

"...MAKING SOMETHING VISIBLE THAT NO ONE BEFORE HAS SEEN."

ON THE ART OF YOSHIHISA SANKAWA

When an art historian notices that he has to think hard about the question of how he should address the artwork he wants to write about, one possible explanation for this is that the artist has created something entirely new. Something that resists the usual art historical categorization and the usual verbal approaches. This is the case with Yoshihisa Sankawa. Since the late 1980s the artist has produced works that in a new way combine the painterly with the three-dimensional, without their becoming pictures or sculptures in the narrow sense. What then are they? The artist's original creation requires the creation of original words on the part of his interpreter. We can perhaps approximate his works with terms such as wall object, picture object, volumetric picture, sculpto-painting, painted sculpture or wall-picture-sculpture. One thing becomes very clear from these attempts at naming: a study of Sankawa's works must take the formal criteria of both painting and sculpture into account. Thus we need to speak of coloration, paint application, composition, plane and line, but also of material, spatial extension, three-dimensional form, volume, weight, the angle of shadow, and contour. Any attempt to define precisely in language what it is that distinguishes Sankawa's complex works seems to me the way to go to understanding them.

Yoshihisa Sankawa was born 1941 in Tokyo and studied law and political science at the Keio University there before he transferred to the State Art Academy in Tokyo. His teacher was the famous painter Kazu Wakita, who had studied at the Berlin Art Academy in the twenties. In Wakita's class, Sankawa also met Kazuko Okano whom he married in 1971 and with whom he moved to Germany the same year. The artist couple was admitted to the Düsseldorf Art Academy and to Gerhard Hoehme's class. Hoehme was a great influence on the couple, who over the years developed a warm relationship with their teacher. In 1983 Hoehme dedicated a book to these two students with these words:

Yoshihisa,
Kazuko,

art is a life full of toil
and uncertainty,
but its reward is the knowledge
of making something visible
that no one before has seen.

Therefore take courage ...

Your
G. Hoehme

In 1973 Sankawa settled in Vanikum near Rommerskirchen, a small village northwest of Cologne, to which the family – Yuri, a daughter, was born in 1974 – has remained true. “A god-forsaken village,” the artists notes with a smile, “but we like living here, we love the flat countryside, nature.”

Yoshihisa Sankawa, as a person and as an artist, is very intimately bound to nature, especially to wood. He loves hiking and mountain climbing. In Japanese, “Sankawa” means “three rivers”. The ancestors of the artist’s father came from Takayama and were one of the few families allowed to build temples during the Edo period (1603-1868), which were traditionally made of wood. And so from the start, wood was the most important ingredient in Sankawa’s art.

Around 1988 sculpto-paintings came about that were meant to be hung on the wall; they are the focus of this exhibition and the accompanying catalogue. Their genesis entails an extremely long and intensive process that lasts over several weeks or, in the case of the large-scale or multiple-part works, even over months. Three phases can be distinguished: the planning and drafting phase, the construction of the corpus, and the work on and the painting of its surface. At first Sankawa formulates and develops his idea in small drawings and sketches. He then makes the wooden form, which we can imagine as a kind of inside-out ship’s rump. On a heavy-duty panel made up of multiple-layered block boards, the artist places vertical and horizontal struts that (though invisible in the finished product) form the underlying construction and ensure its stability. Onto these ribs, many thin, 3cm x 10cm chipboard plates are glued and nailed. As with all the material he uses, Sankawa does the sawing for these plates himself. For the concavities and the rounded corners the artist prefers tropical balsa wood, used in model building, which is light and pliable. The gaps are filled with wood or plastics glue, filler or wax, the surfaces made even and the whole polished by hand or machine. In some works Sankawa

covers the wooden form with a coarse burlap sack before applying several layers of acrylic paint or lacquer. Often enough, this surface too is partially or completely sanded. Along with painted works such as these, there are others that are very little or not at all painted and explicitly manifest "material visibility".

