

The Castle of Debris: Tatsuya Tatsuta's Formative Abstract Representation of Lacanian Desire

George Saitoh

“There are only two tragedies in life: not getting what one desires, and getting it.” – Oscar Wilde



The Castle of Debris is situated first from the entrance to the large exhibition hall in Tokyo's National Art Centre. Piled on the floor are the 'monad' pieces of heat-transformed polystyrene, burned and melted from identical and flat machine-turned replicas into figurations of seemingly infinite textural and topographical complexity, but all to some degree concave, hollowed-out carapaces.

Tatsuta tells me that this latest work represents desire (or the Lacanian structure of desire as defined by lack (欠如) of an ideal

object, drawing the individual towards images of that object that are—and must be for desire to persist—false or unobtainable.

Among the pile are islands of heavily burnt pieces with varying degrees of spacial condensation and discoloration from white through brown, and at the center of each is one or more glittering decorative orbs sparkling with superficial beauty. Beyond these islands, the remoter monads can appear as benign as white prawn crackers until the devastating truth of their potential is realized in the browning, glazing effects encircling the positive object with its solid reflective surface, dark and round like the swiveling eye of a burlesque octopus camouflaged beneath a rocky shelf.



Unlike his previous *Re-Monad 1-4* exhibit (NAU exhibition, NACT Feb 2016), where the composite monad pieces were fixed to the supporting medium's surface, permanently embedded in it, here there is a sense of ease, of possibility for change, palpable potential for re-arrangement, escaping the confines of the present, a sense of optimism. In the center of the mass, where the pile is deepest, the pieces are whitest—pure, creamy, airy, and, at first glance, as playfully attractive as puffed rice, popcorn, curls of hair, beer froth, bath foam.

This effect is emphasized, as well as made possible, by the horizontal layout that feels alive, intimate, and improvisational, less conspicuously an art exhibit than a real, unfinished creative act in progress inviting the viewer to share an imaginary hand in the rehabilitation process underway. The viewer becomes easily involved—the delimiting boundary of a frame or canvas edge is absent and the contents of the *The Castle of Debris* bleeds right up to your feet.

Unusual for a Japanese artist, the effect of an art seemingly with neither traceable form, formal representational structure, nor formal material constituents is that it leaves the viewer helplessly exposed—cut off from any pre-conceived notion of how art is (or should be) constructed and represented.

It is worth repeating that the units of the work—and we must remember that they are merely touching one another in this latest exhibition, like grains of sand on a beach—are not irreversibly interconnected. If each unit is conceived as a plastic representation of a Leibnitz monad, then the mass of units is a multiplication of this monadism, a congregation of diverse cybernetic systems, each alike in kind, but each unique in topographical detail.



In *Re-Monad 1-4* (NAU exhibition, NACT Feb 2016), these pieces were irreversibly cross-linked by heat within a matrix—monads overridden and fused by some destructive, omnipotent force. While traces of the monad were clearly visible, each one—as a unit of free-flowing self-containment—was forcibly linked to others that were in turn broken in the same process.

Re-Monad 1-4 as a series of pieces was, in effect, a manifestation of the most primitive recall and awareness of all-eclipsing trauma in the seconds (though they could be eons) before blackout, before awareness as well as time itself ends, and death—and infinitude—begins. It is no less than the interface of birth or of clinical death, or of the soul's abdication from the *muselmann*.

In Lacanian terms, *Re-Monad 1-4* may also be viewed as a representation of the *sinthome*. The minimum condition for life, the threshold upon which we may thereafter either permanently cease to be, or begin to re-emerge, re-habilitate, re-identify, 're-monadize', live.

The eventual encounter with the reality of one's prior experience(s)—a reality where nothing can be recalled, or one of

intolerable recall whose denial has been possible to sustain up to now, but for no longer—coming about as a result of the inevitable running down of imaginative/projective energy that comes with time and the progressive inability to infuse present reality and objects with fantastical (deluded) meaning leads to confrontation with one's *sinthome*.

It is an encounter from whose crisis old fantasies can no longer be supported, but are nevertheless remembered 'to have been' with shame, like husks piled up. This interpretation of 'rock bottom,' where either death or new (different) life is the only way forward is the crisis point from which one emerges to live more consciously than before, or not all.

In *The Castle of Debris*, the improvement is underway. We are no longer in the nightmare or *pavor nocturnus*, locked in the desireless desert of the trauma, but in the dream, the frustrating, desiring dream where objects are as varied and as abundant as they are infused with false promise and pretense. But this fact cannot keep up with our sense of pleasure, and that is what matters most for the possibility of living.

Each unit, each monad, is a unit of desire, a representation of the unique lack inside the individual. Each piece, hollow at its core, has a different shape from its neighbor, with which it nevertheless shares the mark of a cavity.

