

Kota Kinutani's Sculpture

Tetsuya Oshima (Professor, Tama Art University / Director, Tama Art University Museum)

In Japan, there is a saying that states, “three years on a stone.” What this means, is that “with hard work and perseverance comes reward (as even one may turn a cold stone warm by sitting on it for three years)” (Seisenban Nihonkokugo Daijiten), however, this notion of coldness does not seem to refer only to its temperature, but also to its inorganic characteristics, hard, and innate coldness of the stone itself. For instance, in Isaku Yanaihara's work, *Ishi to no Taiwa* (lit. *A Conversation with a Stone*) Yanaihara states “a hard, cold stone seems to harshly reject life.”

That being said, Yanaihara would continue on by stating, “But for this reason, the mute stone makes us feel the power of nature more strongly than animals or plants. In a lifeless stone, we feel something far more powerful than life.”¹

Stone sculptor Kota Kinutani also probably feels how a stone transcends typical notions of “life” or, rather, feels the powerful force of nature that lies at the root of a stone. That is why Kinutani chooses to work with neither wood, earth, or metal, but stone. As he says, “stones are alive.”

Another of Yanaihara's words concerning stones that I would like to focus on is the expression “a mute stone.” The term “mute” is a common expression used also to describe other things, as well as stones. Nevertheless, elsewhere in reference to the existence of stones. However, this does not mean that a stone cannot speak. Rather, as Daigaku Horiguchi notes in his poem, “The stone speaks in silence / It speaks directly to the mind.”² Similarly, Kinutani, too, places his ear to the stone to hear its voice and respond to it.

When I was reading one of Kinutani's recent writings, I was impressed by the following words: “the pure admiration and fascination I used to feel for contemporary art faded as it became a target of investment, and I even developed a sense of rebellion. I felt the emptiness of crowding around it. ‘I want to be closer to nature. I want to listen to the voice of the stones,’ these feelings became stronger than the pursuit of my own desires.”³

From the gratitude he feels for the first immigrants who had to migrate from Japan to Brazil, to the anger and sadness he has towards environmental destruction and war, and the benevolence he expresses for the children who will be responsible for the next generation, when speaking with Kinutani, I can sense that he is truly a genuine person. There are things that mean far more to him, beyond the frivolous world of “contemporary art.”

A major theme to this solo exhibition, which also forms its title, is “A Gaze from Outer Space.” The day may come when the earth becomes inhabitable due to war and the destruction of the environment, and humanity is forced to “immigrate” to another planet. Anticipating this, Kinutani presents us with a works of art that forces us to reconsider our lives on earth by using stone, a material that symbolizes the earth's structure, as a material, at a cosmic scale. Perhaps these works, including *Infinite – Mother Earth*, which evokes a sense of infinity that seems to conversely encompass the universe, will also serve as a message to future ex-Earthlings who have emigrated to other planets.

Returning to the point I mentioned previously, Kinutani's feeling of rebellion against <contemporary art> is not meant to imply that he has turned his back to his great predecessors of contemporary art. On the contrary, he maintained a influence from several key sculptors of the 20th century while simultaneously developing his own, new approach to stone sculpture in the 21st century.

In the early 20th century, Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957) believed that the important thing was not to capture the external form of an object, but its essence- where its truest expression laid. From this idea, Brancusi's forms became increasingly simple or pure, entering its so-called "abstract" phase. Similarly, Kinutani follows this path of abstract sculpture pioneered by Brancusi. However, what defines Kinutani's practice is its ambition to "face the core of the stone."⁴ The most important thing to Brancusi was to capture essence of his objects, and for this he utilized metal and wood in addition to stone. On the other hand, Kinutani is devoted to the material of stone. Rather, for Kinutani, no matter what the subject matter or the final form of the work might be, it was important to, first, listen to the stone's voice and communicate with the "material (stone)'s core."

