WHY HAVE THERE BEEN NO GREAT WOMEN SCULPTORS?

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Odawara Nodoka

JAPANESE ART EDUCATION IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

IN MY WRITING ON the sculptor Aoki Noe, I refer to Linda Nochlin's provocative essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"[1] and point out that none of the great women artists cited in the article are sculptors—in fact, all are painters.[2] What this tells us is that when we examine the challenges faced by female artists, it becomes clear that the issue is not monolithic but exists in various forms, specific to their fields of practice. Indeed, female sculptors are often viewed as being even further marginalized, on an outer edge beyond female painters. This is a common perception in both the West and the East. The following is one example observed in Japan.

The Private Women's School of Fine Arts (PWSFA, the predecessor of Joshibi University of Art and Design) was founded in 1900 and accepted students from 1901 to 1904. Published in 1914, the *Zenkoku gakkō enkakushi* [History of schools in Japan], edited by Tōto Tsūshinsha, records the total number of graduates during that time as 1,428. By department, 33 graduates were from Japanese painting and 45 from Western painting. Carving and modeling accounted for 2, while the graduates from the embroidery, artificial flower making, knitting, and needlework departments came to 178, 162, 48, and 860, respectively. Noteworthy is the number of graduates from the carving and modeling department. The data is staggeringly low, but what contributed to this figure? This essay attempts to explore the circumstances behind these statistics within a historical context.

In 1900, the application for the establishment of PWSFA was submitted and subsequently accepted by the city of Tokyo, and on

1 Linda Nochlin, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?, ArtNews*, translated by Matsuoka Kazuko, *Bijutsu techō*, May 1967.

2 https://bijutsutecho.com/magazine/review/20639

April 1, 1901, the first student entrance ceremony was held. Fujita Bunzō, one of the earliest sculptors active during Japan's modern period, was the school's first principal. In the 1870s, he had studied in the Department of Sculpture in the newly opened Kōbu Bijutsu Gakkō [Technical Art School] under Vincenzo Ragusa, an Italian sculptor who had been invited to Japan by the Meiji Government. There were no female students in the Department of Sculpture when Fujita was there. Tokyo Bijutsu Gakkō [Tokyo School of Fine Arts], the institution founded after the closure of the Technical Art School, did not accept women. In 1902, the Tokyo Joshi Bijutsu Gakkō [Women's School of Fine Arts in Tokyo] was founded, as if to compete with PWSFA, which had opened two years before. Despite teaching a variety of disciplines, such as music and photography, the school soon closed permanently, owing to continual conflicts among the board members. In 1903, Nihon Joshi Bijutsu Gakkō [Women's School of Fine Arts in Japan] also opened its doors. This school, which included not only a fine arts department but also a literature department, invited renowned artists such as Shimomura Kanzan and Takamura Kōtarō to be guest instructors. Eventually, as the school faced financial difficulties, their name changed to Nihon Joshi Gigei Gakkō [Women's School of Arts and Crafts in Japan], and then became Tokyo Shiritsu Shinobugaoka Kōtō Jogakkō, a public high school for girls in Tokyo (currently Tokyo Toritsu Shinobugaoka Kōkō [Tokyo Metropolitan Shinobugaoka High School], which is run as a co-ed school).

Evidently, art schools aimed at women emerged one after another during the early twentieth century in Japan. Nonetheless, the *Joshi bijutsu daigaku hachijūnenshi* [An 80-year history of Joshibi University of Art and Design], published by the Joshibi University of Art and Design in 1980,[3] notes that in Japan, providing education for women tended to be viewed in one of three ways: 1) based on a belief in male supremacy, co-ed schools were disapproved of and the notion upheld that educating women at a level lower than men would suffice; 2) that women's education should support their physiological and psychological characteristics as well as society's expectations of them; or 3) that education was acknowledged as effective in achieving gender equality and improving the position of women in society. According to the same book, the prospectus announced by PWSFA in October

3 [Joshibi University of Art and Design, ed. *Joshi bijutsu daigaku hachijūnenshi* [An 80-year history of Joshibi University of Art and Design (Tokyo: Joshibi University of Art and Design, 1980.)]

