimes image comes to me that offers so many possibilities, and contains so many layers; these are the images that have potential to become video work. Next, I have to start think about how I can capture this image using a real body and a video camera. And in the course of this process, I again have to make many drawings. At this stage, drawing offers multiple possibilities of how a project could be realized. So it doesn't matters whether they are good drawings or not. It's a crucial part of my thought process, and as long as it triggers something deep in my consciousness and give me a vision for possible art work, it serves its purpose.

SS: You left Japan for high school. How did that come about?

MK: As I mentioned, my father was a professor of Education, and he was quite pessimistic about the Japanese education system. So he wanted to send me to Canada, where my aunt lives.

SS: How did you feel about the idea of leaving home at 15? Excited? Nervous?

MK: At that time, sending kids to other countries wasn't so common among Japanese parents. So I think I was quite excited—I felt that my life was becoming something different from my friends' life.

SS: And once you got to Canada, how did you feel? What was the same, and what was different?

MK: The whole thinking was different. Just to give one example: I had a really amazing art teacher at my high school in Canada. She taught me the very basis of how to make artworks, and she made us study art history quite intensively too. In Japan, the assignment was to make a figure drawing of your left hand. In Canada, the assignment was to ask yourself what it means to make a drawing of your left hand. I don't think I would have become an artist if I stayed in Japan.

SS: So I guess your father was right about sending you to Canada! It really pushed you in different direction than if you had stayed in Japan. What were your thoughts about going to University? Did you want to go in Japan, or abroad?

MK: At that time, I wasn't thinking about going to art school. I wanted to study art history and literature. So I went back to Japan to a normal university to study liberal arts—art history, literature, archeology, theology and so on. I thought I wanted to become art historian, but realized I was never satisfied by just studying art. I was always making art, and making art made me understand about art more than studying art. When I realized this, I decided to become an artist.

SS: Your work is so layered—a single piece deals with many concerns. Do you think that your liberal arts education, your study of not only art history, but also literature and religion and history, has informed your work?

MK: Yes, definitely. I think my tendency to create many layers within a work comes from studying classical literature in university. For example, I really loved William Blake, this strange Romantic poet, who tried to depict his own understanding of the whole universe through strangely deformed mythical figures. I was really thrilled by this kind of classical artist who speaks to the biggest ideas through smallest things, and tried to make sense of the whole world through

their art.

Also as I mentioned, classes for religion helped me looking at things like faith and belief in a rational ways. Now I am making series of works that deals with Nationalism in Japan, and the root of this interest definitely comes from my liberal arts education.

SS: You mentioned that you were making art at university. When did you first start? After your manga, when you were in Canada?

MK: I started making art in high school, and haven't stopped since. But as I told you, I never thought of becoming a career artist, because I didn't even think that was an option. I became aware that it was when I was 21. I saw Bruce Nauman's show at the Hayward in London. I innocently thought "I can do that too." But of course, I discovered later that I was so wrong. It's so easy to copy Nauman, but just impossible to make bodies of work he made from scratch.

SS: It's so interesting that you mention that show in particular. I don't think we've ever discussed Nauman before, but in describing your work to people, I have used his work as a point of reference. There is something shared in the way you use your own bodies, restrain bodies, manipulate information... Has Nauman continued to be an important influence for you? Are there other artists, either from your study of art history or your own art viewing, that you feel have been important in your thinking?

MK: Nauman has always been a hero for me. His works are so simple yet so strong. It is always my goal to have that quality in my work. And I am constantly amazed by his ability to be so playful with his medium. Whether it is neon or video or sculpture or installation, it doesn't matter. He can somehow distance himself from each medium to create this free space where he can just enjoy playing around with it. It is very stimulating to imagine how he made his

works.

Another important artist for me is the Japanese film director, Yasujiro Ozu. I am especially fascinated by the way he directed actors. Actually the characters in his films have some similarity to the subjects of Nauman's videos, in the sense that depictions of the inner self are stripped down to set of gestures within a rigid framework. Ozu's films are like puppet shows using bodies of real actors. He never believed in conventional filmic language; he wanted to create his own. And he achieved it, inventing this very strange filmic language that no one can copy. On the surface, everything looks so ordinary and undramatic, but once you become aware of the layer behind this surface, you realize how dark and pessimistic his visions were.

SS: You mentioned that you saw the Nauman show in London at 21. You were at Chelsea College of Art and Design, right (1999–2002)? What did you take away from your time in London?

MK: I had a great schoolmates in London; I feel like I was taught more by my classmates than by my tutors. It was after YBAs made themselves successful, and young people from all over the world were coming to London to become the next YBA. So it was a great time.

SS: What was it about the works of the YBA that appealed to you?

MK: For me is the combination of punk attitude with a banality of expression. I think I was very much influenced by this, and they are still with me.

SS: Meaning works like *The Chair* (2000) and *Meroko-zu-uumi* (2000)? There is something very stripped down about these – just you and a couple of props.

MK: "Untitled" (2000) is one of the earliest video that I made. With this series, I was experimenting with a pencil,

a wooden board, a microphone, and a video camera to create a new instrument. Also *The Chair* (2000) was made around the same time. The video camera was a new thing for me, and I was innocently playing around with this device to see what images I could create. I am trying never to forget this innocent attitude towards video, and to keep it in my work even now.

