

## DOMOBAAL

### Another Country

"Yet we are talking about major ruptures that affect everyone, every generation, every generation, and all their images, languages, ways of life. From one moment to the next, this opens in us, allowing us to see this vast drift (derive) of the world. From one moment to the next, we find ourselves sensibly and physically outside ourselves, outside the blind slipping away of our little stretch of time. We see the night that borders our time, and we touch on some aspect of it - not the future, but the coming of something or someone: the coming of something that is already of us and of the world, but that has to come from somewhere else, displaced elsewhere into an unimaginable elsewhere.

Perhaps it is an ability to touch, in the darkness, this coming elsewhere, this breaching of time, of space, of all orientation, that will have defined a character trait specific to modernity. Modernity knows itself to be exposed (this is both a threat and a desire) to what is not itself and is not there, but is nonetheless very close or continually approaching."

Jean-Luc Nancy's essay "Changing of the World" in "A Finite Thinking"<sup>(1)</sup>

Miho doesn't speak very much. The country of her birth is far away and she rarely returns. Living here appears to be in accord with the way she chooses to be, for no one really bothers her. She no longer feels fully Japanese, but being English is even more remote. I think that she lives a zone that excludes the considerations that emerge from integrating or accepting boundaries. Not to be too bothered is the place she makes her own. I wonder if she feels that she might have escaped from Japan. Someone told me once that they felt leaving Japan was an escape. "Concrete has entered the lives of people."

"When I first arrived here I thought that I had made a mistake because I couldn't understand anyone. For the first six months I just stayed locked in my room, but I am glad that I eventually came out and started to circulate. Japan has another sense of reality. I think I just get on with ordinary life in the sense of paying rent and just living without any need to fight others. Maybe, in this way, I can live anywhere. When I was at art school I felt that there was something that was a little fake about it, or in a way political. Sometimes people would put an idea before your work and this got in the way of my desire to change, or at least keep the gap between what I was doing and what I liked. Working in isolation means that many gaps are kept open, so you have to live with the reality of these spaces."

I first saw Miho's work in the Royal Academy schools. I stood within her studio space. I think I said the word, "interesting" and Miho simply smiled without paying too much attention. We might have had a conversation through looks instead of words. Since then there have been few words between us, but we look at each other carefully. This is the opposite of shyness or withdrawal. Our lives touch because we have eliminated all the usual things that enable the understanding of connection. This might indicate that we only connect through painting, but this is far from the truth.

"As an artist I do not think in terms of being a critic of images, as if there might be such a place. There is an essential ambiguity, which lies in the fact that you are never fully inside or outside of the image so the act of painting is partly in extending that ambiguity within the painterly surface. Painting is a slow process and I think it is slow because it never answers a purpose but rather goes around itself constantly as if lost. Sometimes it feels like I am stretching something in time at other times it is like suspension. I think we need to keep alive the edges of images, or points of departures. I often work from images I found a long time ago, even childhood memories

## DOMOBAAL

so there is I think a process of unlocking or at least dealing with something that might seem strange. Images both move toward me but they are also departing from me so I never know at which point they might come to rest. Anyway I find a point of concentration through which the restlessness of the image might grind to a halt and then lodge within a space of painting. I think I stop painting when everything is still."

All of this is not really a detour from talking about Miho's paintings. People often have a sense that someone's life is in their paintings, as if painting might be a special kind of symptom. There is a semblance of a subject within Miho's work, but it is a trace of a subject that has already departed. Also there is a sense that there is a pursuit of something in these paintings, but rather than moving toward that something, they are instead moving away from a sensation of this something.

"I was thinking about repetition and how repetition is of interest to painters. I remember at the Royal Academy doing a painting of a nun and it just didn't seem to work. I think this difficulty related to the relationship of the body and the costume. I tried several other paintings of nuns but they each failed for different reasons. Somehow the painting that I am exhibiting now works because of the way I have cropped the image, which I found in the Evening Standard. So I have returned again and again to nuns but this is the first one that I have left in the open".

It is an easy thing to slip into the belief that painters paint because they have something to say. I would say that painters have little to say, but they have something to do, which is the simple act of painting. The expression "stupid like a painter" is an outcome of not having anything to say. One of the proper conditions of painting is in touching that which is either numb or dumb. This is why painters repeat themselves constantly, because each painting is its own event, rather than a version of an original experience in search of expression. Of course painting might propel speaking and writing, but never without a sense of inadequacy arising within such impulses. Part of the sensation of immobility that might appear at the heart of these paintings, seems to induce an equal form of immobility within the process of naming. If I say, "I am not sure about these paintings," then already I have started to find a slope that leads me away from myself and toward an exemplary gap that distinguishes art. Connection with painting might equally start with lack as well as wonder.