1900 referred to the latter two beliefs. It is important to note that the objective of elevating the social status of women was closely tied to the social conditions in Japan during that time. In February 1904, Japan declared war against Russia, initiating the Russo-Japanese War. And in wartime Japan—when the country was moving towards becoming a nation-state—the empowerment of women can be seen as just another way to accelerate the imperialism directly associated with chauvinistic nationalism.

In January 1904, just before war broke out, Fujita resigned from PWSFA, and the school appointed its second principal, Satō Shizu. The school closed its doors permanently only two months later, after the two students in the carving and modeling department, its first and last students, completed their studies. This tiny class size can largely be attributed to a lack of model cases to demonstrate the ability of sculptors to serve as beneficial resources for the country. The records from the Technical Art School, the first art education institution operated by the Japanese Government, also highlight the difficulty in recruiting sculpture students, both male and female. Additionally, the male-dominant Japanese culture—as represented by apprenticeships among Buddhist sculptors—also negatively affected the development of female sculptors, though its impact was less prominent in Western and Japanese painting.

Furthermore, during the Meiji era, the asymmetric relationship between genders in Japanese art education—in which men were the creators and women the created—cast a darker shadow on the practice of sculpture than on any other art discipline. This illustrates the objectification of women: female bodies are viewed not as "naked" but as "nude," which, as art historian Kenneth Clark points out,[4] is considered an idealistic art form in the history of Western art.

4 Kenneth Clark, T*he Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Doubleday, 1959). Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, translated by Takahisa Shuji and Sasaki Hideya (Tokyo: Chikumashobo, 2004).

ARTISTS CHALLENGING THE SYSTEM AND HISTORY OF SCULPTURE

KASAHARA EMIKO WAS ONE of the artists who addressed the issue of the conflicting body images of women in sculpture: the body that is objectified as a sculpture model and the body that is the subject of creation. Kasahara, who moved to New York after completing the master's program in sculpture at Tama Art University in 1988, had felt somewhat ambivalent on seeing the Venus de Milo at the Louvre. At the museum, Kasahara compared the body image of the statue in front of her with her own body and that of female tourists around her, and realized that the image women see by looking at their own bodies and that observed by others is not the same. More precisely, when a woman looks down at her breasts, she sees two upside-down spindle-shaped objects with a nipple atop each one, as opposed to her image of another woman's breasts: round with a nipple at the center of each circle.[5]

This realization prompted Kasahara to create her marble work, *Untitled -Double Urinal-* (1993). Displayed side by side were two similar urinals of carved marble, each with a small pointed nipple at the bottom. The artwork was "made to recreate, in sculptural form, the shapes that appear when looking down on one's own breasts from above," said Kasahara. She added that "when reflecting on the fact that Western art history has always revolved around studying women's breasts as objects, viewing the breasts myself from a subject's perspective, and elevating them to an art object demonstrates great significance."

5 Kasahara Emiko, "In Between Sono aida ni aru shinjitsu wo motomete" [In Between: looking for the truth that is between those things], *Keshō Bunka*, no. 44 (POLA Research Institute of Beauty & Culture, 2004). Kasahara's subsequent statements in this essay are quoted from the same article.

Kasahara Emiko

UNTITLED -Double Urinal-, 1993, marble, water, bleach, 24 x 19 x 19 cm each

Kasahara was born in 1963 in Tokyo. Using shapes based on how her own breasts look when she glances down at them, this work addresses the objectification of the female body as sculpture, and the female body as the subject of creation.

Kasahara converted the objectified female body image into the subject through her own perspective, and then reproduced it as an object using a classical marble carving technique. By using marble of a pinkish-apricot color with blue veins, she challenges the supremacy of the white body and the standards coded into Western art history, typified by the whitewashed marble sculpture found in Western art museums.

Before Kasahara, another female sculptor addressed the subject of women in her work, but with a different approach: Kubota Shigeko. As quoted in the artist profile of *Bijutsu techō*,[6] Kubota graduated in 1960 from the Department of Sculpture at the Tokyo University of Education (present-day University of Tsukuba). Her quest to become a master sculptor continued, even as she moved into video art. The fact that Kubota intentionally used the word "sculpture" in her signature "video sculpture" has importance on its own, reflecting her determination to materialize videography, a medium in which images are fixed. At the same time, it could be interpreted as an expression of her identity as an artist who studied in Japan. That said, most of Kubota's milestone artworks were presented outside Japan; her work never caught the attention of Japanese art critics, prompting her to leave the country. Nevertheless, these facts seem to have made Kubota call herself a video sculpture artist as she tried to define herself as a sculptor and an installation artist. Therefore, the use of sculpture in her title carries deep meaning.

