

Between Human Beings and Trees

By Iseki Masaaki



"A Quiet Head Wind" 1988; h. 84.5cm; painted camphor wood, marble; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo

I had a strange experience at the 1992 Dokumenta IX, Kassel exhibition. A visitor was standing in the corridor, in front of a work by Funakoshi Katsura. He was not looking at the work, but was standing with his back to it, his face looking out in the same direction as the face of the woodcarving. And that face looked exactly like the face of the Funakoshi Katsura sculpture.

When my eyes took in these two faces, I thought for a moment that the face of the woodcarving had transposed itself onto the face of the living man. The two faces didn't, of course, simply look like each other. They had the same feeling about them.

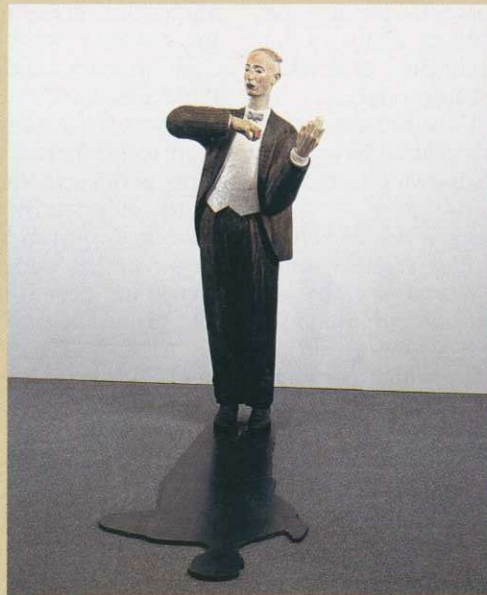
The viewer of a work by Funakoshi can never approach the piece with the conviction that he or she has ever met the person depicted by it. He or she can,

however, be sure that such a meeting has never taken place.

Whether Funakoshi's model is a great artist such as Anthony Caro, or whether it is some unknown person off the street, has no bearing on the value of the work he produces. Each work is simply an expression of a fragment of a person's life. None has the mark of monument or memorial.

Funakoshi works almost exclusively in half figures—portrait-sculptures from the navel up. In his words, "The figure has a stronger presence if it includes the body all the way down to the navel, it gives the strong impression of existence ... If you do the whole body, it could be anyone, if you do just from the neck up, you just get personality. I was conscious of something else ..."

Funakoshi naturally carries on Japan's long tradition of woodcarving. His



"Extended Caesura" 1993; h. 188.5cm; painted camphor wood, marble; steel; photo by Hayakawa Koichi; Nishimura Gallery



"Schwarzer Berg" 1994; h. 90cm; painted camphor wood, marble; photo by Hayakawa Koichi; Nishimura Gallery

influences include Egyptian sculptures and the simplicity of the figures that populate Hans Memling paintings. His works, filled with loneliness and sorrow and serenity, attempt to express modern humanity with exquisite simplicity through the medium of wood, a material that Japanese have loved since ancient times. He tosses off works of supreme originality with apparent ease.

Funakoshi is very particular about how he names his works. His 1982 debut, "Reason Why Rudy Runs," was followed by "Slanting Cloud," "Mirror Reflecting Fingers," "Churchyard Cafe,"

"Waterdrop Remained," "The Day I Go to the Forest," "Words Falling on Wood" and "Saving the Wind." When one considers that all of these works are portraits, it is clear that these poetic titles create distance between the idea and the work itself. The title opens a world between the viewer and the object of the viewing, creating a refreshing dialogue between them. Funakoshi says that he gives his works these literary titles only after they are finished.

He says, "I wanted to give my works titles that would open up new worlds and enable people viewing them to open a

world of their own." The space he creates around the three dimensions of his sculptures is an expression of his prodigious ability to be aware of the outer world.

"For a maker of things, nothing can beat the exhilaration of having the courage to start in on something and then seeing the shape start to take on life. It is a moment even more gratifying than the happiness of completing a work ..." Funakoshi's words express the reason for living for the maker of things, but also to emphasize the importance of the mutual dialogue between the thing that is made, the person who makes it, and the person who views it. One might even say that he gives joy to the wood that he works with.

Funakoshi Katsura was one of six children of one of modern Japan's best material sculptors, Funakoshi Yasutake. When he was a child, he would peek in on his father's studio, and knew vaguely that he would become a sculptor himself.

On a trip to Italy as a university student, he was much impressed by the Romanesque sculptures and Renaissance sculptures by Desiderio da Settignano. In Rome he was inspired by

Fazzini's Ungaretti. Since his 1982 one-man show debut, Funakoshi has basically kept to the same style. In this decade, he has participated in a Venezia Biennale in 1988 and has become widely known overseas. He is a unique individual with no precedent in the world of modern Japanese art which is different from avant-garde.

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