

Making the right choice

by Kuniharu Shimizu (Fall, 2010)

I was asked by Robert san to write something about haiga, relating it to Hiro Yamagata's recent painting series "Atmosphere".

As I viewed Yamagata's paintings at the webpages of the show (http://www.tenri.org/gallery/hiro_yamagata.shtml), the images of similar paintings done by other artists came to my mind one after another. By showing those images, and adding my comments to them, I hope to put together something that will relate Yamagata's painting to what I do, haiga.

"Atmosphere" by Hiro Yamagata





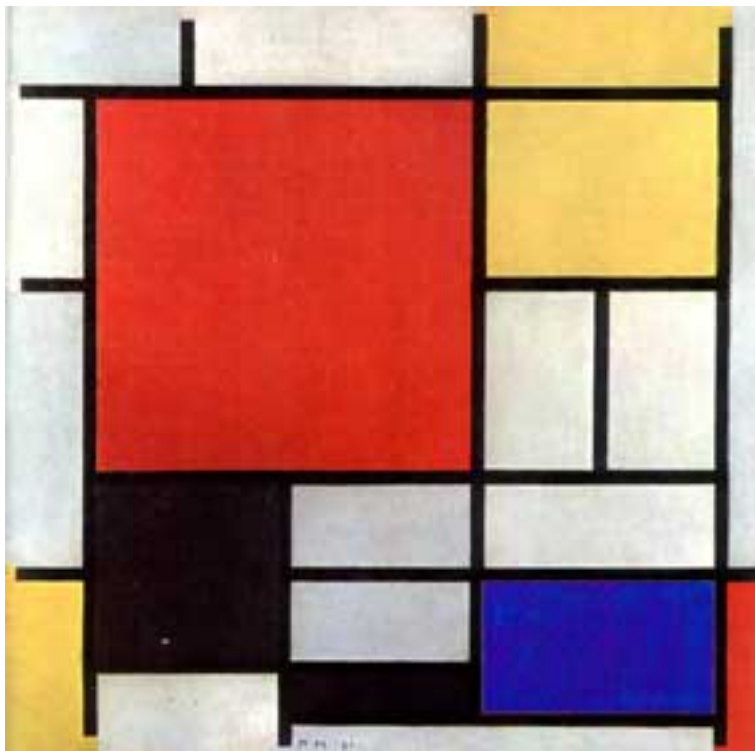
This show was held at the gallery of Tenri Cultural Institute in NY (Nov.4~30, 2010). Yamagata used mainly india ink on rice paper canvas. The inspiration of the series came from his encounter with Afghanistan. He frequented there to carry out a laser project in which laser beams reconstruct destroyed stone Buddha at Barmiyān.

I did not see the actual paintings, meaning I did not experience their size and picture plane textures, and this makes my impressions limited. However, my vague memory of Yamagata's earlier painting series "Transient", which I saw at his LA studio some years back, and which were done in similar approach, supplements the limitation. "Transient" paintings are done mainly with black ink on several layers of rice paper, which give interesting depth to otherwise flat canvas. Adding to that approach, for this new series, Yamagata seems to have pushed and pulled, and even ripped the rice paper, creating almost like satellite views of Afghanistan landscape. There must be a lot of tangible textures on the canvas.

I have never been to Afghanistan, but the photographs and video feeds I see on TV and Web seem to tell me that the nature and the environment there are not exactly friendly to us human. Plus that, there has been many

years of turmoil within the Afghanistan society. Yamagata actually walked on the land of Afghanistan under the harsh sun, climbed treeless mountains and witnessed brutal human acts of destruction, and all these must have left tremendous impact on his mind. Yamagata is a poet before being an artist (He associated with the Beat Poets, especially with Alenn Ginsburg). His sensitive poet's mind breathed the "atmosphere" there, and his painter's hands began to visualize it on the canvas.

The "Atmosphere" can be classified as works of unfixed abstract forms. The forms can be either the fixed form (teikei) like cool geometric shapes and manmade shapes, or the unfixed form (hi-teikei) like all the shapes we find in the nature and shapes derived from them. Piet Mondrian's works are the examples of the fixed abstract forms, whereas works by Jackson Pollock, Sam Francis, and Tōkō Shinoda are those of unfixed abstract forms.



Piet Mondrian



Jackson Pollock



Sam Francis



Tōkō Shinoda

Yamagata's works fall into the later category, and I think that Yamagata made a choice here. To express the kind of experience he had in Afghanistan, he felt using unfixed abstract forms was far better expressive than the fixed ones.

