

Curator Interview **YAMASHITA Kaori** (Association “crazy about SHITAMACHI-RETRO”)

What are the highlights of this exhibition?

We considered it our role to design the venue and collect the artwork, so first and foremost, we want people to see just how much art we have on display at the venue. As the type of person who actually prefers figuring out just how much I can do within the limitations of venue design, even though it was something I had never created before, I enjoyed thinking about how to put it all together. For example, for the Mom’s Art Tower that covers the pillar in the Interactive Space, the ceiling is only so high, so we adjusted the height of the art and it ended up being a tower. I’m glad we all shared our opinions and agreed on the final appearance. At first, the fixtures in Exhibition Room 1 were stiff and angular. But we talked it out and arrived at the opinion that we should incorporate some curves to achieve a sense of unity with the design on the flyer.

The most challenging thing about the Mom’s Art exhibition was collecting the artwork. Yes, I think that was the most difficult part. Honestly, we didn’t even realize that we would be able to collect so much art. As to why, I think a major part of it was the fact that some of the moms in Kobe had always taught handicrafts and made so many kits, so they were each in a position to teach. In that sense, it feels a bit different than if they had gotten together and just done it for fun. It’s not just a hobby—they make so many pieces of art once they get to the creating phase. Everyone in Kobe is really engrossed in the art now that it is their life’s work. It could be that the staggering amount of art is the result of more than a decade of team building.

You mentioned that you first saw Mom’s Art while walking around old inner-city neighborhoods around the time that your association, “crazy about SHITAMACHI-RETRO,” got started. How did the team come together after that?

In that first year, [association chairperson] ITO Yuki and I searched for art and got the artists to lend it to us. There have been many Mom’s Art exhibitions here and there, but hardly any last very long. In fact, most happen once and then never again. That made me think we really needed to get the artists involved in the exhibitions. I

wondered what we could do so that people who make this art at home or while having tea with friends would have a compelling reason to take action. We tried various strategies to get the artists to actually come to the venue instead of just letting us borrow their art. For example, we let the artists choose where their works would be displayed on a first-come, first-served basis. We did things like that to get them to come to the venue.

You encouraged active participation.

Yes, little by little. Everyone was passive at first, so we realize how far we’ve come since then. Members came and went during that time. I got the particular feeling that people who were thinking mainly of selling their works were moving on from these kinds of exhibitions. When I looked at who stayed back, I felt like the best of the best had remained, including some who taught. We needed a lot of art for this exhibition, and these top artists came through with works of their own or even created new ones. It was amazing. I was surprised to see how much power we had.

Do you see any differences between this exhibition and past Mom’s Art exhibitions?

It’s not so much that I see differences, but more like I realized the team’s reason for existing, because we have the artwork, and we are able to collect and create more. This is definitely an exceptional team. Other teams may be able to put some art together, but it’s pretty difficult to gather more than 1,000 pieces. I see these exhibitions as important opportunities for these women to express themselves. One even came after breaking a bone, and another called the day of her husband’s wake. That’s why they got so angry when someone said this art was frivolous. That may be one aspect of it, but it is definitely not the only reason that these women create this art. Mom’s Art looks super easy at first glance, doesn’t it? I mean, it’s ubiquitous. One might think it would be easy to put together a collection, but it’s not that simple. I mean, this exhibition is set up to highlight the ubiquity, so that’s well and good. But I want to tell these people to try to actually collect the pieces to make an exhibition. We had never thought such a thing was possible, so this

exhibition is a representation of that realization.

How have you been putting these Mom's Art exhibitions together? Do you collect pieces specifically for each exhibition?

More like, we take what we've created over the past year and lay it out on the tables.

Like a harvest festival.