But if we can see each piece as an individual's desire *per se*, among the mass of diversity shaped within each individual out of a uniquely lived experience, we can also take this pile of monads to represent the multiple forms of desire in one individual. For unlike Freud's drive, orbiting some fixed focal point, Lacanian desire is multivalent, finds countless possibilities for its fulfillment.

Complexity (複雜性) is key. The pieces, upon closer inspection, reveal a plethora of lost, bleached or formalin-fixed possibilities: outer ears (pinnae), inner ears (cochleae), hearts, pancreata, snake heads, deep-sea jaws, scooped-out fruit-halves, Venus flytraps, noses, boxing gloves, embryonic sacs, coffee beans, fetuses, lobster claws, placentae.



For each transformation of one replica polystyrene food tray, each convulsive reaction to the propane torch's 2000 degrees C of heat, the duration and distance from the object is never precisely repeated though the materials are gripped in the artist's sensitive hands. However much control the artist brings to bear the outcome cannot be pre-ordained. The object gets away from him, takes on a direction (a 'will') of its own. Thereafter, the most he may do is modify its form according to what he *discovers* to emerge under the blast of heat. But he cannot consciously *create* any of these objects, these 'monads' in their precise detail.

Each is a product of entropy that he has nevertheless instigated, is responsible for. This, perhaps, is the source of the work's harnessed energy, it's wildness. The artist has to live with the results, accept what they retro-actively reveal to him about his own artistic desire.

And here we have yet another aspect of this complex, multi-layered artwork that demands our consideration: the notion that desire

itself only becomes fully recognizable, takes on clarity of form and substance, *after* it has been (unsuccessfully) satisfied. This sense is also somehow rendered and captured within *The Castle of Debris*.

This remarkable and unavoidable Lacanian characteristic ensures present desire will outpace knowledge of its object, and therefore will always require a 'leap of faith' if it is to be actualized, if we are to experience its pleasurable effects – the pleasures of hope and optimism for a future better than the present.

How does this fit with our (and the artist's) striving for control? If control deadens, it is because it kills desire. Desire for control is an oxymoron. It is the fascist imperative inside each of us against which art rails, subversively, to redeem us.

But without a container of control, desire (欲望) cannot manifest itself. Lack is no longer a lack (欠如) in an infinite void (無).

Every great modernist has sought this balance between control and emancipation. Indeed every great artist who has understood, on some level, this structure of desire and that perfect balance (unattainable, because it *must* be to sustain itself) is the object of their own desire, has had to treat complexity in either of two (ideal) ways—use complexity to render a simpler object or use simplicity to render a complex object—in the full knowledge that they will fail, and thus have the desire to go on failing again and again in the name of desire.

James Joyce set out to show that all the desirable ingredients of the world that he could name didn't satisfy desire. His literary son, Samuel Beckett, chose to fail at rendering desire by assuming that he didn't have any, and setting out, from that hypothetical position, toward a sub-worm existence, which he could never quite reach. The nagging urge to go on, the only thing left when he stripped away every possible image of the desirable, was desire itself,

or its insistence on Waiting for (its) Godot. But both artists adumbrated desire's locus in their own extreme way.

In a distinctly Beckettian turn, Leonard Cohen sees himself described in his *Book of Longing* as 'the creator of the black photograph...the guy who takes a lot of trouble setting up a picture and then holds his hand over the lens as he snaps it... I have been, I am and I will remain the Cheat of Matter and the Redeemer of the Inert. Nico perceived me immediately...my work...is a monument to Nico's eyes...that the Black Photograph sang to other irises, and yes corneas, retinas, optic nerves, all the way down the foul leather bag to Nico's restless heart, another human heart.'

I prefer the 'cheat of matter' who (knowingly) restores the lack at the instant it is to be (falsely) occupied by the actualization of an imperfect image. Either way, Cheat of matter or Cheat of matter is an important reference to the presumption of controllability: the geometrically identical polystyrene dishes, the hand-held propene lamp (or hand-focused Fresnel Lens). The two interfaces between control/loss of control and loss of control/control, which, although the artist cannot dictate what happens where heat meets material, he can at least approach control over the duration of this span of time—when the first interface occurs, and again when the second occurs. Here Tatsuta may play God, presiding over a world in which individuals, between the traumatic poke of birth and the curtain call of death, are nevertheless guided by free will.



That world is characterized by the unfathomable complexity of human desire. It can never be other than disordered, evolving, and failing.

Coda:

THIS VERSUS THAT

by

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*There had to have been
really something
for this to be
like this and not like that,
or even that.*

*Later, this will really have been,
proving it will not
have been that,
or even that*

but what had to have really been this.