

The 13th International TAKIFUJI Art Award winner

TANADA Koji

Sculptor TANADA Koji, known for his one-wooden boy and girl statues with beautifully coloured, slender bodies and a unique sense of floating, is the recipient of the 13th (1992) International TAKIFUJI Art Award. In preparation for the exhibition, we interview with Mr. TANADA, who continues to pursue what it means to be human through the act of facing wood and carving images of the human body, in his studio, where his university graduation project and his latest work are on display. (Interviewer: NAGAI Yuko, Date of interview: August 2019, First appearance “The International Takifuji Art Awards 40 year’s Anniversary (published in 2020)”)

Sculpture as a means of self-expression

—When did you decide to become a sculptor?

I think it was around junior high school when I had my first roots as an expressive person. I bought a guitar, and as I copied songs from various rock bands, I wanted to write my own songs. Since rock music is a rebellion against the system, I was also in a rebellious age and wanted to say “What the hell!”. After entering high school, I added painting to my self-expression. As for sculpture, my grandfather learned wood carving at a community center, so I thought he was doing something unusual but I had an affinity for wood carving.

When I applied to university, the admission rates of an art university was very high, but the sculpture department was the lowest among them. I thought there was a possibility, so I chose sculpture. Anyway, I liked to express something. I enrolled in Tokyo Zokei University after two years of study since I graduated from high school.



Mr. TANADA Koji at his atelier

—Sculptor FUNAKOSHI Katsura*¹ taught at Tokyo Zokei University, didn't he?

When I was preparing for entrance exams for universities, I saw the solo exhibition that Mr. FUNAKOSHI held after returning from the 1988 Venice Biennale, and I was very moved. I looked at his bio and saw that he was a graduate of Tokyo Zokei University, and I heard that he was going to come to Zokei University as a part-time lecturer the following year, so Zokei University became my first choice.

I met Mr. FUNAKOSHI after entering the university, and he stimulated me in many ways,

which was very significant for me. But I also wanted to create something in human form, so I didn't want to get too close and be too influenced. Mr. FUNAKOSHI is a very kind man, and he dealt with the students as equals and kept us company with frank, but I was aware that I would lose myself if I didn't get the distance right.

—Why did you apply for the International TAKIFUJI Art Award?

I found an application posted at the university and have been aiming for it since my junior year. My professor also encouraged me to apply, and I thought that since my seniors students at a university had also won awards, it wouldn't be a bad idea for me either.

Thanks to the award, I did not have to work part-time, and I was happy to know that I could now move forward with my graduation project, both financially and emotionally. The 300,000 yen I received was all spent on drills and other machine tools, chisels, and logs for materials. The tools from that time are still in use today. I was able to create a large work, so I decided to apply for graduate school at Tokyo University of the Arts with that momentum.



"Portrait of a Woman (partial)" 1992, camphorwood, Art Work submitted to 13th International TAKIFUJI Art Award



"KAKU" 1992, Komatsuishi, 230mm×190mm×270mm, Art Work submitted to 13th International TAKIFUJI Art Award

—Why did you choose wood carving among sculptures?

I did clay and stone, but wood was the best match. Wood can be cut with a chainsaw as soon as I want to cut it, and I can paint it as soon as I want to paint it. I myself am impatient and have a strong desire to see things as soon as possible, so I think the material of wood, which allows me to get answers quickly, suits me well.



The "Whereabouts of People," my graduation project from college, which I created by pouring my scholarship money into the project. It was just being assembled for an exhibition.

Contemporary figurative sculptor known for life-size wooden figures. He has participated in many international exhibitions including the Venice Biennale.

Human figure to fill the space

—Why do you keep making portraits?

I like humans and am interested in humans. I want to know if I look the same way when I see

myself in the mirror of society. For example, when I come in contact with unusual crimes, I think that I might have a violent or insane streak in me. By creating human figure, I feel like I am looking at these social phenomena and questions about life in comparison with myself. I think the other reason is because I'm lonely. I've been a rock and roll lover and rebel my whole life, so there's a sense of loneliness being removed from the right royal road and the system. When I was young, I felt like I deserved to be left out, and that's why I went to art university, but there is actually a royal road in the art world, and I have a bit of a feeling that I don't want to be left out of it.

Maybe working together in an organization just isn't for me. If I could, I would have been looking for an art teacher at an early stage. I had actually taken the employment exam, but I still didn't get it. Then I thought, "Well, I guess that means I should create a work of art." Since I am alone in the atelier, I feel lonely, so I create human figures as objects to fill the space, which may be a way of making myself feel at ease.

—After entering graduate school, you made a mask of fiber reinforced plastic (FRP) by molding your face with plaster and made a work that was attached to the head. What was your intention?

Being a model is the easiest thing for me, and since I had a part-time job at a sculptor when I was in college, I had a good knowledge of materials and was good at it. As for the mask, I was thinking about how I could make myself disappear.

