

Takako Azami: Approaching the Origins of Painting
—Depictions on the Backsides of Paintings
Hideki Nakamura, Art Critic

Takako Azami creates her works with traditional Japanese painting materials, such as *sumi* ink and chalk pigment on Japanese paper, while also using new materials such as acrylic mediums. She is in no way shackled by either the frameworks of existing styles or systems, or by conventional usages of materials. Her works are solely aimed at directly pursuing the strength that the visual expression of ‘painting’ can bring to people.

The surface of Azami’s work consists of a mass of dots and lines done in fine brushstrokes. These innumerable, temporarily expressed traces conform to the physical characteristics of the materials that transcend human agency. These traces allow viewers to intuitively feel the boundlessly expanding sense of time-space behind the work, which has not actually been expressed despite of the highly condensed nature of the surface. In fact, Azami consistently uses a unique method of production in which she paints the backside of Japanese paper with *sumi* ink and chalk pigment, but shows the front side as her work, through which the *sumi* and chalk have oozed out from the back. Conspicuously found in her newest series of works are a sense of dynamism, which derives from the rhythmical repetition of her brushstrokes, and a sense of depth created by the multilayered brushstrokes.

I would like to now make a more careful analysis on the structure of Azami’s works and investigate the source of strength possessed by the medium of ‘painting’ that is indicated in her works.

First of all, each and every fine brushstroke in her painting can be considered the manifestation of the process of cognition by which she perceives one microscopic fragment after another within the seamlessly continuous external world. By ‘cognition,’ we mean the understanding of external objects via one’s perceptions, reasoning and memory, in order that we may cope with our surroundings. Our limited function of ‘cognition’ is also characterized as an eternally inconclusive ‘process.’

As if substantiating the said essence of her brushstrokes, Azami once wrote an interesting comment as follows: “When I was small, I felt as if I could actually see the movements of the particles of air in my room.” (January 1998) In her recent solo exhibition, her theme of “Viewing Light” called to the minds of viewers an intimate relationship with their surroundings that enveloped their own bodies.

Azami’s aim does not lie in creating a form that becomes its own end goal, which would sever the work’s relationship with the external world. Rather, she persistently depicts her paintings with an open mind toward the unfathomable, intricate and chaotic world. However, even when she faces trees that have grown dense, her mind is not confined within an ordinary level that would replace the ‘trees’ with words such as ‘leaves’ and ‘branches.’ Instead, she sees a continuum consisting of the nameless, infinitesimal portions of the trees, as one would view the phenomena of light. Regardless of the fact that the mass consisting of large and small and long and short brushstrokes in her painting allows viewers to imagine ‘leaves’ and ‘branches,’ these phenomena are in fact connected to the regaining of the “non-verbal cognitive processes,” which is the essence of the medium of ‘painting.’

We ordinarily connect ourselves with the external world via the segmentation of language. This is one of the outstanding abilities of humankind. But on the other hand, this ability also confines us within a monocentric world image, which is brought about by the fixed frameworks of preconceived ideas, as well as the trends of simple expressions. In comparison, 'painting' allows an artist to flexibly respond to still-nameless phenomena, and also to synchronously indicate the processes of his/her cognition into innumerable visual points that are created at different points of time. The viewers of this type of painting would not only look at the entire surface all at once, but would focus from one detail to the next on the multi-centered surface. This would position them to be in the "middle" of the multiple-view that was created at different points of time, whereby they perceive the distant boundless continuum of time-space, which would never directly actually appear on the surface.

The countless materialistic traces found in Azami's paintings derived from her eye movements that were subsequently replaced with her hand movements. These traces are temporary replacements created to visualize the forevermore inconclusive and fragmental cognitive processes that have taken place within her brain. Thus, the traces themselves do not possess any reality; in a sense, they are equivalent to "nothingness." Azami's work is solely composed of multilayered traces that derive from her actions taken at different points of time, which conform to the physical characteristics of the materials she utilizes. Thus, her work emphasizes the fact that its surface consists of temporary symbols; at its core are the blur of the ink spreading on the Japanese paper and the tension created between the *sumi* and chalk.

