

Affinities of Metal Sculpture: Kiyomizu Kyubei

By Iseki Masaaki



Affinity-K, 1975; 86x747.5x745cm.

Given direction in the 1950s by the *gutai-ha* materialist school and beginning in the early 1970s by *mono-ha* conceptualism, post-World War II Japanese sculpture, grounded as it was in the interconnections between people and things, developed in step with the dominant trends in Western avant-garde conceptualist art, and for a while its trends shaped the modern Japanese art world. In the 1980s and 90s, Japanese sculpture branched out in individual directions, none of which gave rise to an articulated movement or trend. This, too, was true in the West.

It is in this context that our attention is drawn to the existence of a sculptor named Kiyomizu Kyubei, who in the late 1960s began using metal to develop a colorful world of abstract sculpture, and who is still vigorously active today.

In our modern internationalized era, one is free to reject any preoccupation with or inner sense of the traditional. Kiyomizu Kyubei's works must first be understood from this perspective. While his sculptures are done in the newest, non-traditional materials, they are imbued with a traditional Japanese

beauty. Even his smallest work retains body in the overall form and remains true to the texture of the material.

When he first decided to be a sculptor, Kiyomizu made a conscious decision to produce works that would differ from Western conceptual sculpture. Of the forms and textures of his abstract sculpture he has said this:

"I somehow felt that something distinguished the *matière*—the material itself—and the 'feel' or texture of the material. I feel that the *matière* is a superficial quality, but its texture is a quality that emerges from within. I think that this is what the Japanese have . . . Foreign sculptors are just doing the form. For me, it is different: the material's texture weighs heavily on what I produce. I think that I am working from a slightly different position from them."

(*Bijutsu Techo*, October 1984)

Trained in architecture and metal casting, Kiyomizu decided in 1967 to devote himself to sculpting. As early as the following year he produced works in brass that combined two different forms: cylinders and balls, and flat slabs. His work was, one could say, a marriage of the organic to the inorganic. Subsequent works were created from different forms, but always welded two very different qualities. By combining straight lines and curves or indentations and protrusions, Kiyomizu produces a single constructive space by bringing an artist's internal softness and hardness, an epic and a lyric poem, to the surface. Without these opposites, the concept underlying Kiyomizu's work would collapse. In the 1970s, Kiyomizu began to work almost exclusively in alu-

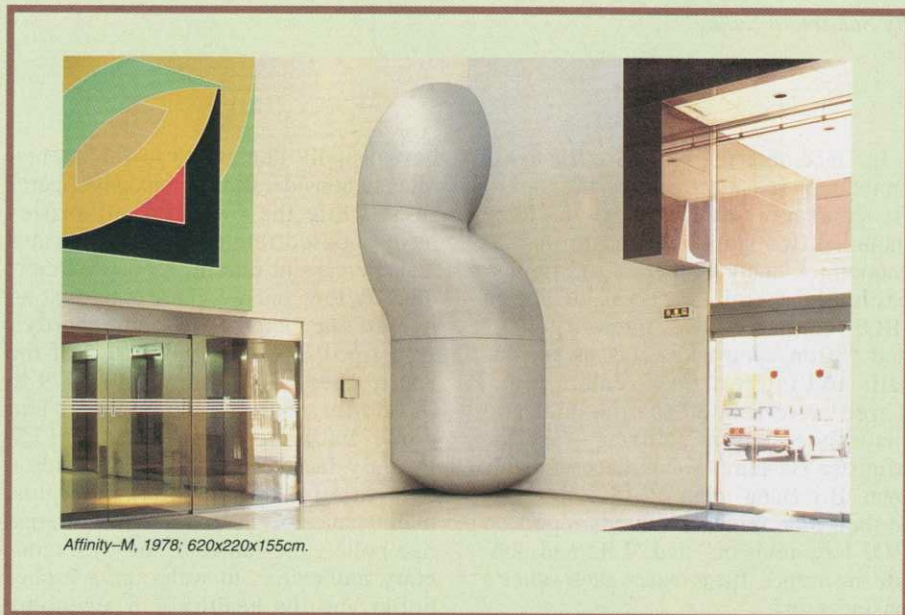


Maikanzashi, 1993; 116x30x70cm.

minum. His *Afinity* series, produced in the early 1970s, layered plates with beautiful curves created through strict adherence to the principals of geometry. The series thus retained pliancy, purity and lightness, and was devoid of the heavy quality of metal sculpture, foreshadowing the varied drama of his later compositions. The concept of *Afinity* appears frequently in his works after this, and is indeed basic to Kiyomizu's approach to sculpture. His *Mask* and *Wig* series in 1977, and *Traverse* in 1980, are each fusions of two unlike forms, evidence of the enduring sensitivity this sculptor has toward the form and feel of a material.

In 1975, Kiyomizu exhibited 10 pieces from *Afinity* at the 13th Middleheim Outdoor Sculpture Exhibit in Antwerp; one major work was placed directly, without benefit of a pedestal, on an expanse of grass, creating a splendid affinity with nature. One Belgian critic was said to have commented, "A good blow with a metal bar would reduce the works of other sculptors to powder; but Kiyomizu's works, if so dented, would bounce right back up again." His comment aptly pinpoints the tough yet pliant character of Kiyomizu's works.

Kiyomizu always attends to the sur-



Afinity-M, 1978; 620x220x155cm.

roundings of any display of his works. This is not simply a token of his adherence to the traditional Japanese artistic concern with harmony with nature. Even in a setting that is uniquely Japanese, it is striking how completely these abstract forms and the aluminum texture blend in with their environment.

Soon after graduating from his architecture course, the young Kiyomizu threw himself into the project of

observing buildings in Japan and abroad. He was especially captivated by the tile roofs of villages and private houses, and says that these elegantly flowing forms greatly influence the forms he strives for. Composed of straight lines and curves, organic and inorganic forms, with the pliant texture of aluminum, and sometimes dyed in crimson, the spaces created by his sculptures have depths which invite the viewer to meditate quietly. His 1990s works engender this kind of contemplative response. The atmosphere created by the series *Kyoto Afinity*, for instance, calls up the inner fluctuations of shade and light and the diverse designs of the old Kyoto town houses.

Kiyomizu's sculpture embodies a dialectic of Western and Japanese senses of space. Proof of this lies in the fact that whether Kiyomizu's works are displayed in a westernized Japanese city or within a traditional Japanese environment, they seem to belong, in either case, creating an entirely new space unto themselves.



Echo-I, 1989.

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