Yeah, they really are like harvest festivals! But because people can only put their work out on their own table, I don't think they were going around to see everyone else's work. Because everyone has to stay with their work. Even at the Kobe exhibition, where we experimented by mixing and matching the exhibition pieces, the artists ended up staying close to their work so that they could explain it. The artists' names only appeared on [the price tags of] pieces for sale. So people have mentioned that the artists' names do not appear on the works at this exhibition, since last year we have been experimenting with displaying everyone's work on one desk, but we did that on purpose and mixed and matched the exhibition pieces so that the artists would have to look around to find out who made which pieces. The women enjoyed this setup, and even though they had only had to focus on their own tables at past exhibitions, by mixing and displaying their works, they started paying attention to the order and how their pieces were lined up, and even the overall display with others.

When I think of the moms who make Mom's Art, I sometimes wonder if the phenomenon skipped over my parents' and grandparents' generations. There may be some people in my generation who have this sense of doing a little something to make people happy, but at least for me, it wasn't something I inherited. (Laughs) Maybe that's why I'm so into it. Other people say "Oh, wouldn't it be cute to add this to that?" or "What if we use this to cover that?" but I always end up thinking it's fine to keep things plain. (Laughs)

You seem to view Mom's Art as a bit detached, so what is it that attracts you to it?

I've always liked things plain. I've never been the type of person to decorate each and every little thing. Maybe what draws me in is the hospitality of the moms. It always makes me feel warm. As Kyoichi TSUZUKI said,

moms think they should make these things a little cuter, or warmer because they look kind of cold. I'm in awe of this sensitivity because I don't have it.

You described it as "a mother's love" in your previously published book on Mom's Art.

People may be upset that I call it a mother's love, but it is what it is. I mean, I think men also have this sensitivity. So maybe it's human love that beyond gender.

Love that asks for nothing in return?

Right. That's why we're always giving them away. (Laughs) We hand them out not only to family members, but also to neighbors and people who take care of us. So to people in general, not just blood relatives.

It's like breaking down boundaries.

Maybe like utterly destroying them, sometimes. (Laughs) I really like that aspect of it because we don't have to think so carefully. The recipients may look a bit perplexed, but not annoyed.

Has your experience with these exhibitions changed your view of Mom's Art?

I've had many different reactions, but the one that impacted me the most was seeing children looking at the art as they ran around the Mom's Art Tower at the exhibition. It made me cry a little. It made me happy to see the art impacting the children so deeply. Staff members' children had visited exhibitions in the past, but they could only look at the art lined up on the tables because that was the way we did it. When I saw the children running in circles around the tower this time, appreciating one level at a time as they circled the tower, I saw a connection between the form of the fixtures and the activity of the children. I was impressed by how action and space were interlocked in an interactive relationship. When it comes to architecture, I've always been a function-over-form type of person, so I may have taken form too lightly. This experience made me acutely aware of the importance of form. In terms of reactions, three major points of discussion stood out: opinions about what we lump together with the word "Mom," the hard work of the women behind the handicrafts, and the question of whether or not Mom's Art is art. However, when people expressed these opinions, I simply took them as they were, and

these discussions did not seem to lead anywhere.

Personally, I am less interested in whether Mom's Art is good or bad, and more interested in how the artist's life is enriched by making Mom's Art, that is, by creating works as they wish in a world that deviates in a sense from the rules of the handicraft world.

There are definitely a lot of books and studies out there on the subject of gender. I think gender is an important topic to revisit. Although we were using the existing name "Mom's Art" on this occasion, I think it was good that many people realized the relevance to society when they viewed it as a manual art. In addition, it was very good to see the hierarchy in the handicraft world made visible. However, there are things we cannot generalize without looking at how each individual's life has unfolded. So in the future, I would like to look at how each person's life has progressed while also studying how they relate to society.

As for how we think of the term "Mom's Art", I think we have elevated it to a team name. I originally thought of it as a type of art, but I started thinking of it as something different once master artist KOUSAKA [Shitomi] used it as a team name while we worked. When I asked her about it, she told me it's the name of the group. (Laughs) What I've been thinking lately is that you cannot see things unless you are aware of them. There are pros and cons to this approach, but if the body of Mom's Art were in the public eye, people would definitely take notice if they came upon it on the side of the road, wouldn't they? In short, I think these exhibitions have been very meaningful in the sense that they provide opportunities for people to see what they previously could not see. It seems to me that museums exist for exactly that purpose.