

# Naoko Watanabe



What I learned from German art

## 1) Before going to Germany

At the graduate school of Kyoto City University of Arts, I mainly studied the structure of pictorial space. At the time, I was particularly interested in Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, Bryce Marden, and others. I consider the appeal of painting to be the fact that a single line I draw with my body can speak to a wide variety of subjects, and that a painter can create colors that have never existed in the world before. I believe that the line is my most distinguishing capability as a painter. I want to make it clear with the line that our thoughts and bodies are free. I see this theme as influenced by two particular cultural and artistic elements that I have experienced before going to Germany.

The first is the aesthetic sense found in Kyoto's cultural heritage. I have been influenced by the great Kyoto painters Sotatsu Tawaraya (1570-1643) and Eitoku Kano (1543-1590). Their dynamic and elaborate paintings of nature, animals, and customs excel in structure and expression and strongly reflect the artist's intentions. At times, they exude volatility and uniqueness, creating new questions that shake people's hearts and minds in front of their works.

I consider that they recognized fusuma-e and byobu-e not only as exhibits within Buddhist temples and castle buildings, but also as something that affected people's lives.

The second is the Italian artist Caravaggio. His actual work, which I saw in an Italian church, was strong, beautiful, and wonderful, excelling in the production of light and the mastery of pictorial language. They also existed in close connection with the church and the city of Rome in the sense that they never left that church.

I am interested in how a painting, like his work, is intimately connected to the environment in which it is displayed and to the bodies and thoughts of the people standing in front of it. This means that the paintings walk with the people's way of life and the history of the city. I wanted to give further possibilities for my paintings to create an active dialogue as a space of such communication.

## (2) Receiving the Saison Art Program Grant and Afterwards

When I was 30 years old, I was awarded the "Saison Art Program Grant for Artists" sponsored by the Sezon Museum of Modern Art. It was an award given to promising young artists, and I was given a grant for production and the opportunity to have a solo exhibition at the Saison Art Program Gallery in Aoyama, Tokyo.

The Sezon Museum of Modern Art is a Japanese contemporary art museum with one of the leading collections of 20th century art in Japan and abroad, and is a pioneer of Mecenat activities in Japan. Its founder, Seiji Tsutsumi, was a businessman who combined diverse businesses with cultural projects and contributed greatly to the cultural development of Japan in the 1980s, and he was also a poet.

After receiving the grant, I wished to step up as a professional artist and approached the most proficient painter and place to learn about the professional attitude of foreign painters. That was Jörg Immendorff, who was then a professor in the painting course at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf.

## (3) Go to Germany

Initially, I had considered studying at an artist-in-residence abroad, but when I found out that there were schools in Germany where famous artists were teaching, I figured that going to school would be a chance to learn from them. After researching several famous art schools, I was surprised to find that Kunstakademie Düsseldorf had many great artists teaching there. Among them, I got to know that Jörg Immendorff was one of them. When I was a student, German and American neo-expressionist artists were producing very innovative and attractive works, and Japanese students and artists were influenced by them as a truly new contemporary painting movement. I approached him with the conviction that if I could learn from him the attitude of an international painter and the possibilities of painting, I could make progress as an artist.

After studying his work again, I found it to be very thoughtful, energetic, and full of life's struggles at the same time, full of faith, skill, and love for painting. Without hesitation, I wrote a letter to Immendorf and sent it to the Academy with my portfolio.

Looking back on those days, I always think: There must have been many students like me who approached him from all over the world, hoping to become his students, and if so, the chances that my portfolio would have caught his attention were very small. However, one day, some time after I sent the documents, I received a call on my cell phone from him.

What he told me over the phone was, "I saw your letter about wanting to study in Germany. I have an exhibition in Beijing in about a month, would you like to come see me there?" This was unexpected for me. I think he probably had his own considerations in mind when he told me that "Japan and China would be close. A month later, I was able to meet him and his assistant with some of my work. At that time, I could not speak at all as I wanted, but he looked at my work and signed the documents for me to study at the Academy.

A month and a half after I spoke with him in Beijing, I was accepted as a Gasthörer in his seminar at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and was able to start my two years in Germany.