Actually, Yamagata is a very versatile painter, he can go either ways. His earlier works are very fixed, used mostly manmade realistic forms. Take a look at one of those works. This work was commissioned to commemorate the 100th Anniversary of the Statue of Liberty.



Hiro Yamagata 1986

And now, for “Atmosphere”, he tried unfixed, and he is very good at it, too.

Making the right choice is one way to produce good work of art. Choose a right style or way one feels fit to express the theme or one’s emotion. There are many artists who made it good with certain style, and keep on producing artworks with that style for fear of losing the reputation. Such works bore the views eventually. On the other hand, there are many others who keep on trying to find right style that expresses the honest needs of the artists. I can name two of such artists: Picasso and Matisse. And Yamagata is joining the club. (visit his website <http://www.hiroyamagata.com/> and see the variety of paths he walked).

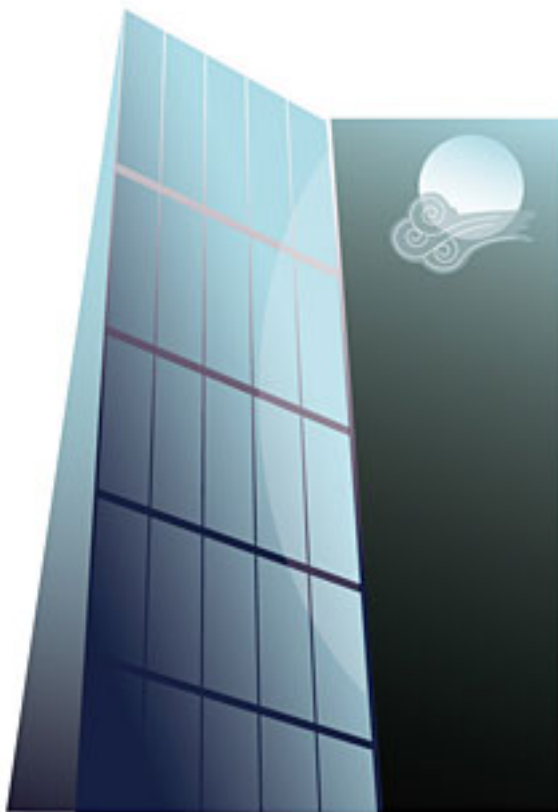
It is presumptuous of me to say that I am also the member of the club. However, the club’s approach is what I employ when I make haiga. In my case, the style changes from one haiga to another. I read haiku and decide what style or appearance is suitable to the content of the haiku. In other words, I try to make the right choice.

Here are some examples. Since I have been discussing about forms, fixed and unfixed, one example is about unfixed, and the other is fixed. And the last one is a combination plus space aspect.



black ink flows freely
human hands never shape it
nature always free
(Elliot Jermy 11)

This is a haiga I made several years ago. The haiku was among a batch sent to me by an English poet, who often gives haiku workshops for school children. When I read this haiku, I decided to use mainly the unfixed form of water. I poured black ink on a sheet of paper, and let it take its own form. Then with a brush I added a palm like shape and splashed dots.



60 stories
of glass:
the summer moon

haiku: Michael McClintock (USA)

60 stories
of glass:
the summer moon
(Michael McClintok)

Compare to the previous haiga, this shows completely different style or appearance. I did not have any information about this haiku by McClintock, like when and where it was written, but the haiku itself spoke to me that it wished hard-edged, sharp and cool rendering, hence this appearance.

The last example is like the combination of fixed and unfixed, but the most important aspect of it is the blank white space. The solitude this haiga expresses can best be shown simply by blank space.



haiku: Ozaki, Hōsai (Japan)

Coughing, even:
alone
(Ozaki, Hōsai)

Yamagata' mind never quit to be inquisitive, always looking for a new artistic path. The urge of creation seems to well from within himself, and never dries up, which happen to the truly creative soul. I am not so lucky as Yamagata. In my case, I rely on something else as the source of creative urge. That something is haiku. The urge is triggered by haiku. Haiku by myself, or by the others speak to me. Each haiku wishes to be rendered in the way fitting to it, and I am to respond to it. I search my knowledge of visual art to find the best outfit for the haiku. This approach seems rather passive, but rewarding too, for I never get to be bored, and am able to stay in the club. If you are interested in haiga, please join the club, too. You are always welcome.

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