"I don't really look at those large scale figures in the history of art like Titian or Rembrandt but rather painters like Reynolds and Gainsborough. For me there is a feeling of the familiar within many of these paintings. For instance a friend gave me one of these one pound framed images of a Reynolds painting. It felt as though it still had a feeling of circulation in it, perhaps even an element of kitsch or nostalgia but there is a ledge there for me, something that I can find an opening in. I think I need to connect painting to a personal vision within myself rather than making abstract judgements."

Jean-Luc Nancy asks a question, "What remains of art?" and then queries, "Perhaps only a vestige." <sup>(2)</sup> If I might relate this discussion of vestige to Miho's work, I would say that her paintings represent a coming-and-going of a self already deferred within occultation, and so without proper figure with a ground ("syncopated blackout of being"). Each and every image is a passing by, in the form of a self that is in search of a face. This could also represent a desire for a spacing or a setting. So images are arrested and drawn into another time, in an arc of slow descent to be gradually stripped of the persuasions of this world, until they reach a point of loss that opens them to the false intimacy of another semblance, or another self. Each painting is a self-portrait or an indefinite slowing of a look that vanishes into its remainder. We are confronted by two extremes, the image within the world of the spectacle, an evanescent world without seeming limit or end and thus without proper origin, and the image as a withdrawal into half-life, disappearing into a sphere of gradual fading. Perhaps we are assured that each day we can find reassurance that the world still has a face and that we can in turn sink into and find

## DOMOBAAL

our loss in the exacting faces of those who pose in order to give face. Miho, I think, is interrogating this, because in starting from her own withdrawal, she wants to suspend that which shines in its own movement. Metaphorically Miho arrests these images, and in drawing them into a night-time space, she enacts a form of death sentence, so that they might have a second life as vestiges. All of this is not a simple play of absence and presence but rather the very erasure of such difference. It is this process of erasure that seals Miho's paintings as works that neither have voice or place. They might be the most perfect lures for our over excited eyes, slow paintings that strike a chord oscillating between pathos and dull humour or a fading of an hyper stimulated visual realm of persuasion and simulation, but as we might passthrough such consolations we are drawn into something far more difficult to comprehend, and that is to be found in the extreme fatigue of having to return to the same futile task of facing mis-recognition as a condition of representation. If each painting is a form of self-portrait, it is because self-portraiture is the most extreme act of faith. Rather than search in a mirror for a symmetrical confirmation of being, Miho wanders across the unlimited zone of images in order to find her departure, detour and then descent. This process is in turn haunted by the sense of not knowing what it is that is being pursued, other than some-thing becoming strange. A simple question is posed. What is it like to be perpetually foreign?

"I didn't use to have a feeling about being in a studio space. For me the impulse for making work could happen anywhere but now I feel this space lends a special sense to my work. There is a special kind of loneliness in the studio, which can be either a happy loneliness or a sad loneliness, but you start to exist of either edge without a concern about which of these states. Sometimes you might be stuck and so you go out of this space in order to find another kind of light. I remember going to a MacDonald's and ordering a child's meal, which had a smiling toy with it and looking at this toy suddenly gave me a new starting point. It was just an everyday encounter but it served to unlock something in me. I think I need the outside world for these moments but I have to have the long stretches of time in order to unpick these moments."

Of course these paintings have a look. This is the condition of modern painting. In particular they have a similar appearance to Luc Tuymans, but not the strategic certainty that make such painting possible. The seeming remoteness of Tuymans is linked to the public understanding of encounter. In some ways it is possible to claim that they speak too loudly of the conditions that provide a ground for them. They enact the rhetoric of the death of painting or order to appropriate a space for the rhetoric to be reiterated in a new form. Likewise they play with the death of history in order to discover a space in which the loss of the genre of history painting might be a site of another enactment. Tuymans has coupled the work of painting with the play of negativity that in turn couples the fading of subject with the loss of definite presence. So despite the obvious visual influence, there is no polemical connection. In other respects I think Miho is much closer to the American painter Robert Moscovitz, who with Neil Jenney and Philip Guston initiated a new relationship to the image in painting in the late 1970's, which at the time was called "bad painting." Moscovitz's produced massive paintings in which largely monochrome grounds contained or held various types of figures, sometimes in silhouette form, or other times masked out to heighten the relationship to ground. In one painting a distinct figure of a swimmer looks as though the act of swimming might also be the act of drowning. What you are left to focus on is the physical gesture, because all signs of visible facial expression are absent. The figure is thus a cipher for an uncertain condition, a loss into pleasure or the panic (in the face of death). Moscovitz slows every-thing down, eliminating all detail until the persuasion of reality departs. A question is placed before the image and in the space after it. You recognise, then doubt the recognition, you double into mis-recognition, fall into loss, pleasure found in one moment, then disturbance within the next. Despite the scale of his work they appear to me to lack the strategic awareness of Tuymans and in this vein they are hermetic or even an esoteric form of painting. Likewise I think that Miho is a hermetic painter, a form of identity we often ascribe as being a painter's painter. In many ways she works on a similar edge as Moscovitz and Jenney because elegance and ineptness appear to coexist with a

