

Tatsuno Toeko: Continuing Metaphors

By Iseki Masaaki

American Minimal Art never really took root in the post-World War II Japanese art scene. This is because conceptualization of expression, rather than its suppression, is more in keeping with the objective conceptualism embedded in traditional Japanese culture—exemplified by haiku or the tea ceremony. Then, if Minimal Art is described as the suppression of subjective expression—art represents only the elements that are the picture itself.

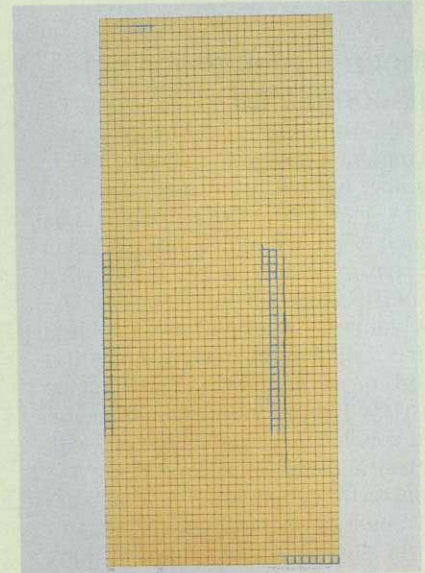
It is not surprising, then, that even by the late 1960s, minimal artists such as Sol Le Witt and Donald Judd were near unknowns in Japan. By contrast, Japan quickly picked up on 1970s conceptual art, as exemplified by the *mono-ha*, or materialists.

Tatsuno Toeko, who has always worked in flat surface painting, is that rare Japanese artist who is thought to have gotten her start in Minimal Art. As she herself often notes, however, her minimalistic expression dates from the late 1970s, and so appears to have developed from something other than American-style minimal-

ism. Her style is the product of a new pictorial space, created through images drawn from her own experiences.

"The wall of the subway platform. In this new station, the wall is formed by continuous rows of light-cream colored square tiles. I get on the train. I am standing directly facing the wall, and so have no sense of perspective. The repetition of the single pattern and color from one end of the platform to the other becomes a grid of intersecting vertical and horizontal lines; the stray dirty or missing tile only makes me more conscious of the flatness of the wall. The train picks up speed, leaving the platform for darkness. At that moment, my consciousness transferred what I had just seen to lines on the corner of my notebook."

Tatsuno's Minimal Art thus originates in the ordinary, not in the suppression of subjectivity that gave rise to American-style minimalism. Her break with minimalism also goes beyond the tension between subjectivity and conceptualism in her paintings. Further, her



Untitled-27, 1974; silk screen; Chiba City Museum of Arts collection; photo by Satani Gallery.

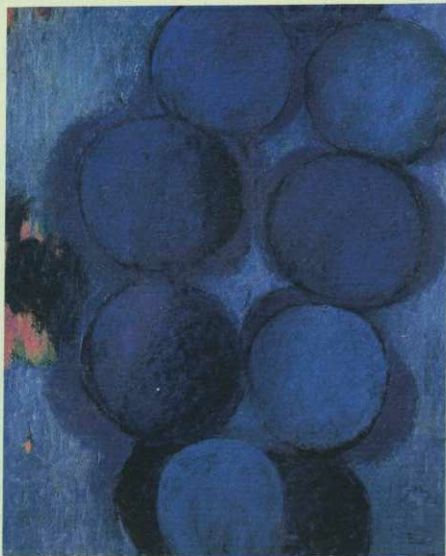
break from minimalism marks a shift to a world of unfettered ideas, but the continuity that marked the minimal period



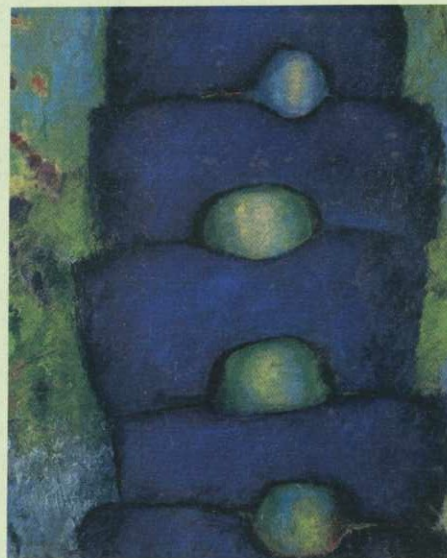
Work 84-P1, 1984; oil on canvas; Tokyo Museum of Modern Arts collection; photo by Satani Gallery.



