

Curator Interview TSUZUKI Kyoichi

What are the highlights of this exhibition?

It is not an exhibition in the sense of displaying things that have never before been seen or created. Most visitors will probably say that they've seen these things before, that their grandmother made something similar or their parents have them at home. People overlook things that are right there for them to see every day. I wanted to show them these kinds of things from a completely different angle so that they would rediscover them. That's why I was very particular about enlarging carefully taken photographs of small works of art rather than simply placing them out to be viewed. I wanted to give people a different look at things they overlook even though they're always right there, so that they will reacquaint themselves. That's what's at the core of this exhibition.

One often sees Mom's Art in one's parents' home, or in the windows of shops in towns, at hospital reception desks, or at rummage sales. I wanted to display as many works as possible, but I didn't want it to look like a rummage sale. Although space was limited, I wanted to exhibit the works straightforwardly and as though they were actually there and not just photographs, so I thought about how to achieve that. I am an editor, so it was not about putting together a stylish exhibition, but rather creating a space where each wall is a page, and each room is a book. I consulted architects and designers about these matters as I put together the exhibition. I have done several exhibitions intended to bring visitors in close, and I always clash with the designers because they want the text in the descriptions to be as small as possible, and I don't like that. (Laughs)

How do you feel when you look back on the exhibition as a whole?

I was glad to see that the exhibition attracted completely different people than usual, from the visitors to the members of the media who covered it. Women's weekly magazines, for example. I have never sought acclaim in the art world, so it makes me far happier to see a lot of people who have never been to or even heard of a place like this. It makes me happy when grandparents, young children, and people of all ages simply come to look and enjoy themselves, think back on the house

they grew up in, or connect the art to personal memories without having to learn anything difficult.

The exhibition is full of descriptions, but not every piece comes with one. Did you purposely avoid identifying the pieces to encourage people to connect them to personal memories?

Yes, that was clearly my aim. In short, you normally describe the work, telling people what it's called and who created it. This inevitably delivers the message that the work could not have been created by anybody else. That is not the case in this exhibition. Of course, these are distinct, high-quality works of art, but the people whose art is on display here are not the only ones who can create it. I think many people all over Japan are creating similar things at the same level of quality. In other words, the aim is not to show unique pieces, but rather to show them as a kind of greatest common factor. I wanted to highlight the nuance that, although many people make things like this, the person who made the one you see here represents them all. Also, especially in contemporary art exhibitions, people tend to read the descriptions before taking a closer look at the works. They want to know who created the work, or the title, or who owns it. Not everyone agrees with this description-first approach, so this exhibition is intended to be a counter to that way of appreciating art. Perhaps this is possible only because the subject matter is Mom's Art. I don't think this opposite approach would work with a more typical exhibition of paintings. This manner of exhibition is only possible because we're dealing with Mom's Art. Apparently, a lot of people who saw our exhibition stopped by handicraft stores on their way home or asked their mothers or grandmothers to make art for them. That kind of reaction is out of the question at normal exhibitions, after which people tend to go straight home. Even the gallery staff members tried their hand at making towel dogs. (Laughs)

Have you noticed any changes in your nearly 15 years of photographing Mom's Art?

None myself, but I did feel like many people who came to this exhibition in particular felt like the art was quite relatable. The response from visitors to the exhibition

and on social media has been amazing, hasn't it? When I see the pictures people upload, I think they are from the exhibition, but it turns out that the items are on display in their parents' homes. (Laughs) If this were a normal exhibition, you would not want to see that people have the same things at home, but in this case, it's different because it's Mom's Art. That's how popular this form of art is now, and it really highlights how much it was ignored before. After all, there were never any Mom's Art exhibitions of this size. We probably will not take this exhibition on tour, but we don't need to because people make things like this everywhere, and can put together their own exhibitions. They'd be local versions of the Museum of Mom's Art, every bit as good as the one in Shibuya. Normally, you can't have an exhibition without a special work of art to headline it, but one of the amazing things about Mom's Art is that it can be exhibited anywhere.

Is Mom's Art more of a place or a community rather than a tangible thing?