I still remember how surprised and excited I was when he called me. It is a miracle that he called me and that I was able to study at Kunstakademie. That phone call allowed me to move into a new phase of my life.

I was confident that learning from Immendorf and being able to train at Kunstakademie was enough for me to step up my game. In addition, the comfort I had felt on a trip to Berlin a few years earlier was reason enough to move to Germany. I was very comfortable with the sophisticated artwork, the beautiful structure and design of the various architectural and product designs, the fusion of random design and nature, and the people creating a city that is as human and life-sized as possible. I felt that in this country, I could cherish and live my life as I am.

My mentor in Japan, Mr. Hisao Domoto, who spent the 1950s and 1960s in Paris and New York as an artist of the "informel" style, told me about his exchanges with Isamu Noguchi, Sam Francis, Antoni Tàpies, and Jasper Johns, and taught me about the significance of studying abroad. He also recommended me to the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs as a fellowship recipient of overseas program in foreign country and encouraged me to study in Germany to learn about the differences in the expression of line in painting between the East and the West.

#### 4) Stay in Germany

I stayed at Kunstakademie for two years. Immendorf visited the seminar about three times a month to interact with the students. Sometimes it was calm, sometimes it was full of tension. He asked me the question, "Why are you here?" I had shown my work in solo exhibitions in Japan and recognized my own style and what was important to me, but he gave me a chance to see how I could continue to question my perceptions and preconceived notions. During my stay in Germany, I also had the opportunity to take a closer look at new works by Immendorf, as well as works and *raisonné* that I had never seen before in Japan, and these special experiences stimulated my development.

At his suggestion, I joined the seminar of Gerhard Merz, another professor at the Academy, in my second year, gaining even different insights and experiences. Professor Gerhard Merz was truly a great painter and educator. His colloquium is the starting point for my current art education research. I was extremely impressed by Professor Merz's wisdom in maturing his seminar through careful dialogue with his students, based on his thoughtfulness, knowledge and experience in culture and art.

Both of these professors I studied with were great painters, with different styles of work, but with a great love of painting and art. I felt their pride in being painters, their originality, and their respect for history and past artists supported their work. I hope to be like them as a professional painter, just as I have learned from the attitudes of many artists.

During my stay in Germany from 2002 to 2004, installation art in particular was becoming the latest trend in the art scene, and media art was also diversifying. In the midst of all this, I was questioning myself about the significance of continuing to paint, and coming to Germany gave me

the courage to do so. In Germany, people cherish both the new and the old, and each has a clear meaning.

I also felt on various occasions that the people of Germany respect artists, and it made me proud to be an artist myself. I am still able to continue my creative activities without hesitation, thanks to the experience of my stay in Germany and the kindness and love for art that I received from the German people. I am sincerely grateful

#### 5) Present and future

If possible, I hope to go back to Germany for a residency and presentation. I am currently working on abstract paintings. I am interested in learning about the German people's concept of objectivity in abstract painting and how they view and feel about their artwork. Germany has a culture in which a sophisticated dialogue is created through art. I would be happy to present my work as an idea for such a dialogue during my next visit to Germany.

"You dance with your senses." is a work for 2020, a stylistic turning point. Until then, the tension of the vertical lines and the expanse of the image were important items to impress the viewer. In this work, however, the white curves are also a key word to describe the painting. In this work, the contrasting elements of curves and vertical lines influence each other, and I painted this work in the hope that they would form a new beautiful moment.

