

A System Given

By Hiroko Inazuka

Curator The Museum of Modern Art, Toyama

When I try to explain about the artist Kazuo Kadonaga, what should I say about what it is that he creates? His work presents the materials purely, almost as if they were unprocessed, as a slice or mass of wood, paper, bamboo, silk or glass. Compared to sculptors and painters who use their hands and tools, such as chisels and brushes, I hardly feel any trace of Kadonaga's hands in his work. I should perhaps say that his work is silent. However, when I encounter his work in person, I get a sensation like, "What on earth is this?" from the overwhelming sense of presence in his work.

Kadonaga's interest in his work is not leaving any trace of thoughts or feelings. It is to discover the plasticity or nature of variability inherent in the basic, simple materials with which everyone is familiar and to make it visible through the power of the materials themselves; for example, as in the way concentric circles are drawn on a surface of water by a thrown stone, wind ripples are drawn on the surface of the desert by wind, or molten iron flows from heat. Therefore, the meaning of creation for Kadonaga is to establish a system for "visualization" suited to a specific material and to execute it to perfection.

In the process of executing the system, Kadonaga doesn't care at all to put his hands in the work; instead, he chooses the very best method, whether through the use of machinery or another person's hands. It seems that Kadonaga avoids using his hands because he considers that his feelings may affect the "power of the material itself" to its completion. Glass material to be melted is put into a furnace, and like a stream of water from a faucet, the molten glass continues to drip onto one point in the heated annealing oven. Glass material keeps piling onto itself, and under its own weight creates an uneven and swelling cone-like shape. After forty hours, it becomes a mass weighing approximately 600 kg. During the process, there are no human hands applied, and it seems as if the artwork is created and completed automatically. Kadonaga first started working on this "Glass" series in 1986 and spent nearly fifteen years before exhibiting it in 1999. After searching for satisfactory equipment to create the work, in 1996 he built a large-scale furnace in Hakusan City, Ishikawa Prefecture. It was an outstanding process and effort for him to reach the point where he established the system of using a single thread of glass, and on the top of that, he exhibited no works during this time period, concentrating only on working with the glass. Once Kadonaga sets a system in motion, he continues to strive for perfection through careful

preparation and continuous experimentation.

The forty hours that it takes to create the mass of a glass piece just hangs on the edge of the fifteen years that the artist spent on conception and experimentation. Similarly, I assume that all of his series, wood, bamboo, paper, silk, and glass, that have been exhibited over the forty years of his artistic career followed the same path: a long time for conception and experimentation, with nothing simply created on a whim. While the art world these days develops constantly, this artist keeps his original stance, and this seems to be relevant to his artwork

Kadonaga studied neither at an art university nor with any specific artists. I find it difficult to relate his work to any of the trends or groups of modern art in Japan. Since the beginning of his twenties when he began to aspire to a career in art, he has been mostly self-taught while learning from his interactions with contemporary artists. I must say that he is an extremely special kind of artist who stands apart from others. Since Kadonaga first had his solo exhibition in Tokyo in 1971, he has exhibited mainly the "Wood" series in solo and group exhibitions. In this series, he used various methods to make slices in pieces of wood cut from mountain trees. Later in the 1970's, he started to show his works on the foreign art scene with some suggestions from a Japanese artist based in Europe. In 1979, he exhibited in the mid-sized city of Malmo, Sweden, and since then he has been active exhibiting mainly on the American west coast while traveling back and forth from Japan. Kadonaga distanced himself from the lively art scene in Japan through the 80s and 90s, placing himself in a different system in Europe and the United States where he can barely speak the languages. In this manner, I consider that he was allowed to maintain his unique stance without being swayed by the criticism or tendencies of a smaller arena.

Kadonaga set up a studio for working with glass in Hakusan City, Ishikawa Prefecture in 1996, which seems to have given him an opportunity to show his work in Japan. After a period of twenty years of not showing in Japan, he exhibited at The International Contemporary Art Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Toyama, in 1999, with a solo exhibition in Tokyo the following year. He has had traveling exhibitions showing the "Glass" series and other works from San Diego to Seattle, and it has been six years until this current "Silk" project. I cannot call these six years silence, though, when I consider how the system has been thought out and given to a single material, and how much time has elapsed for this opportunity to occur.

This is not the first time that Kadonaga has worked with silk. He first exhibited a "Silk" series in the mid 1980s in the United States where cocoons were stored in innumerable grids. Rather than showing his recent work "Glass" or working with a new material, he chose to exhibit "Silk" for the current exhibition and it was neither to repeat nor reproduce the series but to see through to completion the entire cycle of the system that he had set up for "Silk"

that was previously unfinished.

“Silk” is definitely different from Glass or Wood, because a living thing, the silkworm, is involved in the production. Dried pupae that never emerged still remained in the cocoons in the work from the 80s. Due to the space restrictions of museums and galleries, Kadonaga had to stop the process with a heat treatment and was not able to proceed with the process of having pupae emerge. However, the Nizayama Forest Art Museum, with turbines and conducting tubes visible in the space, had the generous space that other museums couldn't offer. Kadonaga decided to re-start the system that he set up for “Silk” in the power plant, which is a challenging space for the artist, yet the only one in which he considered that he could achieve the project.

In the beginning of October, a white net was stretched onto a large aluminum frame 8 meters long, and 50,000 silkworms were set loose on the innumerable grids. After a week, I found the huge frame completely covered in shining white, with an overwhelming sense of presence. And then, when I got close by and observed it in detail, I was fascinated by the delicacy of the strings and noticed that the white was composed of 50,000 cocoons and thin strings. Then when I stepped back and looked at it as a whole, I was stunned to think how much time it took for it to be created, not by human hands, but by 50,000 silkworms, each less than 10 cm in length.

Transient strings of cocoons fill a space. Traces of dripping glass create mass. Innumerable thin slices of wood create the form of the original log. The accumulation of delicacy in Kadonaga's work is a trace of the time required to create such massive forms. There is a considerable gap between the delicacy of the detail and the overwhelming dynamism of the physical mass of the materials used. Perhaps that is what creates the sensation of “What on earth is this?” to viewers who stand in front of his work.

I can hardly imagine how “Silk” will have evolved by the time this essay is published. Kadonaga may have already started thinking of a new material and a suitable system for it while observing the process of transformation. Let us assume that Kadonaga has carefully organized a system for a different material. One can safely assume that this material, too, will then reveal its intrinsic inner form, as far as it exists in its given time and space.