

# The phenomenon of “how it looks” and “being/existence” – The glass works of Iezumi Toshio

## Introduction

At Iezumi Toshio's exhibition held at the Miki City Horimitsu Museum in early spring 2016, I saw a young girl surreptitiously touch one of the artworks. The adults with her had instructed her not to touch the works, but despite this, when the adults weren't looking, she seized the opportunity and did just that. I think she just wanted to see what they felt like. She saw these works with their beautiful green colors and varied appearances and wanted to find out by touching them what they were really like.

In Iezumi Toshio's artworks we experience the gap between the phenomenon of “how it looks” and “being/existence.” This is closely connected to glass's inherent properties and to Iezumi's technique of grinding and polishing laminated glass.

## I. “Exactly what am I looking at?”

The expression “I look at an artwork” is not suited to Iezumi's work. What distinguishes his work is not the active/passive voice experience in which a subject “looks” at an artwork as an object but the middle voice experience. (1) It is not a distant, static relationship in which there is me and the artwork and I look at the artwork. Instead, I am involved in a dynamic process in which on the basis of “how it looks,” a (visible) thing repeatedly emerges. It is the process of something – and it is not limited to something visual, for it may also be something tactual, such as something possessed of softness or volume or internal space – becoming visible. It is neither me willfully “looking” (active voice) nor a certain thing being one-sidedly “shown” (passive voice). Something visible arises in the middle voice between the artwork and me that involves me in a way that is beyond my will but does not entail coercion.

In everyday experience, the emergence of “how it looks” proceeds to “I saw it.” The experience of the emergence of “how the mountain looks” becomes, when we look back on it later, “I saw the mountain (there was a mountain and I saw it).” In Iezumi's artwork, however, the emergence of “how it looks” does not transition into “I saw it.” If I move my head, if I take one step to the side, if I walk all the way around it..., its appearance changes in myriad ways. The parts that protrude become hollow, the parts that were deep become shallow, the green color becomes a different shade, even the contours become indefinite. What's more, despite the fact that it is glass and therefore should be cold and hard, it even appears warm and soft. Exactly

what am I looking at? Somewhere, this is the question the viewer is asking themselves while being captivated by these tricks of appearance.

As suggested in Gibson's ecological approach to visual perception, we do not see things using the eyes alone. Attached to a moving body is a moving head, and attached to this are moving eyeballs, and so the visual sense is supported by a sensory-motor system in the form of the body. (2) Incorporated into the establishment of the condition of "vision" is the movement of the viewer (the thing that is trying to see). According to Gibson, deducing invariants amid changes in response to movement is what leads to perception of the environment or an object. (3) One could perhaps say that through changes in appearance, an unchanging "being" is perceived. However, because of the properties of transmitting, reflecting and refracting light, glass presents a great diversity of appearances depending on the movement of the viewer. In Iezumi's artworks in particular, this diversity is acute. His work demands of the viewer movement, and in accordance with this movement the appearance of the work is continually changing over a wide range. These changes in appearance do not converge on a single "being," but diverge in the direction of different "beings." We probably fail to grasp the "invariants" required to perceive the object. We are unable to ascertain what things are really about, what we are looking at, or the "being" of whatever it is that can be seen.

## **II. Grinding and polishing blocks of laminated glass**

As I've previously mentioned elsewhere, in glass, the two poles to which "how it looks" and "being/existence" diverge are mirrors and window glass. (4) Each neutralizes their own appearance, mirrors through complete reflection and window glass through complete transparency. It is between these two poles that the existence of glass as glass is noticed. To the balance between transmission and reflection is added refraction, at which point glass appears as glass. This appearance, however, diffuses to such an extent that it transcends the "existence" of the glass as material. Iezumi grinds and polishes blocks made by laminating sheets of glass. This is work that involves manipulating the "being" of glass, but it is also surely a process of searching for some kind of "appearance" that cannot be completely foreseen, for "how it looks" as glass imbued with instability and change.

Here, the technique of "cold work," which involves handling cold glass directly, would seem to have significance. By constantly handling the glass to see how it will look as a result of being manipulated in different ways, it is possible to discern what (changes in) appearances will

continually arise from continual changes in the material as a result of it being processed (by using a hand grinder it is also possible to achieve subtle curves). As a result of this work, a certain (desirable) "appearance" and related manner of changing can probably be found.

**In a catalog for one of his own solo exhibitions, Iezumi wrote:**

A long time ago, I was scolded. When I said, "You don't know what a work is going to be like until it's finished, do you?" I was told such an attitude is wrong for an artist. (5)

In the modern art system, an "artist" is someone who devises in their head what kind of concept they are going to "express" in what kind of form using what kinds of materials and then realizes that (a spiritual thing) exactly as they intended. The artist is the "Author" (with a capital A), a word that has the same origins as the word "authority," an absolute being who has complete control over the artwork. This approach, which regards materials and technique as secondary means in the service of "expression," is rejected by Iezumi.

For him, the creation of an artwork is a process of grinding and polishing glass with a hand grinder to see how it will look as a result of being manipulated in different ways, of finding something while repeatedly becoming confused and understanding, of seeking something that can only be found as a result of this activity. (6) The quotation above demonstrates his awareness of this. Making art is not so much a case of "I make an artwork" (active voice) but rather a case of "an artwork takes form" (middle voice).