The craftsmanship involved in artistic work is important to Sankawa: "I love the work process," he says, and the traces of this process are meant to be visible to the viewer. The creative process evolves a dynamism of its own that sweeps its initiator along with it. Thus Heinrich von Kleist's famous title "On the Gradual Fabrication of Thought While Speaking" can be applied to art as: "On the gradual formulation of the artwork while composing it." Too, that the wood (after being finished) continues to "work" according to the respective climatic conditions, e.g. and that the nails can rust, also suits Sankawa's intention.

Any attempt to describe the sheer inexhaustible morphological multiplicity in Sankawa's sculptures takes us back to the subject of nature. Even though the artist in no way imitates natural phenomena mimetically, the world of his forms shows a certain kinship to nature.

Sankawa generally prefers biomorphic, organic, rounded forms. Some of them recall drops (Pl. p. 57), a turtle shell (Pl. p. 81), a whale (Pl. p. 33), an egg (Pl. p. 74), a snail (Pl. p. 39), an icicle (Pl. p. 49), or a mountain (Pl. p. 25). Occasionally the titles allude to nature, such as "Écrins" that refers to a mountain chain in the south of France (Pl. p. 71). But in the end it is the three-dimensionality of Sankawa's works, their physical volume, that calls up an analogy to nature. And as is the case with the human body, there are no *exact* symmetries in Sankawa's picture 'bodies'.

The sizes vary from smaller, compact ones (Pl. p. 23, p. 37 and p. 83) up to works that are over 200 cm high (Pl. p. 63, p. 71 and p. 77). One of his specialties is multiple-piece works. There are those in which several parts are mounted in the same way and assembled to *one* piece and *one enclosed* form ("Vercors", Pl., p. 47; "Kokukou II", Pl. p. 65; "Untitled" (H214), Pl. p. 51), and others in which a number of variably arranged single figures casually distributed over the wall make *many open* combinations of forms possible ("30 Figures", Pl. p. 54/55; "15 Pieces", Pl. p. 60/61; "Klang des Sonetts"/Sound of the Sonnet, Pl. p. 84/85). The work entitled "Nr. 5" (Pl. p. 68/69) belongs rather more to the former variant and deserves special mention here because it is being shown for the first time at this exhibition. It is made up of 33 single parts that all have different sizes, shapes and paintwork. Together they combine to the stately format of 205 x 250 x 10cm. While a rich interplay of forms takes place on the interior – they mutually interlock or shy away and formulate attractive positive-negative pairs – the outer contour of the whole makes up a predominantly closed rectangle.

Such an evenly rectangular form is the exception with Sankawa. What is characteristic for his works is the "shaped body", which could be so called in analogy to the "shaped canvas".

A shaped canvas is an object-like, irregular pictorial form in which the outer contour of the canvas corresponds with the inner structure and the rhythms of the painting. As a programmatic renunciation of the traditional easel painting, the shaped canvas was adopted as a principle in post-1960 American painting, e.g., by Frank Stella and Kenneth Noland. In Germany the Munich architect and painter Rupprecht Geiger experimented as early as the end of the 40s with the breakup of the rectangular picture, and from 1957 something similar took place in Gerhard Hoehme's art. The "shaped body" as a wall sculpture is, on the other hand, an innovation of Yoshihisa Sankawa's.

In several younger works Sankawa departs from the wall as a field of reference and creates autonomous sculptures that stand unattached on a pedestal or lie within the room, such as "Untitled" from 2002 (Pl. p. 87), whose form recalls a submarine. The red hue results solely from the wax's own natural color, which the artist used to cover the entire surface.