#### Naoko Watanabe CV

1970 Born in Kyoto

1993 B.F.A in Painting, Kyoto City University of Arts

1995 M.F.A in Painting, Kyoto City University of Arts

2003- 2004 Studied in the Federal Republic of Germany as a Fellow of 'The Japanese Government Overseas Study Programme for Artists'

Studied at Prof. Jörg Immendorff class and Prof. Gerhard Merz class in Kunstakademie Düsseldorf

- Solo Exhibitions

2022 "Love Myself", Gallery G-77 / Kyoto

2020 "The Beautiful Experience" , Gallery G-77 / Kyoto

2019 "About Love. Like a Monster", Gallery G-77 / Kyoto

2018 "GLITTER", Gallery G-77 / Kyoto

2017 "Unnamed Color", Gallery G-77 / Kyoto

2016 "Purple, The Picture Plane.", Gallery G-77 / Kyoto

2015 "In Softness, In Hardness, Exists BEAUTY", SEZON ART SHOP (Intercontinental Yokohama Grand

+ SEZON MUSEUM OF MODERN ART) / Yokohama 《Kyoto Art Center 31st Artists in

Studio program》

"For Collapse of Massive Stars" Gallery a / Kyoto 《Kyoto Art Center 30th Artists in Studio program》

"Night Watch", Gallery G-77 / Kyoto

2014 "Color Shadow and Line Song" Kyoto City Dohda Senior High School of Art / Kyoto

2013 "Three fixed points observation" Horikawa Oike Gallery / Kyoto 《Kyoto Art Center 28th

Artists in Studio program》

2000 "The Present Exhibition of 'The First Artist-Aiding Program' Saison Art Program SAP GRANT"

Saison Art Program Gallery / Tokyo

Gallery Haku / Osaka ('94, '95, '98)

1998 galerie OÙ / Osaka ('95)

1993 "a sense of time" galerie 16 / Kyoto (-97)

- Group Exhibitions

- 2024 MARUEIDO Gallery / Tokyo  
 2019 "CONTEXT" Art Miami, Florida, USA / Gallery G-77  
 2016 "CONTEXT" Art Miami, Florida, USA / Gallery G-77  
 2014 "Seiji Tsutsumi / Takashi Tsujii Hommage" SEZON MUSEUM OF MODERN ART / Nagano  
 2010 "Toyota Art Competition" Toyota Municipal Museum of Art / Aichi  
 2008 "Kyoten" Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art / Kyoto (2007)  
 2007 "The 24th Ueno Royal Museum Grand Prize Exhibition Feb.6-8, 2007 " Ueno Royal Museum Gallery / Tokyo  
 "20th Mihama Art Exhibition" Fukui Fine Arts Museum / Fukui ... (22nd -2009, 24th-2012)  
 2006 "ART TODAY 2006" SEZON MUSEUM OF MODERN ART / Nagano  
 "The 24th Ueno Royal Museum Grand Prize Exhibition" The Ueno Royal Museum / Tokyo, The Hakone Open Air Museum / Kanagawa, Fukuoka Art Museum / Fukuoka, The Museum of Kyoto / Kyoto  
 2002 "Art Exhibition of Selected New Artists 2002" Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art / Kyoto  
 2001 "Exhibition organized by Yasuo Kobayashi 'Politics of touches-what is the painterliness?'"  
 SEZON MUSEUM OF MODERN ART / Nagano  
 "PAINTERLINESS V" Gallery Haku / Osaka (II-96, IV-'98, 2007, 2008, 2009)  
 2000 "ASOBIJUTSU-To The World of Modern Art" Seibu Gallery / Tokyo  
 1999 "The Principle Beyond Word " O Gallery / Tokyo

- Awards and Fellowships

- 2011 Received the Prize of Town Mayor of Mihama at the "24th Mihama Art Exhibition"  
 2010 Received the Semi-grand prize at the "Toyota Art Competition"  
 2007 Received the Prize of Town Mayor of Mihama at the "20th Mihama Art Exhibition"  
 Received the Prize of Nippon Broad Casting System, Inc. at 'The 24th Ueno Royal Museum Grand Prize Exhibition'  
 The Ueno Royal Museum  
 2003 Was granted the 2003-2004 Fellowship of ' The Japanese Government Overseas Study Programme for Artists'  
 Agency for Cultural Affairs , Government of Japan  
 2000 Was granted 'HOLBEIN SCHOLARSHIP' HOLBEIN WORKS, LTD.  
 2000 Was granted 'The First Artist-Aiding Program SAP GRANT' Saison Art Program

- Public collection

- The Ueno Royal Museum / Tokyo  
 SEZON MUSEUM OF MODERN ART / Nagano