In the examination of the term "sculpture," Miyawaki Aiko is another important artist to consider. Sculpture is the inevitable label used to describe Miyawaki's Utsuroi series. "Miyawaki Aiko keeps on doing only one thing; she takes the traditional concept of sculpture and pushes it to the point where it starts to expose a contradiction around this word," wrote architect Isozaki Arata in 1986. He explained further: "[Miyawaki's work] barely stays inside what can be defined as sculpture. Therefore, calling her work anti-sculpture or non-sculpture is inappropriate. The art piece is the manifestation of what it is all about and yet what it is not—a contradiction found in the term 'sculpture,' which thus can only be described as ~~sculpture~~."[7]

A few years later, in his appraisal of Miyawaki's sculpture, Japanese critic Asada Akira quoted Isozaki, saying that "as long as the definition of sculpture is limited to expression via an object, [Miyawaki's] work

6 [Odawara Nodoka, "Kubota Shigeko," *Bijutsu techo*, vol. 73, no. 1089 (August 2021): 74–9.]

7 Isozaki Arata, "Miyawaki Aiko no ~~chōkoku~~" [Miyawaki Aiko's ~~sculpture~~], in *Utsuroi* (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppan-sha, 1986).

that is a sculpture but also looks somewhat different from sculpture, can only be described as ~~sculpture~~." In the mid-1960s, after hosting a solo exhibition of her flat surface pieces, Miyawaki started creating three-dimensional artworks. Reviewing her new presentation, Asada warned that "understanding it as her big pivot from painter to sculptor is wrong." He insisted that Miyawaki's work consistently acted as "a medium that captures an invisible as an invisible."[8]

Apparently, the rendering of "~~sculpture~~" is taken from French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's concept of ~~sein~~. But when the term ~~sculpture~~ is used instead of anti-sculpture or non-sculpture, Asada's point about "what it is all about and yet what it is not" indeed conveys the quality that sculpture essentially possesses. But what does it really mean?

In this essay, I use the term "sculpture" without providing a definition. In Japanese, *chōkoku* 彫刻 is the translation of the English word. Sculpture, in English, is derived from the Latin *scalpere*, meaning to scratch with a fingernail, carve, or chop. In other words, the English word sculpture refers to a technique or skill; but the Japanese word *chōkoku* is the object that was carved. Introduced around the same time was *geijutsu* 芸術, the translation of "art." Its Latin origin is *ars* (talent, skills, study), corresponding to the Greek *techne* (technique). "Picture," translated as *yusai*, *yōga*, or *kaiga* in Japanese (油彩、洋画、絵画), has its roots in the Latin *pingo* (to color).

In the 140 years that have passed since these English words were brought into Japan, their primary meanings have changed. Just as there is a distinction between artisan and artist, art and sculpture are no longer technical terms. However, the challenge surrounding the word sculpture is no match for words such as art or picture. A bronze statue by Rodin, for instance, is not carved, yet we still call it sculpture.

The Japanese word *chōso* 彫塑 (carving and modeling) was derived to supplement the nuance that was lost in *chōkoku*. Nevertheless, these two Japanese terms are frequently used as synonyms without clear distinction. From iron, wood, and rock to clay and mixed media, today's materials and methods are diverse. This means that in calling such art forms "sculpture," we imply that they are carved and engraved, but, at the same time, they are not carved or engraved. This contradictory idea is indeed encapsulated by Japanese sculpture.

8 Asada Akira, "Shojo de ari, seiki ni afure, utsukushii kyou…*" [Virgin, vigorous, and beautiful today…*], in *Miyawaki Aiko Kaiga* 1959-64 [Aiko Miyawaki: paintings 1959-64] (Tokyo: Foundation Arc-en-Ciel, 1996).

Aoki Noe

all that floats down/Nagasaki [furisosogu monotachi/Nagasaki], 2019, iron, glass, 580 x 1370 x 1500 cm

Installation view: Nagasaki Prefectural Art Museum, 2019

Photo by Yamamoto Tadasu ©Noe Aoki

Courtesy of ANOMALY

Aoki was born in 1958 in Tokyo. Since the beginning of her career, she has been attracted to iron as a key material, and created artworks from cut industrial steel plates.

