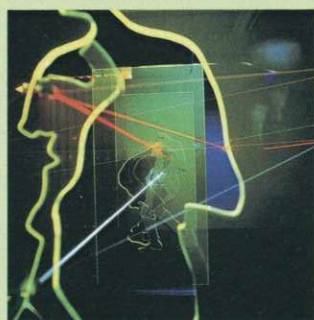


# A Process of Intellectual Symbols: Usami Keiji

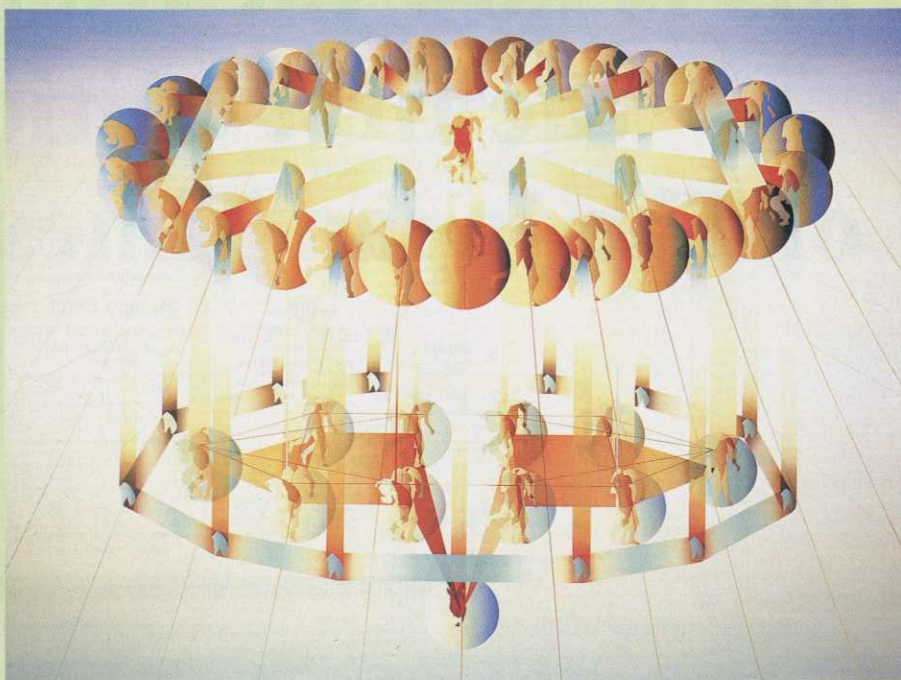
By Iseki Masaaki

Artists can probably be divided into two types. First there are those who, with complete conviction from the outset, are able to demonstrate their talents during their working lives without ever changing the subject of their work. Then there is a probable minority who either achieve or attempt to achieve a single goal by pursuing a process of trial and error having gone through a number of transformations of ideas and forms along the way.

The painter Usami Keiji would seem to fall into the latter category but neither the phrase "trial and error" nor the word "transformation" can be used simply to describe either the process by which he works, or the development of his creative activities. In short, because he works in a highly intellectual manner, he seeks direction through the entire process of transformations without actually expounding on the subject of his work, which nevertheless does exist. He is, in other words, consumed with attempts to clarify the methodology of his painting. Usami is also different from other artists because he often uses the written word as well as his art as a means of self-verification. He has published a number of books including *The Theory of Painting*, *Line Portraits*, and *Duchamp* besides many other studies. In fact, he may ultimately be considered as an amalgamation of both types of artists.



LASER : BEAM : JOINT, 1968



Raputa No. 1, 1985; 218.2 cm X 290.9 cm, oil on canvas

There is always some particular reason for the dramatic changes which occur during the course of an artist's work. The subject of Picasso's unrestricted shifts in direction has, for example, been well documented, and inevitably there are reasons for the changes which have taken place in Usami's work as well as important junctures during that process of transformation. Moreover, despite being able to tell from what period of his career a particular work comes simply because of the homogeneity of the work in any one period, his work is such that we somehow feel sure that it is not an example of his art in its entirety.

Born in 1940, there have been a number of important junctures through which Usami's work has passed ever since he completed *Kyobashi*, his first semi-realistic work with thickly applied paint done when he was eighteen.