Work 87-P18, 1987; oil on canvas; Chiba City Museum of Arts collection; photo by Satani Gallery.



Untitled 92-8, 1992; oil on canvas; Nerima Museum of Arts collection; photo by Satani Gallery.



Untitled 94-15, 1994; oil on canvas; photo by Satani Gallery.

remains. Judging from her essentially free and solitary manner, it seems that the break has unbottled her accumulated energy. And yet she retains her partiality to the inadvertent continuity of forms that catch her eye in everyday life. Her 1984 *Work 84-P-1* is a tableau of simple flower patterns. However, "The sense of order seen in her past work in stripes is destroyed by

the floral pattern; order is swallowed up in chaotic depths." These depths are continuous, continuing into infinity.

Similarly, with *Work 87-p-18* the central motif of small rectangles in a diamond has a kind of oppressiveness, absent with the flower motif, that directs the painting. This symbol is further evidence of her partiality to continuity. The artist has this to say about why she is so fond of such shapes:

"I have so far been deeply attached to certain kinds of forms. They are images of the imagination, but as real to me as actual objects. That is my premise, but lately I have been thinking—I have decided to stop restricting myself too much within the picture order. Instead, I have decided to depict things as they come, whether from the imaginary world or the real, whether mysterious and troublesome, or fascinating and wonderful; to depict shapes that are not human but have a human 'smell' to them. To put it plainly, pictures that make you feel something is standing over there. The pictures are in focus, and they move when you look at them. Unrefined, yet delicate. And always plain."

The origin of Tatsuno Toeko's metaphor lies there, in the "shapes that are not human but have a human

'smell.'" To suggest humanity, a picture need not include the representation of a person. For Tatsuno, the surface of her pictures is a special place that receives images of the world as humanistic forms. And despite the fact that the surface of a painting covers just one section of the universe, we realize that the infinite succession of symbols suggested on it represents time: continuity is infinity, and infinity is the cosmos. As she has developed, especially in the 1990s, Tatsuno has diversified her central theme, from diamonds to combinations of elliptical or key-shaped symbols and indefinite forms.

In their cosmic pursuit of metaphors and symbols, her works embody a superior sense of color and communicate through form with a richness that only a flat picture can sustain. In Japanese art, Tatsuno has proved herself unique.

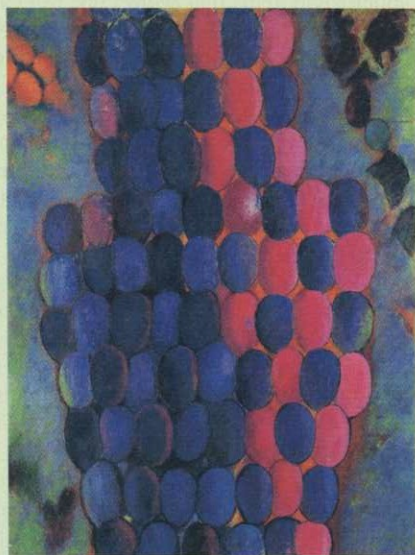
Sources:

Bijutsu Techo, No. 414, December 1976, p290.

Hon-e Kunio: *Tatsuno Toeko—Pictures Facing the World*, Tatsuno Toeko Exhibition 1986-1995 catalog, Tokyo National Museum of Modern Arts, 1995, p10.

View of Modern Art—Plain and Space (18th Modern Art Exhibition) catalog, 1987, p45.

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Untitled 94-7, 1994; oil on canvas; photo by Satani Gallery.