This is exactly what makes sculpture intriguing. Indeed, it is the female sculptors who have been most sensitive to this contradiction and division, despite being objectified as subjects throughout art history. These women studied and reconfirmed the institution known as sculpture, but also deviated from it, to embrace its concept. That is the attitude I see from the three female artists mentioned above, alongside works of other artists: Aoki Noe, who practices the decomposition and generation of sculpture using iron; Seki Naomi, who passionately creates outdoor sculpture works with wood that many sculptors are hesitant to use for outside installations; and Terauchi Yoko, who captures space itself as a work of sculpture.

TO MYSELF, TWENTY YEARS AGO

I AM DEDICATING THIS ESSAY to the person I was twenty years ago—a girl who had just started studying sculpture at a public high school in Miyagi Prefecture and who wondered why there were so few female sculptors. I still vividly remember the confusion that hit me when a male art teacher said to me, “You look at your naked self and carve it.” I experienced the same feeling when I was invited to the Aichi Triennale 2019. The event claimed to have achieved gender equality by having an equal number of female and male artists, and while this news excited me, it left me confused at the same time. Today, art universities in Japan have more female students than male, but the gender disparity is still marked among faculty members. Confusion causes one to pause in the moment, thus providing an opportunity to connect

Seki Naomi

A Tree in Sculpture, at Lough Boora International Sculpture Symposium 2002 in Offaly, Ireland.

Seki Naomi is a sculptor born in Tokyo in 1946. She is known for her outdoor sculpture installations, mainly of wood.

history with one's present.

This essay's title, "Why have there been no great women sculptors?," also demands that we pause for a moment to consider this question. Just as when Nochlin asked, "Why have there been no great women artists?," the response begins by looking at the assumptions behind the way the question is addressed and at the structural imbalance of this line of questioning. As described above, the Japanese translation of sculpture, or *chōkoku*, suggests a self-defeating contradiction. Will the art be considered sculpture or something else? Unfortunately, this argument has often been used to eliminate what is not defined. The issue is fundamentally connected to the harassment reported in 2018 in the sculpture department at Tama Art University, my alma mater.

The use of the word *chōkoku* is expected to evolve further, in the same way that *yōga* (Western movies), the Japanese word created as an antonym for *hōga* (movies made in Japan), has become universally accepted in Japan. Sculpture, on the other hand, could grow to be a metaphor for diversity, for it embraces a broad range of materials and creative methods as described above. Nevertheless, everything is in our hands—the intimation of things to come. I conclude my essay with a quote from Aoki Noe:[9]

> I try to understand the world by making sculptures.
>
> What I think now is that everything lies in the flow, and nothing remains unchanged. In this context, all I can do is make sculptures and leave them behind.
>
> That, to me, unveils how I see this world.
> I think that is a way of communication.
> It is like asking the question, "This is how I think. How about you?"[10]

9 In addition to the harassment by faculty members in the sculpture department, for which the students made demands for improvements at the school, the scandal intricately involved other issues, including the coincidental gender harassment against women staff in the department and the irrational staff replacement proposed by the university board as a response to the issue. For further background, see the following report by the art historian Araki Shinya: https://precariatunion.hateblo.jp/entry/2020/01/20/214716.

10 From Aoki's statement in *Art Tells the Times — Works by Women Artists: Shiseido Gallery 90th anniversary exhibitions*, exh. cat. (Tokyo: Shiseido, 2009).

ODAWARA NODOKA

Odawara Nodoka is a sculptor, researcher, critic, and the head of Shoshi Tsukumo publishing company. Born in Miyagi Prefecture, she holds a Doctor of Arts from Tsukuba University. Her exhibitions include Kindai o chōkoku/chōkoku suru [Overcoming/Sculpting Modernity]*, a solo exhibition at Tokyo Arts and Space Hongo in 2019, and the Aichi Triennale 2019. Selected publications include articles in the literary journal* Gunzō*: "Kindai o chōkoku/chōkoku suru" [Overcoming/Sculpting Modernity] (June 2021) and "Chōkoku no mondai" [Matters of Sculpture] (July 2020).*

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