

On Mono-ha

By Iseki Masaaki

Following the Second World War, Japanese art, especially in avant-garde circles, reacted sensitively not only to the many changes that occurred nationally, but also to many of the major political and social revolutions that took place internationally. Except for the older artists who continued to cling to the belief that only the expressionistic academic type of works were art, many young artists couldn't help but be greatly influenced by major events such as the re-establishment of diplomatic ties between China and the United States and between China and Japan; the outbreak of the Vietnam War; the anti-establishment movement started by the young at the end of the 1960s; and, nationally, the opening of the World Exposition in Osaka in 1970.

To put it differently, during its recovery from the rubble of war and in its exchanges with the new outside world, Japan became influenced by the development of avant-garde art in Western Europe. It was in this climate that the

Gutai Group, an avant-garde movement unique to Japan, first came into being toward the latter half of the 1950s. Following, towards the end of the '60s, in correspondence to the philosophy of the conceptual art of the West, Japan saw the birth of Mono-ha.

As we know, the Gutai Group heralded the arrival of "action art" in the West. In a similar way, it must be noted that Mono-ha was not simply a movement formed from copying ideas of the West, but something that went through the process of creation. True, the Mono-ha movement was similar to Western conceptual art in that the former was started also in a quest for the relationship between human and substance, yet with the movement taking root in Japan which has a very different history and climate from those of the West, it necessitated that the substance be restricted to traditional Japanese "mono" or things, such as wood, soil and paper. What's more, the substance was not used as material for art, but was used as the very center piece itself. In this way,

through the use of substance the artist formed art pieces while, at the same time, gave full priority to the working process of his individual concept.

The person who started the ball rolling for Mono-ha was Lee Ufan, a Korean based in Japan. Although the underlying philosophy behind his thinking was the "destruction of modern times," it is clear that Lee attempted to create a trend of calling the group a variation of the conceptual art of Western Europe. He founded the group by involving such young powerful characters as Sekine Nobuo, Koshimizu Susumu, Suga Kishio, Narita Katsuhiko and Yoshida Katsuro. The name Mono-ha is the collective name given to artists who strived to create a new art form by presenting substance as being "mono" or things effected from human action. In addition, people such as Kawaguchi Tatsuo, Muraoka Saburo, Uematsu Keiji, Haraguchi Noriyuki and Maita Masabumi who can be considered as artists of Mono-ha in a wider sense, also presented an excellent aspect of concep-



Lee Ufan Related Items, 1968



Sekine Nobuo Phase One, Earth, 1968

tual art. As fine living witnesses of modern Japanese art, all of these artists continue to be active in art circles even today.

Examples of Mono-ha art works include 2.5 tons of clay mixed with oil and loosely scattered in a room in various shapes (Sekine); Koshimizu placed a rock inside a large bag he made from paper; yet another artist had a scaled rubber belt on which he placed three natural rocks (Lee); a fourth artist had a piece of square timber charred (Narita); and Yoshida put together a piece with light bulbs and electric cords.

What these works have in common is their rejection of the hitherto meaning of art and an advocacy of natural art through the use of natural material as the centerpiece. As a result of this advocacy, they introduced the "matter" that exists in nature and added to it the "action" in order to present the original relationship between human and substance. It is significant to note that while the group was under Western influence, it grew out of the context of an outlook on nature original to Japan.

In any case, Mono-ha which surfaced in the '60s is undoubtedly the most important avant-garde trend to prelude the 1970s. This trend continued until the latter half of the '70s. The 1980s was an era that suffocated avant-garde trends. Since then, following international trends and post-modern times, there was a gradual renaissance in paintings and artists began to stress the meaning of existence in relation to their own individuality. This came as a result of environmental and pollution problems brought on by Japan's continuous economic growth since the 1970s. Because of this, in viewing the relation-

ship between human and substance, rather than putting stress on substance, weight on the human as an individual was emphasized.



Narita Katsuhiko Charcoal, 1970

Iseki Masaaki, who specializes in the history of Japanese and Western modern art, is curator at the Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art.