

SILK - Its life and death shines behind transience

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The atmosphere is alive with the work. After eating mulberry leaves, fifty thousand silkworms travel evenly on the stretched net, spinning silk filaments. Making countless cocoons, they transform themselves into pupae. Eventually, they become moths covered by beautiful, pure white hair and emerge from the cocoons. The exhibited work presents the entire process of creation, achieving its growth independent of the artist's expression or creative will.

The shocking concept of making the live silkworm itself the material of the work almost transcends the territory of fine art. Bringing in the history of the silk industry and complicated elements that relate to the dignity of life, one almost tends to forget its important aspect as fine art.

Kadonaga's intention is in a different place than this shocking fact that a living thing is incorporated into the work. What really interested the artist was the quality of silk, the material itself, and the process and transformation associated with the creation of this material.

Kazuo Kadonaga started creating artwork in the 1970s. During the early part of his career, he first sliced a wooden log into extremely thin slivers of wood, and then put the slices back together into their original form, exhibiting the state of change in the material as the sliced pieces naturally dry and curl. He presented the sound of cracking bamboo by lining up bamboo stems in a space, sealing the space airtight, and then drying the stems using a dehumidifier. He presented hand-skimmed Japanese paper as a mass of fiber by piling many sheets in layers while they were still wet. In all of his past works, the artist provided a setting that transforms the "qualities" of the material he has chosen, and presented the transformation that occurs as his artwork.

Since 1997, he has worked with glass material, installing a glass furnace in the ceiling so that threads of molten glass slowly drip into an annealing oven on the floor, hardening as they flow in swirls to make solid glass, and presenting it as his work. The pattern created by the accumulation of glass threads along with the trapped air creates a beautiful work with delicate gradations. At the time I made the exhibition request to the artist, I assumed that he would exhibit works from this "Glass" series that he has been working on until recent years.

However, my expectation was wrong. According to the artist, "In the space inside the fearful Nizayama Forest Art Museum, exhibiting a number of solid glass pieces would be no match." In this unique space that was originally a hydropower station, Kadonaga probably felt that he would be unable to undertake a project without firm resolution.

This "SILK" series was produced in Japan twenty years ago, during the years 1986-87, and has been exhibited only a few times in the United States. At that time, the cocoons were heat-treated, and the artist's intention to display the process clear until the cocoons became moths could not be realized. It could be called a sort of phantom series that was never fully realized in later years because of the difficulty of finding a place that could accommodate the display of a work that incorporated living things into it. This time, for his SILK work that has been previously unseen in Japan, the artist has finally had the opportunity to see the conception of his work through to completion, displaying the process clear up through the appearance of the moths.

Creation of the work started on site on October 1st. The aluminum frameworks were installed through the following process, which took three days to complete. Two layers of white fishing nets were stretched onto the frameworks for the silkworms to crawl on. The nets have 3cm grids that were calculated dimensionally to make it easier for the silkworms to create cocoons. The plan was to make cocoons in the space in between. Metal shafts were placed in the middle of the frameworks in order to rotate them from top to bottom. At the end, three 8x4-meter frameworks were suspended in the middle of the space with wires.

Originally, in sericulture, this grid framing called "mabushi" is made out of wood or cardboard, but there is a reason the artist used thin, white nets instead. He wanted to make the silk filaments and white cocoons appear to float in the air in the museum's space as well as to make them look light, and this is also the reason he used aluminum for the metal frameworks

There was a reason for the mechanism by which the frameworks rotated as well. It is the silkworm's habit to make their cocoons above the wood in order to protect themselves from their enemies as well as to be able to move themselves efficiently, and by rotating the frameworks again and again it was possible to make them spread their cocoons evenly throughout. This setup was learned from the knowledge of the sericulture farmer.

In this way, a setting for the silkworms to create their cocoons in was completed. From there on, however, it was truly a testing ground where the artist himself would not know how the work would proceed to its completion because it would be dependent on the silkworm, a living thing. The fact was that the artist, Kadonaga, created a schematic plan, the simple aluminum frameworks with stretched nets, and it was the silkworms that created the image within it. As the person carrying out the experiment, the artist just needed to stay to view

the artwork until its completion.

On October 4th, the silkworms were carried into the museum. They had been raised by a sericulture farmer up until right before they started spinning silk filaments. The fifty thousand silkworms single-mindedly clung to the nets and gradually spread across the whole surface as the frameworks were rotated several times a day. By October 9th they had become almost round cocoons. The silkworms that were unable to slip into the nets kept secreting filaments onto the surface, making a layer with a thickness like Japanese paper. As a result, it created a pattern that somehow looked like cirrocumulus clouds on a night with a clouded-over moon, which was quite mysterious, and it added an even more artistic element to the work.

With the pupae surrounded by white cocoons, the artwork was as silent as if they had forgotten they were alive. Then, beginning to emerge on October 24th, pure-white moths appeared with innumerable fluttering from among the cocoons while they secreted brown fluids that dissolved the silk. The brown secreted fluids looked like paints scattered onto a white canvas. It was a startling spectacle that imparted a realization that the artwork was actually alive and changing hour by hour, day by day.

This new work appears two-dimensional at first glance. However, the artist considers it a three-dimensional composition that harmonizes with the internal space of the museum. To tell the truth, there was a reason why the artist chose to use three aluminum frameworks. There are three existing windows on the west wall of the museum, and each framework with its stretched net is set to face each window so that the setting sun hits the surface of the nets and shines golden on the threads of silk. The grand transparent screen that shines white with threads of silk appears in the white-walled museum space.

This work, "SILK No.3 ABC", of Kadonaga's harmonizes with the space through the beautiful white "quality" of silk inherent in the material, and on the other hand, it keeps the impression of "fearful internal space" in check through the stunning fact that this artwork incorporates a living thing, silkworms. One can say that the artist chose a splendid technique that has allowed the work to prevail over the space through the strong sense of being alive that the artwork carries. Those who visit the museum will first see the beautiful white artwork as a whole, and then as they approach it will be surprised and overwhelmed by the impression of the presence of innumerable wriggling living things in the work.

The work of Kadonaga's begins with a deep interest in the common materials of daily life and reaches its completion by leading the transformation of the beautiful qualities intrinsic to the material to blossom in the world of art. In order to achieve this, it is indispensable for the artist to research and experiment relentlessly, and it is almost unimaginable how long it must take the artist to become knowledgeable about the material. For Kadonaga's art

making, "Material comes first", and his following work takes form from his comprehensive knowledge on the variability of a particular material. Moreover, the detail from which the expression and the image of the work are made appears inevitably by changing the material itself without the artist arranging any details. In a sense, this connects with the spirit of Japan that accepts the appearance of nature as it is, and it can be said that Kadonaga's work makes a clear distinction from past art forms like painting and sculpture, etc. His experimental work, while automatically made, is indeed systematic in that it changes and transforms art elements into materials. With the work this time incorporating living things as its material, it may be shadowed by the image that it must be enshrouded with a sense of the transience of life and death; however, it was also for this reason that the work was able to succeed at leaving behind only a simple, pure-white beauty.