I'm approaching the other by modifying the molded one and erasing all the signs like acuity and masculinity that are attached to me, I wanted to show the relationship between others and myself in "Mask," as if I were someone else but still myself. The tree at that time was like a pedestal to make the "mask" stand out.



"Inner Ferocity" 1998, Wood / fiber reinforced plastic (FRP) / mixed media, 145×65×100cm, photo: HAYAKA-WA Koichi, ©TANADA Koji, Courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery

Confidence in your own culture and yourself

—In 2001, you stayed in Berlin for seven months as an overseas trainee artist of the Agency for Cultural Affairs, did you gain much from it?

I chose Germany as my training destination because I wanted to research the work of Tilman Riemenschneider^{*2}, a German medieval sculptor. I also wanted to see for myself how timely it was, since there are some woodcarvers in Germany today who are working on portraits of people.

If I had to say one thing that I learned from the training, it would be "Have confidence in your own culture." When I was in my early 30s, I thought that if there were right and wrong

answers to art, the correct answer would be in Europe and the United States. But when I ask who is your favorite artist or musician in Berlin, many people are so proud of their own culture that they can name their own artist. This was thought-provoking. Despite Japan's long history, a very self-deprecating feeling was instilled in us, and I wondered how it could be so different, even though we are the same defeated nation.

—It means that you should have confidence in yourself as a Japanese artist.

That's right. I used to write titles in English, but after I returned to Japan in 2002, I basically thought of them in Japanese, and asked my translators to be creative when translating them into English.

Shortly after I returned to Japan, I received an offer to exhibit my work in the "The Human Body in Contemporary Sculpture" exhibition at the exhibition hall of the University Art Museum at Tokyo University of the Arts. Everyone is somewhat concerned about what happened to the work of TANADA Koji, who was making masks. At that time, I thought very consciously that I had to put my heart into it and change it.

—That work is "memorial" in 2003?

I made it after looking at my grandparents' wedding photos, but it's also a memorial work in that I changed my own work. My grandfather, who had already passed away, was made into a relief and floated on the wall as if he were ascending to heaven, and my grandmother, who was still alive, was made into a statue made "Ichibokuzukuri"^{*3}. It was not interesting in grandmother's "Shiro-Muku (white kimono worn by the bride)", so I stripped her naked and trimmed down her volume to compose her, resulting in a slender, elongated figure like a young girl. It was at this time that I began to create portraits in a style that slowly draws an S-shape figure made from a single piece of wood, which became my style later on. I thought it was a very strange statue, but the thrill of finally having something unique, something that was mine, was more than satisfying. But the same time, on the one hand, I wondered "Is this okay?", on the other hand, there is the feeling of "This is OK". Between this two feeling, I am in a constant state of nervous. When I exhibited this work, the professors at the University of the Arts were aghast, but I was very happy that the sculptors of my generation understood it.



"memorial" 2003, paint on wood (camphor tree) / mixed media, 188×55×22cm / 179×35×35cm, photo: YAMAMOTO Tadasu, ©TANADA Koji, Courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery

—Why did you choose “Ichibokuzukuri”?

I checked how big a piece of wood I could carry and make stand by myself, and found that it was 35 × 35 × 135 cm, so I decided to start with a chunk of that size. Buying wood is a ritual, like finding a new friend. Among the many logs, I have to trust my sixth sense and choose the wood I think is the right one. Even if it meant a new change of expression, I wanted to pass on that ritual.

Having gotten a good feel for the “memorial,” the next step was to buy a 4.5m long tree, cut it into thirds, and have it milled into squares to make statues of the three sisters. When I was working on the first statue of my eldest sister, “eldest sister – Butterfly”, I happened to hear the reading of “Anne Frank’s Diary” on the radio, when I thought about what Anne Frank looked like, somehow, I saw my sister with her bangs cut off when she was a little girl. At that time, I realized for the first time that it was my sister that I was building, and from there I became conscious of building girls.

The second and third sisters are also built with slightly longer hands and larger feet. Children of this age sometimes appear to have unusually long legs. I think that an imbalance of the growth and a certain kind of pain are also beauty for humans.



“eldest sister – Butterfly” 2004, paint on wood (camphor tree) / single wood-block construction, 177×72×40.5cm, photo: KIOKU Keizo, ©TANADA Koji, Courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery

*2 Sculptor representative of late German Gothic art. Known for his wood carved figures with a sense of movement.

*3 Sculpture made from a single block of wood. A technique used in Buddhist statue making in which the main parts of the body, such as the head, neck, and torso, are made from a single block of wood.

Resisting Gravity, Eternal Ascendency

—Your work “girl” released in 2011 was affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake?

At the drawing stage, that statue was posed with its arms facing downwards. However, the earthquake struck while I was working, and I was unable to work in my studio for about a month because of the power outage. Partly because I was so busy with my life, and partly because I felt powerless in terms of spirituality. Also I felt that creating sculptures would not help people’s hearts and minds.