Despite the dark monochromatic coloring of his work in the period between 1958 and 1962, the animated, distorted human figures filling the pictures marked the beginnings of the kind of

accumulation of abstract symbols he was to use later, and provided a hint of the primitive conditions in which people were living, when there was a good deal of uncertainty about what direction Japanese society might take in the period immediately after World War II. Furthermore, it is important to realize that for him these images were already an indication that similar images might well appear again, when social uncertainty once again raised its ugly head.

Between 1962 and 1963, Usami carried out a thorough restoration of his work. Rejecting absolutely the reproduction of anything including people and yet stopping short of using symbols per se, there appeared a mesh-like phase during which he used highly transparent colors on a white ground in a style resembling a form of abstract expressionism influenced by Jackson Pollock. But there was also a traditional Japanese sense of color in the work of this period and it became a talking point among many intellectuals when it was first exhibited as a series of work at a one man show.

However, having grown little less than weary of the complete homogeneity of the white, sleek finish he had chosen, he then started to bring parts of the body, namely arms and legs, into his pictures from around 1964.

Just what did the awareness of flesh or human beings mean to Usami? As long as the subject he was dealing with was man, there was no real necessity for the forms to be a recreation of man. However, in his case, it is almost certain that he somehow realized the importance of man's position within society and the landscape as well as in the environment.

An event which had a terrific impact on him occurred in 1965 to verify this. It was when he was looking at a current issue of *Life* that his attention was caught by a picture of the black riots in Los Angeles. He said that it felt as though he was looking at the entanglement of the human condition with the surroundings from within the photograph itself as it was actually being taken. He took images of four people in that photograph as a prototype and grouped them in many of his pictures that followed. This form of human imagery was then gradually used as a reference between symbols and treated as an insight of a clear methodology. However, the way that he clung to a

typical form of body to depict a moment of a movement expresses most intellectually the importance of the position of man in the inter-relationship of symbols in people and people in symbols.

Usami himself explains this in his book called "Line Portraits." "My pictures have nothing to do with reality or with the abstraction of reality. What they are concerned with is symbols and with producing a structured world of diagrammatic relationships."

The human forms he used between 1965 and 1966 were story-telling elements. But by 1967 they were being handled much more geometrically as can be seen in his Aquarium series. Here the pictures, which are based on pink and light blue, emphasize more symbolic elements.

Usami held his third one man show in April 1968, when he exhibited his *LASER : BEAM : JOINT* in which he again used his four preordained figures. It was the spearhead of optical art at the time, and was lit with blue and green beams of laser light in a dark gallery. The brilliant luminosity of the laser light which was still relatively unknown at the time captivated those who saw the work, and it was later adapted for exhibition at the 1970 Expo in Osaka.

The symbols expressing the mutual relationship of the four figures, while being convincing, subsequently became independent during the 1960s and the early part of the 1970s, and materialized as one connected arrangement created by overlapping the shape of the figures in a new way. This was the Profile series which he completed during 1976. However, while being in the form of a kaleidoscope, the work is symbolic of a journey to a more intellectual universe. Who knows? Perhaps it will be the universe which becomes the ultimate aim of Usami's manner of working. At least his universe moved away from the six sided kaleidoscope to circles, cones and spheres in the series of drawings he did at the beginning of the



The Aquarium within an Aquarium No. 2, 1969; 184cm X 133 cm, oil on canvas

1980s. However, within this intellectual process we become aware that the artist is looking into the far distance. This series was done in ink, water color and crayon, and the same figures transcend time and space inside the circles and spheres, giving us the feeling that the artist has somehow returned to where he started out. Through whatever process they went through, these figures do not ultimately come from that particular incident of the black riots because they indicate most intensively the circumstances in which the humans were drawn. Another reason for this is that they intensify not only the scene in which they were drawn but also their situation. One of his most recent works completed in 1997 is entitled *Purgatory-A Tower of Bubbles*. But I wonder if I am alone in thinking that it is possible to discern the same kind of intensity apparent in one of his early works, *Work No. 1* done in 1962, as in the structure of Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement* or even in one of Bosch's works. This is perhaps evidence of the intense nature of all the work produced so far by the artist Usami Keiji.

Photos: Nantenshi Gallery

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Purgatory-A Tower of Bubbles, 1994-97; 290.9 cm X 290.9 cm, oil on canvas