SS: There seems to be a shift that takes place with *Amazing Grace* (2001) – more produced, more props, a new physicality, and emotional resonance. Looking back, do you see this work as a turning point that presages later work like *Human Opera XXX* (2007)?

MK: Definitely. Emotional resonance became one of the repeated motifs in my works since *Amazing Grace*. I have been fascinated by this ability of moving image ever since. Video is a medium that can deal directly with human emotion, and that can offer direct access to the emotion and consciousness of the audience. It is very difficult to make people cry with a painting or photograph, but it is not so difficult to do that with video. It must be very, very difficult to make half the people laugh, and the other half cry with a painting. But with video, you can do that. It's a very powerful medium. I think I want to make works that are crystallizations of the complex mechanism of how our emotions work within a subject and within a society.

SS: Something else that happened during this period is that you turned the camera from yourself onto performers.

MK: After 10 performance videos, I got really fed up with this enclosed universe, and became more interested in bringing in other people. I lost the control that I used to have, but there is no limit now. With a single idea, you get 10 totally different works, if you have 10 different performers. Everybody has different voice, different face, different muscles, different body, different history, different personality and so on. There is no limit. And my work become more than what I had imagined in my head. This process is

definitely more dynamic.

SS: Many of your performers are put in strange circumstances, or given difficult directions. What is your relationship with your actors like?

MK: First I was scared to have someone in front of camera. I got really nervous, and was afraid to direct them. But now I am quite relaxed, and do not feel that fear anymore because I realized that there is nothing special about this director – actor relationship. In the end, it's all about very basic communication like, how you talk, listen, and understand someone else.

SS: How does your process differ when you're directing yourself, or other performers?

MK: When I perform by myself, it is always my face, my voice, my body that I can use. The good thing is that I can control myself better than I can other people's bodies. But at the same time, it is so limiting. When I was my own performer, the work was about myself, about this one human being. But when I got someone else, the work starts to talk about how we communicate, interrupt, hurt, and love each other. It started to talk about human beings in more universal sense.

SS: There is a cruelty, a masochism, in projects like Jap (2003) or Human Opera XXX (2007). Where do you think this comes from? What purpose does this serve?

MK: I do not know where this comes from, and I personally don't think I am sadistic as people might think that I am. But at the same time, I think film directors need to be a little bit of a sadist in order to get what they want to get. Shooting other people with a camera always involves exploitation of subjectivity. You can not be so innocent about this when you need to get image that you want to get.

SS: Projects like Human Opera XXX or Art of Awakening

(2005) certainly create discomfort on the part of the viewer. For me, it's a particularly potent mix of unease and curiosity; the implication of the watcher in this cycle of exploitation. Is that part of your thinking?

MK: Yes in these two works and in some other works like *Jap* (2004) and *Portrait of a Young Samurai* (2009), this cycle of exploitation is more apparent. I think audiences feel discomfort because I make them stand in the director's position, but at the same time, they can never become an active agent in this director – actor power relationship. They always remain just a passive/ powerless viewer of this cycle of exploitation, even though they are in the position of exploiter. And this position can sometimes be more uncomfortable than the position of the actors. The actors can be active agent if they want to. So the real victim can be sometimes the audience instead of the actor.

And I should add that it is never my goal to create discomfort in the audience, but rather to create certain images that satisfy my aesthetic demands. Reaction of audience is always secondary.

SS: In 2005, you went to Amsterdam?

MK: Art in Amsterdam was quite different than that in London—more serious and intellectual, closer to art in Germany, I felt. They seemed to despise the banality of the British artists. When I was there, I felt like I was making works against this seriousness. It was only when I left, that I realized how much I had absorbed. I feel that I developed my current artistic language in Amsterdam, which I can use to address anything from political issues to problems in history as material for my art production.

SS: In recent years, you have used Japan as a lens through which to examine such issues. What is it about Japan's history that draws you?

MK: I am not interested in History as such. My interest in

history comes from my ambition to understand what Japan is all about, what it means to me, how I deal with it, and how I can free myself from it. To gain this autonomy is very important for me as an artist I think, and without going through history, especially the modern history after 1860, it is not possible to grasp how this country is shaped in the first place. So I deal with history in my work in order to grasp Japan at the beginning of 21st century with my artistic production.

SS: A number of recent works deal specifically with kamikaze pilots, military officers, domestic dialogues, that relate to World War II. Do you see this as representing over-nationalism, over-patriotism? How do you feel that this connects to 21st century Japan?

MK: I deal with the history of Kamikaze because it poses the ultimate question of how one should deal with Nation. As long as we are unable to solve this question, the image of Kamikaze will stay with us. And I don't think we've come up with any positive solution to this problem in the last 67 years. So the same thing can happen quite easily if we find ourselves in a situation of war.

Many Kamikaze pilots left farewell notes to their families. I have been reading a lot of them recently, and came to one conclusion. There is always this question: whether these pilots were ordered to kill themselves, or they made a voluntary sacrifice of their lives for the nation. In general, leftists want to believe that they were sad victim of war who were ordered to kill themselves. Nationalists want to believe that they were heroic soldiers who volunteered their lives to save the pride of the nation. I personally think that it was both. Not that some were voluntary and others were ordered, but more that it was both an order and also voluntary act within one person. And I believe that video is the perfect medium to deal with such split subjectivity.

SS: I think that's a tantalizing, and true, statement on which end. Thank you, Meiro!