It could be a type of phenomenon. Then again, maybe it is not urban art. I believe there are urban, suburban, and rural types of expression. There are trendy things that come from the city, things like hip-hop that originate in the suburbs, and things like the Kakashi (scarecrow) Festival that develop in the countryside. Of course, some Mom's Art traces its roots back to cities like Kobe, but in my experience, most is created in groups by elderly women who live in the countryside and have time to spare. Publishers of instruction manuals and manufacturers of kits are headquartered in cities, but people in the countryside are the ones who buy them. Nothing about this phenomenon is initiated from the urban scene, which is one of the things I like about it.

Why do you think that is?

In my opinion, it is sometimes easier to get together in the countryside. I came upon many cases where women met every day, with one of their husbands driving around and picking everyone up. They are able to spend a lot of time creating their art, and they develop a kind of friendly competition as they each see what the others are making.

When we spoke with the artists, we learned that some of them consider things like working with

lace or embroidery as handicrafts, but view Mom's Art as something completely different.

There are aspects of Mom's Art that make it different from typical handicrafts. While talking about Mom's Art, I became aware that no small number of artists actually dislike handicrafts. I had no idea until they told me, but apparently the reason they dislike it is because they were forced to do it. Things like making covers for children's lunch boxes or bags for their indoor shoes. Apparently, it's common to think that a good mother makes those kinds of things by hand. I even heard that there are services out there now that allow you to order things intentionally designed to look handmade. I find it very strange that people are forced to make practical things in order to feel like a good person. It was the first I'd ever heard about certain generations having an aversion to handicrafts because it makes them feel rejected. I'm single and have no children, so I suppose I had no exposure to this kind of thing . . .

One enduring aspect of handicrafts is that homemakers have had to make the things they need for daily life. They had to do things like sew summer kimono or knit gloves late at night. That late-night, unpaid work was simply a part of the mother's domestic work. What makes Mom's Art different from traditional handicrafts is that it is not nearly as practical or useful. Although it may sound strange to refer to handicrafts as servitude because it's generally a pleasant word, they do constitute labor that women were forced to do, and Mom's Art could be one thing that frees them from it. The fact that elderly women can spend all day making something that is of no use, when considered from a different perspective, is indicative of the world we live in now. I also feel that Mom's Art is a form of expression that originated from societal changes.

In your statement, you portray Mom's Art alongside contemporary art and alternative rock. They appear to be worlds apart at first glance, but at the same time, it seems to me that you are showing your reverence for Mom's Art the same way you would for artists and art with the same sensitivities as your generation.

When I look at Mom's Art, I am reminded of Mike Kelley's work because I believe that contemporary artists are aware of the creepiness that lurks behind the "cute" things that flood our daily lives. The creators

of Mom's Art think what they make is cute, but after carefully photographing so many pieces, I get the impression that they are actually a bit unsettling. One Roll-chan is cute, but 10 in a row are downright creepy. It made me realize that there's nothing interesting about "cute" if it's not tempered with creepy.

When professional designers are involved, they eliminate any trace of anything unsettling. They don't want anyone to be creeped out when they see the mascot of the product. To say that something looks professionally made is another way of saying there's a process for eliminating noise. But handmade articles are full of noise. Especially the items sold at roadside stations. They also have very low-quality products with staggeringly low prices to match. I was intrigued that staff members could apply price tags and put items on the shelves so calmly despite not knowing what they were or what purpose they served. Nobody questioned their placement right next to fresh vegetables and fruits picked that morning, garishly colored acrylic scrubbies, twisted-cloth slippers, and beadwork. Observing this as an outsider, you come to realize that there is noise that can be seen as well as noise that can be heard.

Do you think this exhibition will open people's eyes in this way?

I'd like to think so, but if I had to start somewhere, I'd rather people respect their mothers more. (Laughs) Even if you think something is vaguely appealing, you can't say it for fear that someone else will think it's tacky. There are times you won't even let yourself think it's cute, aren't there? But I would be so happy if this exhibition makes people feel like it's okay to say, "I love these kinds of things!" out loud. You see this often at art exhibitions, where people go because everyone said good things about it on social media, and then 'Like' it without really understanding what they saw. It's like a game of trying to understand or appear as though you understand. For what it's worth, I think this exhibition could liberate people from this kind of posturing because they can simply enjoy themselves without any concern for showing off knowledge of art history, understanding esoteric concepts, or raising social issues.