Guided by the stone's voice, Kinutani's sculptures have a shape reminiscent of Jean Arp (1886-1966)'s "organic" and "biomorphic" sculptures. Regarding Arp, when asked by others about his views on painting and sculpture, especially Neo-plasticism and Surrealism, he once said that, while acknowledging geometric art's direct relationship to "life," he pointed out its exclusively visual bias, and how Neo-plastic art lacks all relationship to other human faculties.⁵ One might notice one radical outgrowth of Arp's awareness in Kinutani's sculptures. Kinutani wants viewers to touch his sculptures and feel them with all of their senses. By doing so, the viewer can also feel the stone's life, hear its voice, and communicate with its core.

I mentioned Brancusi and Arp, but perhaps Isamu Noguchi (1904-88) is more important to Kinutani's work. Noguchi's love of stone and the way his sculptures serve as playthings/playgrounds for children are traits Kinutani inherits deeply within his own work. Another crucial aspect of Noguchi's practice is his grand vision for *Sculpture to Be Seen from Mars* (1947). This work (an unrealized model) aimed to form a gigantic rendering of a human face that stared out at the cosmos in a desert, somewhere earth. With this work, Noguchi hoped this work would serve as a symbol to life on mars of humanity existence on earth, following humanity's extinction.⁶ Created in 1947, Noguchi's project, *Sculpture to Be Seen from Mars* reflects his fear of human extinction, which was felt first-hand, two years earlier when the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan. Likewise, Kinutani shares these fears. However, when compared to Noguchi's *Sculpture to Be Seen from Mars*, Kinutani's work issues a stronger and more direct warning to us in our current situation, whereby we still have room to act.

In February 2024, I visited Kinutani's studio in Kawasaki for the first time. It was a cold winter day, and the stones in his studio were so cold that he inadvertently withdrew his hand. However, after spending three hours, if not three years, facing stones in my own way, by listening to Kinutani's stories about stones, touching them, and even carving them myself with him, I felt like I could begin to hear the silent voices of the stones in my mind.

¹ Isaku Yanaihara (Texts) and Hiromichi Inoue (Photos), *Ishi to no Taiwa* (Tankoshinsha, 1966), 70.

² Daigaku Horiguchi, "Ishi," in *Ningen no Uta (The Songs of Man)*, (Hobunkan, 1947), 84.

³ Kota Kinutani, *Works of Kota Kinutani* (Arte Vent, 2022), 32.

⁴ Kota Kinutani, "When I Face the Stone's Core, My Heart Feels Engraved," *Gekkan Sekizai*, no. 486 (March 2021): 67.

⁵ Jean Arp, "dear monsieur brzekowski" (1927), in *Arp on Arp: Poems, Essays, Memories*, ed. Marcel Jean, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 35.

⁶ Hayden Herrera, *Listening to Stone: The Art and Life of Isamu Noguchi* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 192.

【On the Author】

Tetsuya Oshima (大島 徹也)

Professor, Tama Art University / Director, Tama Art University Museum

Born in Aichi Prefecture in 1973, Oshima graduated from the Department of Art History, Faculty of Letters, the University of Tokyo. He completed the Master's Degree Program, Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology, at the University of Tokyo, and received his Ph.D. (Art History) from the Graduate Center, the City University of New York. After working as a curator at the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art, then as an associate professor at the Graduate School of Integrated Arts and Sciences, Hiroshima University, he took up his current position as Professor at Tama Art University. Oshima specializes in modern and contemporary Western art history. Major co-authored works include *Ils ont regardé Matisse: Une réception abstraite, États-Unis/Europe, 1948-1968* (Musée départemental Matisse, 2009) and *Norman Lewis: Looking East* (Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 2019). Major co-translations include *Clement Greenberg: Selected Writings* (Keiso Shobo, 2005). Major exhibitions (curation/supervision) include "Jackson Pollock: A Centennial Retrospective" (Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art and The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, 2011-12) and "Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross—Lema Sabachthani" (Miho Museum, 2015).