## DOMOBAAL

controlling sense of logic or idea. Somehow the work emerges from being both under and over described at the same time. By its very nature it cannot aspire toward a condition of consistency.

"Painting animals is different from painting people. I think that human beings are heavy beings. They also appear to carry things and have a lot of detail. Animals also appear to me as being more friendly but in turn flowers or butterflies are lighter than animals. I like light things, its funny but I always think that Reynolds paintings are light, which is why a lot of people might dislike them. I think I might eliminate things or features in order to make faces or figures lighter so that they might be able to manage better in the zone that I take them to."

The aim of these paintings is to keep alive the difference between immersion and distance. In this there is both a chill of indifference and the awakening of a space of reverie, which in turn might heighten a sense that image culture itself is a repository of undisclosed movement. Rather than seeing images as either simple presence or sensation, Miho poses the notion that there is something that is before and after the image. In this respect her work is an act of re-inscribing a different understanding of duration within the image. If the images Miho draws upon are linked to memory, then these images are realigned with the unconscious, a space Freud felt was outside of time. Memory is of course a strange and shifting non-place, which is continuously at work, realigning, focussing, blurring, editing, framing, condensing, connecting, closing and opening. We might treat memory as our primary form of evidence or narrative of being and yet it also serves as our space of fiction in equal measure. Its very persistence is the persistence of our becoming and thus the site of our claim for having a world. We might view Miho sending her images back in time, in order that they might find a temporary resting place that could be described as personal experience. In this process the image is thus touched by something that is both removed and alien to it. If the stereotypical image appears on the horizon of the forever new, then the archetypal image might be seen in contradistinction, as forever remote, but I do not really think that we are dealing here with the confrontation of this order of difference. Rather it is an attempt to find ways of resolving a space between the attraction and the fading of the image, rather like a space of mourning in which loss and remembrance are pushed into constant proximity.

"In the painting *Encounter*, I found an image from the film *Poltergeist* in which a woman had just seen a ghost. I wanted to isolate this figure in order to make its condition more inward. I think that this represents a special moment, even a spiritual moment when there is a kind of turning in life. Simply, her hair stands up as if there is a fan blowing a current of air. I think that I was working off a sense that the moment that you have a problem or difficulty in something then something else will happen that creates an opening for this to be altered in another direction. This might appear slight or without consequence but on a deeper level it might be read as a special or spiritual moment. A lot of my work is connected to the apprehension of moments even though in another way I am also interested in delays."

In Descartes' thinking, natural light illuminates the path of knowledge providing the basis of the subject's interrogation of itself. There is a triangulation between the subject, light, and knowledge, which in turn serves as the metaphorical basis of Western rationalism. The sense of light in Miho's work appears quite contrary to this for not only is the light as a general principle subdued but it is closer to a form of "black light" evoked by Derrida. It is a form of light in which polarity is somehow annulled and thus the dialectically oppositions of light and shadow are partially eliminated so that a far more neutral sense of vision might come to the fore. Although these paintings might be based upon flashes or insights, they also appear as stubborn form of withdrawal from the ocular. Likewise the route into any claims of knowledge is obscured so instead indicate a withdrawal from the clarity in which such inscribed claims might cohere.

## DOMOBAAL

"Sometimes my life sinks into the world of images as if they are like the sky that you just accept as being there as a fact of nature. At other times I do not know what it is I see and then there is a sense of everything appearing as completely unnatural. Also sometimes my work appears light and humorous and sometimes as dark and heavy. I do not feel it is possible to control how we might be seen or indeed see. Painting is just a process of bringing such differences into the open."

