

RESTROOM RETROSPECT

(1997)

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BACK WHEN I WAS AT ART SCHOOL studying oil painting, I had a part-time job at a luggage shop in Ikebukuro. Perhaps because they feared that my “Welcome!” greeting to the customers was not up to snuff, from the afternoon of the very first day I was assigned to the attic stockroom, where drifts of dust motes gleamed in a swathe of sunshine from a skylight, and the shelves along the wall were neatly stacked with buff cardboard boxes for various kinds of bags. That’s right, I was a stock boy tasked with taking inventory—*student bookbags, black, 5pcs; elementary school rucksacks, red, 2pcs; women’s clutch purses, beige, 6pcs*—spending my days marking the status of such “necessities” on the provided forms. It was boring tabulation work up there in the attic, but even so I had my reasons for keeping at the job for several months: there were bundles of flattened cardboard from boxes that weren’t needed once they put the merchandise out in the shop, and I could take as many as I liked.

I don’t know about art school students today, but I didn’t have enough money to buy stretched canvases one after another, and simply as a matter of principle, I had already developed a strong aversion to the notion of exchanging money for materials at an art supply store in order to paint pictures. Often enough when I finish collaging onto a brand-new canvas I’ve bought, my creative urge just evaporates. On that score, the cardboard boxes I stumbled across at the luggage shop were a nice color, smelled good, and their broken-down industrial-stapled flaps made for an interesting shape, all of which put me instinctively in that “I’ve got to whip up something with this” mood. Every three days or so I’d take a bundle of flattened cardboard home with me and set to work on what I called my Shop Box Series, staining it with ink, adding pencil lines, overlaying enamel-soaked tissues, gluing on found bits of styrofoam, pasting snippets of print media, over and over again every day.

Using my own private trove of favorite materials with no need to spend my part-time earnings on art supplies, I was happily steeped in a sense of accomplishment at my many “artworks,” until arriving home one day I was struck by an odd tinge of fondness for the light-blue plastic wastebin stationed in the entryway. No sooner did I notice the tan-colored stuff bulging out of it than my fondness flared into a fit of anger. My mother, fed up with all the artworks (mere trash to her) I’d

displayed (dumped) in one room of the family house, had taken it upon herself to clear away the lot. Burning with rage and in a cold sweat, I overturned the wastebin to rescue my poor crumpled pictures and protested vehemently, “That was art! You don’t go throwing it out!” But my mother just sat there sipping her tea at the low table and didn’t budge, saying, “Oh, s’t that so?” Still fuming, I hauled the pieces off to my room and lined them up again, only to realize that my mother’s viewpoint was also plenty correct. Stretched out lazily gazing at the pictures, yes, I could really appreciate how closely they resembled what most folks called garbage. And while I had to laugh, at the same time a vague uncertainty came over me.

From then on, whenever I found myself waiting on a bench in a train station somewhere and happened to see a billboard, especially one sladdashed with white paint to blot out an older picture yet showing patches of the underpainting, I’d be truly inspired, thinking some day I want to paint pictures like that—even now that feeling hasn’t changed at all. Say I set out one of my pictures by the roadside on garbage collection day and looked on from a distance, would the garbage man not hesitate to toss my work into the truck? That’s the kind of pictures I wanted to make, and twenty years later I still feel the same way. I have absolutely no theoretical rationale for “using refuse,” nor do I have any interest in making pictures on such a basis. Rather, what comes from making things instinctively, intuitively, stripped of all rational thought, must have something of the flavor of a commonplace half-painted billboard—otherwise, it’s false. Granted it’s a far cry from what my mother or probably most people would recognize as “beauty,” things like that are so beautiful to me they still make me tremble. Supposing a person calls himself a painter or sculptor or artist or whatever, what is this thing called “intent” by which he makes things? Something that never even for a moment transcends a consciously intended production plan cannot be called an “artwork.” Even now, I have to wonder about the relationship between an “artwork” and the declared “intent.”

Many a restroom wall in an old restaurant is incredibly beautiful, but if you were to cut it out and hang it up in an art museum with the title Restaurant Toilet Wall, would most people feel put off? Short of tacking on some intentionally unrelated title or placing significance on

such an act, why not title it Toilet Wall? Whether or not people care to look at the title, it's enough that it can be regarded as "beautiful." After all, it is a toilet wall and it *is* beautiful.

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