Artist and textile researcher Shinichiro Yoshida on being guided by curiosity

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As told to Ryu TakahashiBrandon Stosuy, 2063 words.

Tags: Art, Research, Curation, Focus, Independence.

Can you tell us about your work with fabrics?

Do you know the term *Boro*? About 25 years ago, I published a book about these fabrics and called it art. These were only about 5,000 yen each back then. It was so inexpensive because most Japanese people were discarding them, and I was collecting them. These are patchworks made by farmers using small remnants of silk. They were poor, so they would fix and apply these patchworks where it's damaged.

I portrayed this as a canvas and claimed that it's art, and published this book. But the Japanese didn't really understand it. Ten years after the book had come out, the Italians picked it up and they've published a really beautiful book about this, too, and since then it has spread globally. Designers like Hiroki Nakamura from Visvim, and other fashion designers from overseas started to come visit my studio to see them. I heard that Takashi Murakami's been collecting them recently, too.

When did you first think of this as art?

I'm an artist, a painter, and I first got interested in this when I was about 20 years old. You can see a commonality in Surrealism with people like André Breton or Kurt Schwitters's patchwork art. They are obviously different, but it felt close. Artists, especially back then, were stuck in their studios making oil paintings and putting them into a frame. I started to realize that there are similarities to these patchwork fabrics in Dadaism or in the Russian avant-garde, but these boro are things that were made by anonymous female farmers. I thought perhaps they are the true artists, and of course, they aren't aware that they're creating an artwork.



Detail from studio visit. Photo credit: Michael Renaud

What's the difference between making something with utility in mind versus trying to sell it?

I've personally decided not to sell my work. Maybe that just has to do with the era I grew up in versus the current era. Now it's about selling the work. I don't think that's a bad thing. Antiques and art are similar in a way. One shift in perception could turn these things into a business. There are many artists who weren't able to sell their work, but fetched high prices later in their career. So if you regard that as something beautiful, there are still so many undiscovered things in this world that have art values. We're just not aware of it yet. Recently, the boro fabric that I had was sold for over $10,000 in Paris. I wasn't able to sell that for $10 in Japan back then. Japanese people thought that it was dirty, and were concerned with whether it was washed or not. But then if you switch the perspective, a rich person would hang this in their really clean lavish living room. It's not about creating things. There are many things that have art elements right next to you, if you pay close attention.

Another interesting thing is this [*holds it up*], which I got in Okinawa a while ago. It's called warazan, and it's made out of straws. These were used up until around 100 years ago. In Okinawa, there were many people who couldn't read, understand numbers, or do math. Each of these knotted cords represents a number. This was their price tag essentially. So, for example, you'll see these cell phones at the shop, and each knot will tell you how much they are. To me, some of these look exactly the same [*laughs*]. It's quite interesting.

I used to live with Joseph Beuys in Germany when I was younger. It was because of his influence that I started to do the Japanese folk stuff. Beuys told me that my artwork could perhaps be sold, but he also told me that there's no meaning to that without the context to my roots. No one had told me anything like that before. The relationship between the work and its roots. I used to make these white paintings and he was interested in my work. So he started to ask me about the work, and I wasn't able to answer that. He told me that they were paintings that had no point. I immediately had the urge to go back to Japan after that. I believe that it's these things (warazan) that Beuys had regarded as real art.



Detail from studio visit. Photo credit: Michael Renaud

How did your painting shift after adopting this kind of perception?

I've gotten offers from galleries and museums to show my work but I never did it. I turned 69 this year, and I've been doing these white drawings and sketches everyday, but I wasn't interested in showing them.

Last year, I went to see this documentary about Beuys at a cinema in Shibuya, and suddenly realized that I had lived longer than Beuys. On the way back home, I had an offer from the Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media and decided to show these group of 50 pieces of white hemp fabric.

It's very personal, but Beuys' words stuck with me all this time. I felt like I had to settle this somehow. When you look at these fabrics, they are all in fact white, but each white is completely different when you see them in a group like this, and they were full of spirit.



Photo credit: Kazuomi Furuya. Courtesy of Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media [YCAM]

This is what I had wanted to do with my paintings. Whether it's applying oil paint on a canvas, or grouping these fabrics, it's the same to me.

