

“Whereabouts” in a time of Diversity

It's said that a truly talented sculptor does not build form from material but instead finds and frees the form that lies within the material.

The legendary Italian renaissance artist Michelangelo once said:

“I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.”

--Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni

In addition, one of Natsume Soseki's narratives from the book *Ten Nights of Dreams* involves a mysterious episode in which bystanders from the Meiji era watch the early Kamakura-era monk Unkei carve statues of *Nio* Buddhist guardians. As they look on, one member of the crowd says the following:

“He does not use his chisel to create the eyebrows and nose. He uses the force of the chisel and mallet to unearth the eyebrows and nose that lie within the wood. It is like excavating a stone and that is why he never makes a mistake.”

Excerpt from Natsume Soseki's *Ten Nights of Dreams*

Emi Katsuta is another sculptor who fulfills the ideals described above.

One of the signatures of her artwork is the way her wood-bored creations seem to possess the soft skin of a child. She achieves that quality by working with the bark of Japan's distinctive Hinoki cypress trees and the results, when contrasted with the matte texture of the characters' colorfully painted clothes, evoke a lifelike complexion that tempts the viewer to reach out and touch them.



Tiger Girl, 2018 h108 × w47 × d27cm Japanese cypress, synthetic resin

Meanwhile, the red noses of her characters lend their faces an ambiguity that suggests “I am everyone and no one, myself and someone else.” This sense of ubiquity provides an opening for the audience to crawl inside, and the characters' facial expressions will often appear different depending on the feelings and circumstances of each person, almost as if the viewer is looking at themselves in a mirror.

But while her works take on the familiar form of the human figure, Katsuta's primary drive is to capture scenes and phenomenon she has seen with her own eyes, all while reflecting feminism, gender, and the other complex intertwining ideas and circumstances that spring from social context. In 2018, Katsuta held her first solo exhibition in New York, *Emi Katsuta: That Fantastic Someone* (SEIZAN Gallery, New York), presenting a sculpture called *Tiger Girl*. It depicted a girl who was clad in the MEXICO 66 design of the artist's favorite sneaker brand, Onitsuka Tiger. With a megaphone in her hand and a gaze that was unflinchingly straight ahead, the piece was intended as an homage to the #MeToo movement and feminine strength. Later, her 2022 exhibition *Emi Katsuta: Someone's Whereabouts* (SEIZAN Gallery, Tokyo) responded to the

protracted COVID-19 pandemic, the outbreak of conflict and military invasions abroad, and other external elements that produced fundamental changes in the lifestyle and outlook of people around the world, by evoking the multitude of “whereabouts” that are forced upon people of all kinds. Be they the physical “whereabouts” of people who have lost their homes or are forced to do remote work, the psychological “whereabouts” born from differing views about the pandemic or Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, or the “whereabouts” thrust upon us by the roles we are assigned, from protagonist to powerless or villainous, the works in the exhibition expressed the way that all of these “whereabouts,” regardless of a person’s nature or their affairs, are subject to change depending on nationality, religion, or social position.

Now, in this new exhibition, “Emi Katsuta: One’s Whereabouts,” the artist expands her thoughts and inquiries beyond the subjective individual perspective of “someone’s whereabouts” to ponder the differing landscapes of others, as seen from “one’s whereabouts.”

From the mythological nine-tailed fox to the albino fox that is said to be a servant of the God of Harvest, and the beckoning cat that is known as a good luck charm for businesses, the exhibition features apparitions that have taken the form of foxes and cats. In doing so, it reveals how, due merely to the relative attraction they hold for human beings, each has alternately been held up as an ally or enemy of mankind.

For example, while the nine-tailed fox was once worshipped as an auspicious beast that marked the emergence of a wise ruler and peaceful world, it is also said to have disguised itself as a beautiful woman and tempted the rulers of the day into wickedness. The description of the fox as an evil being is sometimes said to be a misunderstanding or a creative conceit developed by subsequent generations. The albino fox, too, has been called a servant of the Gods and, at other times, a monster that deceives humans. The origin of the beckoning cat as an omen of fortune or positive encounters can be traced to a number of different sources, including different folk religions, and it is unknown which explanation is correct. No one has a clear idea of the truth and with the years that have passed, any clarity gained would likely be incomprehensible to us.

This shift in characteristics is not limited to the supernatural world. On the contrary, we judge all beings and events as good or evil on a daily basis, and in an extremely self-serving manner. In response to the endless flow of news from the Internet, we assume full knowledge, based on a single element of each affair, and make myopic conclusions. Even with regard to things outside our experience, those limited elements are enough to make immediate judgments. What’s more, when the elements unknown to us are made clear, there are surely cases where we doubt our previous judgments and easily shift to new ones. It could be said that rather than a change in the nature of good or evil, these shifts actually represent changes in the judgments we, ourselves, render.

“Can the world seen from one’s whereabouts really be trusted? Can the whole really be divided so easily into individual parts?”



Nine Tailed Fox Spirit: Ann, 2023 h81×w38×d35 cm
Acrylic on Japanese cypress, cloth (base)



White Fox: Vivienne, 2023 h37×w26×d18 cm
Acrylic on Japanese cypress, cloth (base)

The works in this exhibition feature a sharp contrast between brightness and darkness.

What do brightness and darkness mean to the artist? Due to the nature of her work, Katsuta does not complete her days in 24 hours. Rather, her lifestyle is spent in 26 hour cycles, meaning each day is two hours off the previous one. On some days, she is known to wake up extremely early and on others, late in the evening. When she wakes in the evening, Katsuta stays up through the night and goes to sleep in the morning. In these periods, she enters a cycle of darkness during which there is no afternoon. According to the artist, this “nighttime cycle” feels as if she has plunged into her own subconscious. Though she is far less social, she is able to experience bursts of well-honed concentration. On the other hand, during her “daytime” cycle, the artist becomes more social.



The smell of brunch, 2023 h33×w11×D11 cm
Acrylic on Japanese cypress, cloth (base)

I myself have had a similar experience. It occurred with the transition between my college days, when I drifted as far as possible from daily exercise, and my early days as a professional, when I began martial arts as a hobby and a way to lose weight. At university, I was known to talk through the night and was a light sleeper, preferring a life of day-dreams that left my decisions clouded in ambiguity. As I was losing weight, however, my hours of sleep grew shorter and deeper, while my decision-making was clear and fast. Perhaps this was because the cruel weight loss regimen activated my body’s instinctive need for survival. Either way, those who met me during these different periods may have come away with completely different impressions of who I am.

Amid these changes brought on by external circumstances, if one were to ask which of the varying identities was the real me, I can only say that they both emerged naturally and cannot know which is correct. More curiously, if I were to be surrounded by the people who knew “me at that time,” even “the me I am now” will naturally begin to speak and act as “the me I was then.” One could conclude from this that human beings unconsciously act as the person that others expect us to be.

As we ponder the opposing pairs of elements captured by Katsuta’s works, be they good and evil, brightness and darkness, light and shadow, or truth and lies, what crosses the mind is the alternating shifts in perspective that occur in response to the presence of others, the inner changes to the self that occur in response to external elements, and the unconscious roles that we all perform. Could the judgments we render toward other persons and events really be filtered through such an unstable lense?

In an age of diversity where our relationships with others grow ever more complicated and we risk losing our own sense of place, perhaps the only thing that can guide us is, as Katsuta suggests, to continue thinking.

By continuing to question and consider what we see, our own whereabouts and the whereabouts of others remain unfixed. That, alone, can us save us.

Text : Yasuyo Ota
Translation : Brad Plumb