

## 'Time' along with Tomoko Sato

Tokyo University of the Arts, Faculty of Fine Arts,  
Adjunct Education and Research Assistant  
Mutsuki Iwaya

What I felt strongly when I faced to Tomoko Sato's painting for the first time was the time which was preserved as layers on the surface of canvas. She exists with 'the time' through various motifs of painting.

Previously, Sato had painted concentration camp in Europe. The first time when she saw the field, she felt that this tragic place represents such a serene beauty. The landscape painted by such her continuously full filled by mysterious silence. This silent atmosphere appears in the previous series of landscape paintings produced during 2001 to 2002 (Fig.1). The atmosphere is inherited in the more recent series and appears to be getting even deeper.

'Concentration camp' is a place where only hearing the word reminds us of heavy sadness and tragic history behind. Yet, Sato's paintings are not such as deliberately depicting painful grief or regrets, which never banish like ominous clouds hang low over. The tragic event becomes equally part of time gone by before her paintbrush. She is looking silently all things that have past this landscape as if she finds 'the time', which had settled down like layers, in the landscape. When she picks up different colours and the economy of brushstroke becomes more sophisticated, that is to say, lost the details in the process of describing the subject, the surface still remains the silent atmosphere and this silence never interrupts the flow of air in the painting.

Perhaps, what always captures her imagination is how 'time' is embodied in the subject. Her work, *Landscape with story* 2004 (Fig.2), represents this particularly well. The narrative that the landscape bears is consist of the time that had subsided on the ground of landscape. She who had called landscape as 'Open narrative', perhaps, realised that she is also incorporated into the flow of time while she is creating this work. She regards her own time as a part of entire flow of time as well. Her time for observation and painting are also laid in the same layer of time the subject has. Such her idea of time and space seems to be reflected in the next series of paintings. It represents 'the time' that is running in her while she is painting.

After she felt limitations in painting landscapes she found a new subject. Practicing the classical method and Caravaggio's paintings served as the catalyst for this finding. As a means to acquire this skill, she has chosen 'fabric' as the motif. 'The fabric', Caravaggio had painted to cover the saint's skin, was lifted out of his painting by Sato's hands. It became independent subject of her artwork in this new series. The red fabric is showing its heavy weight and calm presence. It is like a stage curtain that is signing to tell her painting skill has developed and



Fig.1: *Landscape*  
Oil on canvas, 2002



Fig.2: *Landscape with story*  
Oil on canvas, 2004



Fig.3: *Untitled*  
Oil on canvas, 2010

opening up to new phase (Fig.3). Her aim of learning this classical method was to obtain the technique of representing depth in the colour. The method brought her to the clear realisation that the oil painting consists of layers upon layers of colours. Each layer suggests a single process towards the completion. By repeating this process, 'the time' she spent to paint becomes the representation itself, namely, the very structure of her painting.

This series of work with 'fabric' as a subject continues until recently. Because viewers receive the similar feel to abstract paintings at first glance, one might say this series gives out different impression from the previous series. Yet, there is this subject, which is 'the fabric' in the painting. Again, she paints 'the time' that subsides in the space by painting 'the fabric'. She goes through the same process of thought as previous series of landscape painting. One could say that she is layering 'time' on the canvas through the creative process. In this perspective, the very practice of painting itself becomes a narrative through the subject.

'Concentration camp' is a subject that has strong connotations (or viewers can't help to give strong connotations). In contrast to that, 'fabric' has an extremely neutral meaning. The practice of painting becomes the narrative and then, constructs the artwork itself. In this light, it is natural to say that the meaning of the subject becomes less important. Instead, the rich expression of the wall of fabric is enhanced and become alive. As a result, the flat surface of canvas gains the depth. Shades merged into the wall of fabric provide subtle movement on the surface.

In recent works, those fabrics are seen though the layers of highly transparent oil paint, which gives the look of a sheet of film covering the canvas. The narrative has already been completed by the very act of painting the fabric. The deliberate act of painting, a sheer sheet of colour and the pattern on top brings further glamor to her narrative. The pattern is a trace of process that has directory left by her fingertip. Each marking is the sign of time that had layered.

Sato's practice of painting has changed from depicting the narrative to being the narrative itself. Thus, the layer of time was changed from being depicted to becoming the artwork. The series of painting with 'fabric', which are not given the title, is not her autobiographical narrative in any way. 'The fabric' is always fragmented and never shows the entire figure on the canvas. This suggests the existence of flow of time out side of this square canvas. The narrative that Sato represents in her painting belongs to even wider scale of narrative. Namely, her work represents a fragment of time, which is running in every subject in this whole world.