Azami's method of depiction, which reveals the surface's character created out from only temporary substitution of symbols, does not weaken the strength of her expression. Rather, by returning the surface to the original state of "nothingness," viewers are made to become strongly aware of the cognitive processes that have not directly appeared but which would naturally occur in their minds. Thus, the viewers face Azami's cognitive processes by superimposing those processes with their own. The manifestation of her cognitive processes is merely composed of inconclusive and incomplete fragments that are depicted in the foreground of time and space that boundlessly expand into the background. But within the eyes that gaze into this expression, there dwells a solid ground for self-creation.

Now let us explore the underlying meaning behind the most significant feature of Azami's production method, whereby she makes depictions on the backside of Japanese paper and displays the front side upon which the ink and the pigment have oozed out into. Surprisingly, her method that is, in a sense, irregular multilaterally demonstrates the mechanism that gives strength to the medium of 'painting,' while also greatly supporting her expressions.

The numerous overlapping layers of brushstrokes, which look as if they are receding from the surface, require viewing from countless visual points that intersect with all parts of the surface. Thus, one of the meanings behind her use of that method is so that viewers can perceive the state of "distance between the viewer and the work," via taking in the entire view before then drawing closer and moving their eyes about as if they were wandering about the surface. It is also aimed at having the viewers perceive that the true essence of 'painting' lies in the physical sensation that can be felt from their

relationship with the work. This allows viewers to become clearly aware that their own existence is on one side of that relationship.

Another underlying meaning is that Azami's method manifests the function of "the other within the self" within 'painting.' As the artist paints on the backside of the paper, she also possesses the imaginary eye of the other-self who stands looking upon the front side. On the other hand, it is the viewer who superimposes the other-eye with the eye of the painter that is depicting the work from the back. This means that the other-self who looks at the self painting, and the other-self who is equivalent to the painter on the other side of the self can both be nurtured. The certainty of one's own existence can be strengthened by being objectively gazed at by the fore-mentioned "other within the self." Strangely enough, the idea of the origin of 'painting' as the place for one's own self-creation can be confirmed in Azami's method of creating her depictions on the backside of her paper.

When the brushstrokes depicted from the back are viewed from the front, what naturally always occurs is that the first series of brushstrokes come out to the very foreground of the surface. The following brushstrokes that came after the first ones recede into the distance in the order that they were created, while also being partially blocked by the earlier brushstrokes. Thus, the final brushstrokes are seen as receding to the most inner depths of the work. The first brushstrokes, depicted in advance through her initial physical reactions, are based on her overall intuition that she perceives from gazing at the subjects of her work. These brushstrokes are then repeatedly complemented through her additional cognitive process, which also allows them to gain more refinement and profundity.

Azami's method of depiction is clearly different from the common method in which new brushstrokes are overlaid in succession as they erase the previous ones. Her method, which considers 'painting' to be the manifestation of the temporarily objectified "cognitive processes that continue to complement her initial intuition," has succeeded in transforming the state of the self that did not make use of one's past experiences. This method thus releases the painter from the sense of tension in which one has to determine the next move without having anything to go on.

On the other hand, the way in which the black-*sumi* and white-chalk dots and lines compete with one another, while also intertwining with one another on an equal basis, conveys that her expression possesses a double-meaning of certainty and uncertainty that must have occurred during her cognitive creative process. Generally speaking, a sense of peace of mind can arise from the self-creation process, possessing both certainty and flexibility, via the combination of relying upon the primordial cognitive process for the 'next moment' and accepting the fact that cognitive processes can never be absolute.

Takako Azami's method of creating depictions on the back of her works became more intricate in her newest series of paintings, in which she created conspicuous differences in her brushstrokes' directions and forms, as well as in their sizes and shades. This visual effect functions as a source for creating a sense of rhythmical liveliness that can lift the viewer's spirit, while also acting as a source of strong impact on the viewer by seemingly approaching and directly speaking to him or her.

(Translated by Taeko Nanpei)