Which brings us to the subject of color. The rich coloring in Sankawa's works corresponds to their formal diversity. For the most part the artist uses acrylic paint or lacquer, but also incorporates the natural coloring of the materials used, such as wood, glue, filler or wax. There are monochrome works or those reduced in color to a minimum (Pl. p. 57, p. 73, p. 81), those where their coloring is restricted to two or three tones (Pl. p. 27, p. 41, p. 74), as well as the most recent works that are very decidedly brightly colored. One example for the latter is the work noted above, "Klang des Sonetts" from 2001 (Pl. p. 84/85). Onto the eleven single forms already covered in different layers of paint, Sankawa has set down thick spots of color directly from the tube onto the surface, where they form a dense network of low relief. The extreme colorfulness and the technique of paint application are new, since, up to then, a reduced, unobtrusive, delicate range of colors dominated in his works, topped off with glazing that allowed the wood corpus to shine through or at least be inferred. The way he applies the paint approximates the gestural and open Tachist style, while an evenly closed layer of paint as in "Untitled" (Pl. p. 49) is more the exception. More usual then is a repeated sanding down and reworking of the matt surfaces that bring about the optically appealing interplay between the different paint layers. Sankawa consciously avoids any perfect, glossy, hyper look. It is the impression of raw, off-putting, unfinished imperfection that conforms to his intention and that makes up the special appeal of his works. That sometimes a destructive act is transformed into a creative factor can be seen in the above-noted work, "Écrins" (Pl. p. 71). Sankawa dealt a blow with an ax to both left corners of the work, traces of which can be clearly discerned.

Along with the sculptural and painterly factors, there is an immaterial quality that very much contributes to the effect Sankawa's sculpto-paintings have, namely via light and shadow. In the changing light, different patterns of shadow fall on the sculptures themselves and varying highlights onto the surrounding wall. In this way how we perceive the objects varies; they come alive.

His teacher, Gerhard Hoehme, as Yoshihisa Sankawa tells it, always told him: "Yoshihisa, your work is full of contradictions." The most striking one is the contrast between the optical lightness of Sankawa's sculpto-paintings and their actual physical weight. The large works such as "Avignon" (Pl. p. 63) or "Écrins" (Pl. p. 71) tip the scale at 100 to 150 kilograms and are correspondingly difficult to move. Beyond this, there are still other tensions and opposing poles that can be seen in his work. Thus the question whether the central problem is a sculptural or a painterly one cannot be unambiguously answered. It is namely all about synthesis. "I am searching for a new dimension," the artist remarks, "something between sculpture and painting." At this point there is an accord between Sankawa's and Hoehme's aesthetic inquiries, though not between their pictorial solutions. In 1965 Hoehme began to experiment with colored nylon cables, which he intended as a link between artwork and viewer. In 1984 he stated in his "Reflektionen": "The actual contents of my paintings are the in-between paintings [...]."

In his biography and his art Sankawa brings two worlds together. He has lived just as long in Japan as in Germany. Assumably his sculpto-paintings seem to many European viewers to be 'Japanese' and 'European' to many Japanese viewers. This tells us less about the works themselves than about the ideas and clichés we have in our heads of the 'other'. Nevertheless it is interesting that Sankawa confronts us with the habitual way we see and observe and induces us to question this. Sankawa himself feels closer to the European art tradition than to that of the Japanese. He adores Piero della Francesca and Corot, Matisse and Picasso, Schwitters and Fontana, Stella and Judd.

Yoshihisa Sankawa's art finds no parallel in contemporary art production. It is original and unique. His abstract sculpto-paintings are not only auratic objects of the greatest formal and aesthetic attraction, they have a special pensive and contemplative quality. (And strangely enough they seem just as spiritual to me as the realist portrait sculptures by Sankawa's compatriot Katsura Funakoshi, who created such a sensation at the 1992 *documenta IX*.) I feel we can learn a lot from Yoshihisa Sankawa's works, and the supreme good of tolerance from their originator: "Art is a garden. Everyone should have a place inside it."

The words I quote by Yoshihisa Sankawa were spoken during an interview I had with him in his studio on 23 November 2002.

The Hoehme quotation was taken from: Gerhard Hoehme, *Catalogue Raisonné*, edited by Margarete Hoehme and the Kunstmuseum Bonn, Dieter Ronte, Christoph Schreier, Ostfildern-Ruit 1998, p. 524.

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