

Ensculptured Scenes: Toya Shigeo

By Iseki Masaaki

The modes of expression—pits, excavations, protrusions, spaces, reversals and indentations—seen in Toya's work were first apparent in his 1974 *Pompeii-74*, which, of course, takes its inspiration from the human remains at Pompeii. These human shadow-forms are death and rebirth; they are the spaces and circumstances left by human bodies. Toya Shigeo continues to this day to focus his greatest energies on this topic, on the consciousness of surfaces.

The surfaces of sculptures are formed in one of two basic ways: modeling, which builds up material, and carving, which digs away at material. Historically, Japanese sculptors used the latter technique; Buddhist images carved in wood typify this tradition. But with the modern introduction of Western techniques of modeling, this tradition fell by the

wayside.

After World War II, traditional notions of sculpture broke down; themes and motifs for sculpture began to encompass the universe and all else that could not be seen with the eye. As a myriad of possibilities for expression emerged—new spaces and installations—a sculptor named Toya began to create his own new spaces with the traditional technique of woodcarving. A number of postwar abstract sculptors also used wood, but few were concerned not with simply constructing things out of wood as Toya was with its surface possibilities. And Toya used this wood with an utter lack of consciousness of its common image as warm, gentle, or fragrant.

Toya was influenced by the Japanese *mono-ha* artists (materialists) who, in the 1960s and 1970s, began to expose the natural materials with which they

worked by placing priority on direct interaction between people and matter. Toya went beyond the *mono-ha* conceptualism, however, and in the 1980s began making works, such as *Underground Room* (1983-1984), that took on the issue of sculpture-material-object. As he explains, "One carves not to impose a shape, but to excavate an image from a space already filled with an invisible sculpture."

In 1984, Toya turned to what could be called his life work, the *Forest* series. Here, wood is used decisively as material. Chainsaws create detailed carvings on the surfaces of trees, evoking Japan's virgin forests through cuts in the surfaces of trunks, branches and leaves, sanctifying the point of contact between humans and nature. Toya explains: "The forest from the outside looks like one big mass, but from the inside there are



From *Borders III* (detail). Photo by Muto Shigeo.
Installation view at Satani Gallery. Photo courtesy of Satani Gallery.



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Toya Shigeo, *From Borders III*, 1995–96; wood, wood ashes, acrylic, glass; H220X450X225cm.
 Photo by Muto Shigeo. Installation view at Satani Gallery.
 Photo courtesy of Satani Gallery.

crevices between the trees through which birds and wind may pass. The structure of a forest overlaps precisely with what I want in a sculpture—it maintains a difference between outside and inside, and blends perspectives from all sides.”

We may understand from these words that Toya is trying to swap forest with sculpture, to approach sculpture with the concept of a forest. But this forest reminds us less of a vibrantly lush, green forest than of artificial urban spaces, making it all the more magical. It is as if he uses the life and death of

once-living trees and forests as an elaborate play on the life and death of a large city. And at points the carved unevenness in his work is beautifully erotic.

Toya’s most recent work, *From Borders III*, evokes the forest through an architectural structure. A mass like a thorny tongue protrudes from the façade, creating the sense of being within a person’s inner organs. Through this ensulptured scene, one might say, sight is restored to touch.

There are other sculptors who sculpt scenery. Most evoke plants and people

as details on a single plane, but Toya’s mode of expression puts you in touch with a striking imagination, one which can create a scene that converts such details to the internality of human life and death.

This, it can be said, is an entirely new direction for Japanese modern sculpture. ■

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