One of the most fundamental questions that face painters at this moment relates to the question of painting needing a negative horizon in the form of the death of painting and secondly the idea that all painting is now a form of minor painting because such a negative horizon might appear to force painting away from itself into a space of endless deferral. In Miho's case little appears to happen from painting to painting. In turn the actual ground that they survive within, seem as a consequence to lack expansive possibility. If the spectrum of images, that appear as available in the realm of visible appearance, seem to give rise to unlimited forms of appropriation then one might question why such an art might in turn appear to reside within such constrained limits. In the words of Jean-Luc Marion the "world is made into an image ... Today, the image covers the surface of the earth - in addition to the surface of the eyeballs (*des globes oculaires*) of the inhabitants of the world - only in so far as it produces itself, multiplies itself, and expands without restriction or reference ... the image, in contrast to paper currency, accrues (*accroît*) its authority by disconnecting itself from every original: the less gold there is, the more value the image has; so the dollar is not an image; but fortunately, the images produce dollars. In short, the liberation of the image consists precisely in its being liberated from every original; the image is valued in itself and for itself, because it is valued by itself. The image has no original other than itself and undertakes to make itself acceptable only to the unique original." <sup>(3)</sup> So if the image is its own reality then in turn all viewers are defined by the way it sets up both framing and screening. All the image can do within this context is confirm the nihilism upon which it is predicated in the first place. Everyone is placed by his or her own self-image. Miho is probing the circularity between the image and desire trying to find tiny fissures that might be opened in order to question the power of this world with origin or ending. Whereas this technological realm of images displays authority, completion and persuasion, Miho creates awkward and even redundant looking paintings, which look as though they are in a state of exile. They cannot of course claim political expediency because they are unsettlingly remote in any public sense but this might be the basis of claiming a form of "resistance to the present." Painting is necessarily minor within the present because it is so much adrift from the technologies of persuasion. Painting, as a material practice, has to invest in the sense of a world apart or a recessive sense of space in which it might develop gestures away from the tendency of closure found in image culture. Contrary to the idea of the last gesture that is inscribed with futility painting might examine its long syntactical history in order to find a turn away from the relationship with nihilism, which renders everything as interchangeable and thus exhaustible. I cannot be any more exact than this, so I am left to reiterate the sense that the image field is pressed so finely into its surfaces, that are without textual or temporal edge, to feel any sense of relation. Painting we might think, that is a form of painting that has not succumbed into being a simple pro-duct, holds the memory trace of another mode of relation beyond that which is pre-governed. If the source or sense of signification and meaning within Western culture has departed (Man, History, God, the Subject) we might then have a sense that everything slides or drifts in ways that are indefinite or at least a renouncing of the regulative ideas that issue from such figures. Modernity, as a project, could at least imagine an undoing of the very impulse toward investment in such forms of signification. Modernity was a form of restless undoing of these regulative ideas and could announce autonomy, to the extent that art became its own object. This has largely proved to be an empty gesture, leaving artists to pick through the ruins of signification in order to affirm this project of art. Painting can no longer press its claims through inscribing a relationship to presence, instead is left with the departed remains that we might name as trace, amnesia, absence, edge, fading, elsewhere, impossibility, negativity, sacrifice, fissure, stain, lack, accident, apparition, loss, suspension, drift, wound, emptiness, gaps, memory, invisibility, undoing, deconstruction, homelessness, abjection, trauma, resignation, entropy, ruination,

## **DOMOBAAL**

separation, madness, death and solitude. In picking up the threads of these words in order to write, it would seem necessary to be seeped in delicate suggestion, even hushed tones, so as not to disturb the scene with anything resembling final pronouncement. We are a culture without the semblance of a dream of completion; instead we have instead an inclination a simple form of drifting without the desire for anchorage. I look at Miho's painting without seeking anything from them, they might be even be said to be going nowhere, and yet I find a relationship to them. The moment I saw them, I think they stuck to me, even though my taste and inclination are otherwise. I am inclined to say that they add texture to the way I say world, but this is not really the case that I could develop. Instead I think that her art resides in simply passing through obstacles in order to confirm a relationship to the reality of painting. On one level this is a bland acceptance of what in another context might be experienced as overwhelming negativity. Simple put her art never skips a beat but rather focuses upon the simple honesty of painting without a project. In this sense Miho is very much a Japanese painter, each day is simply another footstep. Her paintings are imbued with this sense of modesty. If part of having a life is paying the rent, it is because there is a need to be constant in the face of both sacrifice and gift. Miho appears to know that there is no point in persuading others with a viewpoint or even a sense but rather all of this is to be retained within. Her painting thus works off this sense of reserve. It is minor in the way that steps are minor, that is all.

Jonathan Miles, London June 2005

written for Miho Sato's solo exhibition 'Amnesia' at domobaal, 2005.

### Notes:

- (1) Jean-Luc Nancy: A Finite Thinking, Stanford, 2003 (p. 301)
- (2) Jean-Luc Nancy: The Muses, Stanford, 1994 (p. 81)
- (3) Jean-Luc Marion: The Crossing of the Visible Stanford, 2004 (p. 46-47)