That’s when I had the dream. Near dawn, I dreamed that the girl was standing alone in the rubble with a stick, and I was just staring at her. As soon as I woke up, I drew the figure on a notepad that was nearby.

I changed her pose, found a good copper bar at the hardware store, and made it look like she was holding it. I was saved by my sculpture, or rather, I felt that I was allowed to do sculpture. The important thing is that she came out as an incarnation of me and was holding a stick. It

looks like she is rowing to move forward, and I myself have chisels and other tools on a daily basis.



"girl" 2011, paint on wood (camphor tree) / single wood-block construction / copper pipe, 181.5×78×105cm, Collection: Kagura Salon, photo: MIYAJIMA kei, ©TANADA Koji, Courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery

—Why do I feel strong even though it is a very thin girl?

One of the major issues in sculpture, as I see it, is how to resist gravity. How to make the viewer feel an eternal ascension by using materials that do not move, such as logs and stones that gravitate downward. This requires an artificial composition, an "eternal composition" that can be found in Christian and Buddhist religious sculptures, as well as in Chinese stone statues. I noticed this with Riemenschneider's Maria and other statues I saw in Germany as well, and I have been pursuing it since my "memorial".

For example, the "S" and the "K" are connected in an endless configuration, not ending at the height of the sculpture itself, but continuing to the universe as a consciousness. It is not about posing, but how to put a girl or a boy in such a composition. I have to put them in a wobbly line from foot to knee, knee to hip bone, hip bone to tummy, and tummy to shoulder. That's why it is going to look so strange. I think the interesting thing about sculpture is that it's strange, but it doesn't look unnatural, and it can be accepted as a normal existence. I am very happy to hear that even though it is thin, it looks strong, and I feel like I've conveyed what I wanted to do.

Existence like a mirror that interacts with yourself

—In recent years, you have been working not only on boy and girl statues, but also on adult women statues, and you have been increasing the number of works that are not painted. Have there been any changes in your production activities after working with wood for so long?



"statue of rain" 2016, paint on wood (camphor tree) / single wood-block construction, 207×65×64cm, Collection: Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, photo: MIYAJIMA Kei, ©TANADA Koji, Courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery

The first adult woman to be sculpted was the "statue of rain" in 2016. When I spent two months in Bandung, Indonesia in 2015, a local woman who modeled nude for me was extremely beautiful. I thought she could be made into a sculpture as she was, so I took a picture of her and built it as soon as I returned to Japan.

I hadn't really thought about building adult women before, but I am a man and I am attracted to the female body. I guess it was a very stoic environment in the mountains of Indonesia, it must be that the vector turned strongly in the direction of production.

I do not apply color if I feel that the presence of color would make the entire piece too loud, or if I feel that the wood itself is more appropriate for the work. Recently, I've come to understand a little more about how to color things like this, and I've started thinking about whether I can compete without coloring.

When I was younger, I used to think I ruled the trees, but these days I do it with the feeling that I am losing from the beginning. It's always the trees that test me. For example, if a large knot appears here, you could consider it a habit and accept it. It's a lot like married life. At first, they will argue and fight with each other, but after living together for a long time, they will know where the line is. Even if the wood has cracks in it, it is becoming acceptable. That may be a change that has come out of our relationship with the trees.

Looking at the tree and talking to it all the time, I sometimes realize the meaning of what I'm doing. Just like a Buddhist statue that transforms me through prayer, for me, sculpture is like a mirror that I can use to talk to myself.

—What is the theme of the new works in your atelier at the moment?

I was inspired to create this work after reading an article about a woman who had died alone in a dumpster, titled "statue of her leaving from the box". Box = solitude, and I believe that everyone has a box inside of them, but I think that she cut off her relationship with society and filled the space around her, her room, with stuff because it was so empty inside that box. When she dies and leaves the room, a piece of cloth is placed over the nude statue, making her look like a goddess in the sculpture. I work with the hope that when I have converted

what is inherently human into a sculpture, it will be somewhat beautiful.



Mr. TANADA talking in front of his just-finished work, "statue of her leaving from the box". ©TANADA Koji, Courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery



TANADA Koji

Born in Hyogo Prefecture in 1968. Received the 13th International TAKIFUJI Art Award in 1992. He graduated from Tokyo Zokei University Faculty of Design, Department of Fine Arts II (Sculpture) in 1993 and completed his M.F.A. in Sculpture at Tokyo University of the Arts in 1995. Known for its beautifully painted, slender bodies and unique, floating statues of boys and girls made from single block of wood. In 2001, he stayed in Berlin as an Agency for Cultural Affairs Grant. He was awarded the 8th Taro Okamoto Memorial Grand Prize for Contemporary Art in 2005, and the 20th Takashimaya Art Award in 2010. In 2008, he held solo exhibitions including "Eleven Boys, One Girl" at the Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum in Shizuoka, and in 2013, "Tachinoboru." (Rise) exhibition at the Nerima Art Museum in Tokyo and other venues.