

# CULTURAL NEWS

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WINDOW TO JAPANESE FOOD, MUSIC, AND ARTS

## Kadonaga's "Process Art" is Exhibiting at Doizaki Gallery, Little Tokyo

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### Beyond Exoticism: Kadonaga's Work is Characterized by a Clear-Eyed Attention to Material Facts

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To Westerners, Kadonaga works seem very Japanese. Since he has rarely shown his work in Japan since the late 1970's, he is little known by Japanese critics and curators compared to other artists of the same generation, and there are almost no Japanese language texts on his work.

Therefore, I would like to take this opportunity to explain Kadonaga's work in a Japanese context. This requires the exploration of some interesting issues in the way contemporary Japanese sculpture has been viewed in the West.

Before discussing Kadonaga's work, it would be instructive to know how he started his career as an artist. Kadonaga was interested in art as a child and learned about contemporary art mostly on his own from magazine articles and gallery and museum exhibitions.

He did not show his own work until he was more than 25 years old. After receiving prizes in a number of contemporary art competitions, he was asked to participate in the 9th Artists Today Exhibition" in 1973. This annual exhibition, organized by the Yokohama Citizens' Gallery, played a very significant role in contemporary Japanese art.

Through participation in this exhibition, Kadonaga was able to meet many of the artists of his own generation who were important in the art scene of the time. Influenced by such movements as Conceptual Art, Arte Povera and Anti-Form, they use photographs or plain, un-worked materials to create art

that questioned the basis of the art system and artistic expression.

The general tendency of Japanese contemporary art in the late sixties and the period of the Osaka World's Fair of 1970 was a superficial fusion with technology, employing such materials as metal, plastic, leather and neon.

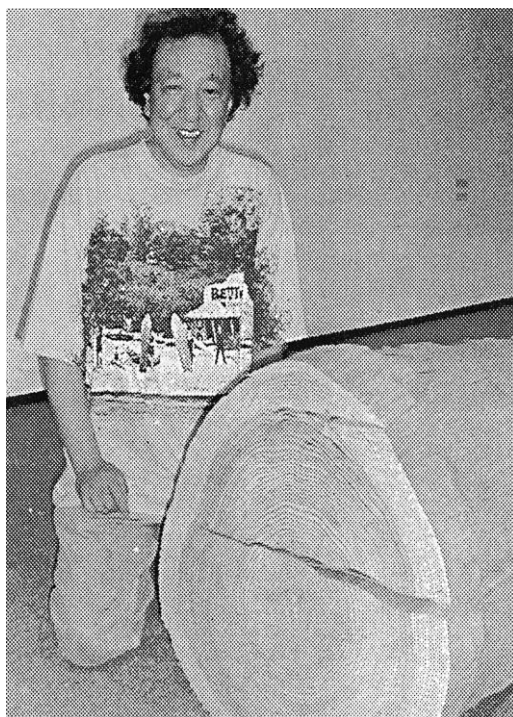
However, there was another tendency, emerging quietly and steadily, that had a firmer base in theory and opted for a more stoic approach to artistic expression. Kadonaga's basic thinking about art developed in this environment. "The Mono-ha," often mentioned in relation to Kadonaga, was a representative movement of this period. However, "the Mono - ha" proper was most active between 1968 and 1970.

Kadonaga's debut came a bit later, so he did not participate in this movement directly. He did look carefully at exhibitions which had a great impact on the Japanese contemporary art scene of the time, such as "Aspects of New Japanese Art" at the Tokyo National Museum of Modern Art in 1970 and "The 10th Tokyo Biennale in 1970: Between Man and Matter," which featured Japanese as well as

American and European artists such as Christo, Klaus Rinke, Daniel Buren and Carl Andre, and he was undoubtedly influenced by them.

During this period, Kadonaga was searching out his own path as an artist. He is sometimes referred to as a "late-blooming 'Monoha' artist", but I believe there are some fundamental differences between Kadonaga and "the Mono-ha." "Mono-ha" art is concerned with the relationship between materials and the artist, between the materials themselves, and between the materials and the exhibition space.

Instead, Kadonaga took the approach of direct engagement with the physical properties of the materials. He was chiefly concerned with developing a system that lets the material



Kazuo Kadonaga and His Work

determine form by itself. As is explained above, the structure of Kadonaga's works was very simple, and the concept behind the process by which they were made was very clear.

