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For a long period of time, people held the belief that art was related to eternity and changelessness, as opposed to technology, which makes steady progress. However, the development of modern art in the second half of the 20th century proposed a history proving that such a simple belief was just an illusion. From the 1950s to the 1980s, abstract expressionism, pop art, minimal art, conceptual art, simulationism, and neo-expressionism emerged one after the other, receiving attention as cutting-edge expressions in turn. After the 1990s, however, the philosophy and model of modernism have taken a huge step back. Accordingly, from 2000 up until now, contemporary art has been largely transformed, just in 15 years, from something received by the privileged to something enjoyed by everyone, and from something difficult to something more familiar. The emergence and flourishing of relational art and video art can also be counted as an example of this, yet, among the traditional genres—in an ironic twist, as the modernist aesthetic had long valued exclusively abstract expressions—the biggest change took place in painting.

For the past 15 years, contemporary painting has been significantly changing along with the ways we view and perceive it. In terms of contemporary painting, during the 1990s abstract expressionism was in the mainstream. At the time, no figurative paintings were seriously regarded as contemporary art, only those that were expressed in an abstract manner.¹ Entering into the 2000s, however, figurative paintings in turn reached new heights. And stretching into the middle of the 2010s, we can again observe several artists returning to abstract work. If we look back to the “Informel shock” at the end of the 1950s, it becomes apparent that painting, for the past half-century, had only experienced two big shifts: the first moved from figurative to abstract, and the second from abstract to figurative; while painting in the present moment shows symptoms of the tendency to swing back from the figurative to the abstract once more.

For the past 15 years, since its opening in September of 1999, Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery has been producing “project N,” a series of solo exhibitions of young painters. So far, by the time of the current exhibition by Shiokawa Ayao, there have been 57 in the series, and in this time, the trends in painting that I have identified have clearly been reflected by the artists in “project N.” Needless to say, this phenomenon is not isolated to “project N.” The “VOCA” exhibition, which has been held annually in March at the Ueno Royal Museum since 1994, has exhibited and awarded works that are also indicative of similar trends as “project N.”

Representative of this, we could introduce Minamikawa Shimon’s works, which exemplify the transformation of painting between the abstract and the figurative. The memorable first “project N” artist, Minamikawa is currently known for his portraits rendered with a light and witty touch, which could be considered either semi-abstract or semi-figurative, while the work that he exhibited in the first “project N,” in December 1999, was of a completely abstract style, interweaving indefinite colour shapes like puzzle pieces. Since then, coupled with figurative motifs like the portraits, his current style is achieved with abstract motifs, such as stripes and dots, in part of the painting structure.

1 More details on the trends in Japanese paintings from the late 1970s to the 2000s can be found in the article written by Nishimura Tomohiro, “‘1995 Issue’ and the Transition of Paintings—Beyond the Conflict between Modernism and Postmodernism” (published in the “1st Tokorozawa Biennial of Contemporary Art, 2009: Siding Railroad,” Tokorozawa Biennial Executive Committee, 2009). In this article, Nishimura categorises the trends in Japanese painting during the late 1990s into three groups: formalistic abstract paintings and postmodernist paintings, with the third group far off from the other two categories. In this third group he situates Maruyama Naofumi, Nukata Nobuhiko, and O JUN.

There is no denying that it was due to two artists, Murakami Takashi and Nara Yoshitomo, who strongly drew the "Zero generation artists" who emerged during the 2000s in the direction of figurative painting. If I am not wrong, there is no doubt that the commercial success of those two artists in the international market broke the curse of formalism that made the use of images taboo, and made it possible to open up painting to the possibility of the free appropriation of images from subcultural genres, such as comics, animation, and advertisements.

As I just described, in just over 15 years, starting from the end of the twentieth century, the age of abstract painting, which was regarded as the mainstream of contemporary art, transformed into a new era where figurative paintings flourished. Although in terms of absolute numbers abstract painters still do not constitute the majority of artists, there is a growing tendency—as compared to the 2000s when artists were exclusively devoted to figurative paintings—to go back to abstract paintings, and abstract paintings have nowadays been suddenly gaining more attention.

The artistic value of the masterpiece is eternal and changeless, but art works also reveal entirely different faces over different periods of time. The widely opposing movements of Japanese contemporary painting in recent years have clearly demonstrated this.

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"There are very few exhibitions of contemporary paintings in Japanese museums." I remember being slightly puzzled when I heard the same opinion from several participating artists. The following list is limited in scope, but as far as the areas around Tokyo, in addition to the aforementioned "VOCA" exhibition (whose organisers include: the "VOCA" executive committee; the Ueno Royal Museum), there are the "Tokyo Wonder Wall" that started in 2000 (organisers: the Tokyo Metropolitan Government; the Tokyo Metropolitan Foundation for History and Culture, Tokyo Wonder Site); the "Shell Art Award" that began in 1956 and then started up again in 2003 in its current format (organiser: Showa Shell Sekiyu K.K.); "Art Award Tokyo Marunouchi" that started in 2007 in conjunction with the inauguration of the Shin Marunouchi Building (organiser: Art Award Tokyo Marunouchi Executive Committee); and the "Sompo Japan Art Award FACE" (organisers: Seiji Togo Memorial Sompo Japan Museum of Art; Yomiuri Shimbun). The number of competitions and open submission exhibitions for contemporary painting is at an unprecedented level of richness in past years. Moreover, it is needless to say there are many special exhibitions frequently held in numerous public and private museums focusing on art from the early to late modern period, such as impressionist art and the like. On the other hand, however, exhibitions focusing solely on contemporary paintings are rarely held. The competitions could be possibly viewed as the alternative, filling the role of such exhibitions in the greater Tokyo area. However, even when one considers the museums across the country, the number of exhibitions featuring contemporary painting is limited.

In recent years, there have been a few exhibitions that included a relatively large number of participating painters, including "Painting as Forest: Artist as Thinker" at Okazaki City Mindscape Museum in 2007; "Garden of Painting: Japanese Art of the 00s" at the National Museum of Art, Osaka

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