I've been working extensively with these fabrics, but it took a while for me to see this. One day I was doing microscopic inspections, and I had stacked these white ones on the side for reference. I took a break and came back, and felt a significant presence from this pile, which I had left randomly. Consciousness will inevitably kick in on a painting, so if I were to try to paint this type of white on a canvas, it becomes a craftwork. It doesn't feel like an artwork. I can try to paint with a state of unconsciousness, but I'm still actively applying paint. Rather, what I'm trying to do, is to just lay out these things that already exist. It feels closer to me.

At this point, do you see yourself as an artist or a historian?

I was going to continue and end as a painter, but I started these microscopic examinations to find out whether this string is hemp, ramie, or linen. I was just curious and I wanted to find out for myself. Then a museum visited me and asked to do an exhibition about this. They hadn't done anything like this, because museums are restricted from doing these kinds of destructive inspections and aren't allowed to pull the strings apart. That's why national museums still to this day would put hemp, ramie, and linen into one category.

For example, if you look at these two kimonos from the Edo period [*holds up fabric*], one is made out of hemp, and the other from ramie, but they would both simply be categorized as "hemp." This difference is really important for me, but it's the same for most people. It's like putting dogs and cats into the same category. They are totally different as a plant.

I was doing a lot of this research for myself so I could understand them. And on the other hand, I was also doing these paintings day and night. But because I didn't sell them, I had various other jobs to make a living.



Detail from studio visit. Photo credit: Michael Renaud

I did about 1,000 of these microscopic examinations in the course of 20 years, and organized over 10 exhibitions about this subject. I then become a hemp historian. About a month ago, I received an award for my research work, but frankly I could care less about that [*laughs*]. It's an honor, indeed, but this isn't an award about art. I was doing this for my art, for my practice. I often get labeled as a fabric historian, but it's not really my intention.

The idea of finding things versus making things… Can you talk a bit about the new fabric you made, or invented?

Most of the hemp shirts out there are actually made out of linen. I want to say about 80% of them. Hemp isn't used much any more in industrial production. Cotton was introduced to Japan during the Edo period, and it was believed that people wore firm hemp clothing up until then. But the fabrics I have from the Edo period are fluffy and soft, and these are all hemp. They bleached hemp and made it soft like cotton since the Ancient period. Not many people understood this when I first started saying it, but it has since been proven. I wanted to put this into industrial manufacturing and started a project under the name majotae. There are many textures of kimonos and workwear like in this hemp from the Edo period. I think it would be the first time in the world to run an industrial production with this level of softness, using hemp.

You can wear it on bare skin and it won't feel itchy. For research purposes, I went to a department store and bought several fancy hemp shirts, which had a smooth feel, but it was still kind of itchy so I couldn't wear it on my bare skin. But these shirts from the Edo period don't have that itchiness, so I wondered whether it was possible to manufacture these on an industrial level.

It created a little buzz in Japan when we announced it, but because of Japan's restriction on cannabis, it was difficult to deal with some of the media. This project was a collaboration with the record company Avex, and we've been working on this with a small team. It took several years to develop, and we launched it three years ago.

The guiding philosophy of all these projects is being interested in something you're figuring out?

Yes, definitely. There's this shell mound in the Fukui Prefecture called Torihama Kaizuka, which is from the Jomon period. And this little piece of fabric was found from about 10,000 years ago. The government ran a fiber test, and turns out it was hemp. That means they were growing and using hemp 10,000 years ago. So the Japanese people should be wearing this older fiber material, not linen which came from Europe. I can't escape from what Beuys had told me about looking for that connection to the roots.



Courtesy of Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media [YCAM]

I think hemp is a very important material for Japanese people. It's used in the Ise Grand Shrine, one of the most important shrines in Japan; it's used in both Shintoism and Buddhism, and the loincloth for the yokozuna sumo wrestlers were traditionally made out of hemp. The white kimono dress worn by the Shinto priests used to be all hemp, too. But the traditions are now collapsing and it's often being replaced by linen.

Rather than saying these kinds of things out loud, I wanted to incorporate that message through the daily lives of younger people through t-shirts and shirts.

Many artists and similar minded people come visit me, like you guys. Many gallery people come visit, too, but most of them don't understand these kinds of things. I'd be open to talk to a gallery about doing something if there was someone who understood me, but there hasn't been anyone so far [*laughs*].

Should we go get some coffee?



Photo by Michael Renaud

Shinichiro Yoshida recommends:

Riches from Rags
majotae
The meaning of fabrics for mankind at YCAM
Japanese natural fabric
Joseph Beuys

Name
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Vocation
Artist, Textile Researcher