These were unique characteristics that differed substantially from previous trends in Japanese art. After careful thought, Kadonaga started out in the simplest possible way, dealing with what he considered most essential. It is obvious that he looked at Japanese art, including his own work, with perceptive insight.

Since he was not associated with an established educational institution, he was able to maintain a unique point of view, proceeding boldly in his own way without becoming too cerebral or being diverted by particular Western trends or theories.

Kadonaga was not concerned with a superficial return to tradition or a presentation of specifically Japanese features in his art. This is clear from an examination of the various factors that motivated him to become an artist. However, critical commentary in foreign countries, which places his work in the context of Conceptual Art and Process Art, always suggests that it is specifically informed by a traditional Japanese aesthetic sensibility.

It is true that the materials employed in his early works - wood, bamboo, paper and silk - are associated with Japanese tradition by most people. However, it is doubtful that this interpretation reflects the artist's true intentions.

While it is desirable to find a common language to discuss contemporary art transcending national boundaries, we often expect art to reflect national characteristics, and many people look for connections with the clichés of a certain tradition.

Recently, however, scholars of art history and other area of the humanities and social sciences are pointing out that these stereotypical ideas about national tradition are not as self-evidently true as they seem, and they have seldom developed naturally.

Many recent studies show how cultural traits have been artificially produced in the modern era to promote a sense of national identity. Many things that the Japanese consider to be traditional characteristics of Japanese art were established or created by government officials and others in the process of forming a modern nation state based on the West.

Discussions about the use of wood in contemporary Japanese art take on an interesting dimension when they are examined in light of these recent studies. Wood is often seen as the most representative sculptural medium in the history of Japanese art.

It is often identified as a characteristic feature of modern and contemporary Japanese sculpture, especially in books and exhibition catalogues published outside of Japan. These accounts often refer to the concept of tree spirits, and relate the use of wood to a non-Christian, pantheistic world view peculiar to Japan.

As can easily be imagined, not all of today's Japanese artists think about things when making their work. It may be possible, whether the artist is aware of it or not, that ancient traditions have an unconscious effect on present-day Japanese artists,

but this is something that no one can know for certain.

However, this tendency to see a simple pre-Christian, pantheistic attitude in cultural "Others" engaged in a dialog with materials has historical roots in writing on sculpture in the Western modernist tradition.

The rise of "direct carving" in Europe, and particularly in England, between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, was based on a variety of influences, including a desire to return to the simple craftsmanship of the Middle Ages and an interest in primitive art aroused by the tribal sculpture of Africa and Oceania.

"Direct carving" became a major trend in modernist sculpture, but its significance for the present argument is the way it became associated with a certain tendency in criticism and academic studies.

This was initiated by an article on Brancusi by Mircea Eliade, the renowned scholar of religion, that appeared in 1967. Eliade wrote that the innovations introduced by Brancusi in twentieth century sculpture were due to his unique approach to materials and that this was based on the simple pantheistic faith of a Romanian peasant.

He maintained that Brancusi's attitude to materials derived from a primitive religious viewpoint that had survived in the folk culture of Romania.

There is no doubt that Eliade, who was also Romanian, intended to promote the cultural identity of his native country through this essay on Brancusi, but he took this position in response to a sense of loss he perceived in modern Western culture and a desire to fill this gap with the achievements of a cultural "Other."

Ever since, commentaries on modern or contemporary sculpture made with wood or natural stones have often proposed theories that relate it to the influence of cultural "Others" or antiquity.

According to Kadonaga, however, he chose wood, because it was the closest material at hand. The same was true of bamboo, paper and silk. All of Kadonaga's materials at first seem to be natural, but like the wood, which comes from planted trees, they are a part of nature that has been tamed and cultivated specifically for human use.

Kadonaga has said that nothing would prevent him from using an industrial material like steel if he thinks of an effective system for revealing its invisible properties.

There is no trace of mystery or pantheism in Kadonaga's attitude toward his materials. In fact, his work is characterized by a clear-eyed attention to material facts supported by precise calculation. Just the same, he should have realized that this way of using materials might be associated with Japanese tradition in people's minds.

While choosing materials that risk being interpreted in clichés, the toughness Kadonaga seeks in his art communicates intentions that go beyond such stereotypes. This same thing can be said about the associations with craft and other stereotypes, not just those of Japanese tradition, that surround glass.

(An excerpt from the museum catalog.)