For this reason, Iezumi places an emphasis on the "being" of the glass at the level of an object and the technique of manipulating it. It is the glass as an object that the maker is able to deal with, and they are not able to directly manipulate that something that arises between the artwork and the viewer: the emergence of "how it looks." It is precisely the question of what to do with what part of the block of glass as an object that constitutes creating and making. The material of glass and the technique of processing it can never be simply physical methods for realizing what one understands in one's head. The artwork is the ground and polished laminated glass, and there is no substance (a spiritual thing?) beyond this. Without the material of sheet glass and the technique of laminating and grinding and polishing it, the work would not have been thought of nor would it have been made. According to Iezumi, he began using laminated glass because he thought it was beautiful. In terms of the artworks, the material of sheet glass and the technique of laminating and grinding and polishing it represent a mandatory starting point and the major premise.

For this very reason, Iezumi's artworks make viewers aware of glass being glass, and of what being glass is like.

### III. Making what he wants

Iezumi's approach of taking the material of glass as his starting point calls to mind the characteristics of modern art as outlined by Clement Greenberg. Iezumi himself shows an interest in abstract expressionist and minimalist artworks. According to Greenberg, in modernism, as a result of Kantian self-criticism, it was realized that "that which was unique and irreducible" in each particular genre was the medium exclusive to that genre, and the resultant self-definition, or "purity" (i.e. the elimination of the mediums of any other genres), was regarded as guaranteeing the independence and standards of quality of that genre. (7) In painting, rather than concealing such things as the flatness of the supports or the materiality of the paints, these "limitations" were incorporated into the creative process as positive elements. In a sense, Iezumi's approach of limiting his materials to not only glass, but laminated glass, and bringing into existence artworks based on its properties of reflecting, transmitting and refracting light into green could be described as modernist "purified glass art."

At the same time, however, Western modern art, which gave rise to modernism, is author-centric. Likewise, Kantian self-criticism derives from the self-consciousness and identity of the creator, and has the "author" in the modern sense as the major premise. Ooka Makoto, for example, points out that in modern times since the Renaissance, people's interest has shifted from "what" is painted (the subject) to "how" it is painted (the individual artist's unique style). In other words, what is looked for in an artwork is not the representation of a "noble cause" from the perspective of the artist, customer or the general public but a "result of the self-expression of the artist themselves." (8) In the modern art system, people look at the "Author" behind the artwork. This is the "Author" with a capital A as mentioned above. The "spiritual something" of the artist "expressed" in the artwork is emphasized, and the artist is regarded as the absolute source creating the artwork for the purposes of such "self-expression." (9) Iezumi, who declares, "You don't know what a work is going to be like until it's finished, do you?" makes art from a standpoint different from the author-centrism of modern art.

The French aesthetician Étienne Souriau regards art not as an activity aimed at "beauty" or "expression" but as an activity that involves creating a single thing in the form of an artwork. Art is not an activity for the purposes of some other kind of "event" (événement) comparable with investors buying and selling bonds to become wealthy or engineers building a bridge to cross a

river. (10) One might think this argument has similarities with the characteristic (or aesthetic judgment) of art that has traditionally been regarded as "disinterestedness," or the non-association with utility, but the other kinds of events referred to by Souriau include "beauty" and "expression." The artwork itself is the aim of art, which is not a means for achieving "beauty" or "expression." Art is that of which the aim is the existence of being. According to Souriau, ancient Greek ceramicists desired the existence of amphora-shaped containers, Dante desired the existence of the Divine Comedy, and Wagner desired the existence of The Ring of the Nibelung. (11) By which he probably means they created these things because they wanted them. It would seem that Iezumi's artistic practice is not aimed at what is referred to in modern art as "self-expression," but that it is a case of this "creating something because he wants it." Although the exact nature of "such a thing" is probably not known until it is completed.

Iezumi is also interested in ancient Egyptian sculpture and old Chinese bronzeware and ceramics. This is an interest in the things themselves that people have admired and treasured down through the ages regardless of who made them. If we look at art without worrying about its modern state we realize that such things are in fact omnipresent. Probably he is in love with artworks that have transcended the individual, which if one agrees with the concept that "artworks" and "authors" form a pair can no longer be called "artworks." It would seem that this love for artworks that are so "universal" in a sense that when we look at them the artist as an individual vanishes is a motivation for his own artistic practice in addition to his belief that "laminated glass is beautiful." Perhaps he works towards achieving the kind of "being" of glass (that has transcended himself?) that upon looking back strikes him that, "This is what I really wanted."

## Conclusion

Looking back at the experience of encountering Iezumi Toshio's artworks, it is clear that it relates to the inquiry into the experience of encountering artworks in general. And if we try to understand his artistic practice, it is clear that it relates to the inquiry into the experience of creating artworks in general. If we step outside the narrow framework of Western modernity, it is also conceivable that the artistic experience in general is an experience concerning the mystery of how it "looks" ("sounds," "feels," and so on).

In the end, I think Iezumi's practice and artworks exist in an orthodox form within the vast current of the activity of "art," or of what we who are familiar with the word (or concept of) "art" can call "art" in the broadest sense. (12)

- (1) Regarding the "middle voice" experience see chapter 3 in Morita Aki, *Geijutsu nochūdōtai* (The middle voice in art) (Nara: Kizasu Shobo, 2013).
- (2) James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1979/1986), p. 222.
- (3) *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- (4) Morita Aki, "Glass Works as Phenomena," Toshio Iezumi: Glass and Movement, ex.cat. (New York: Chappell Gallery, 2006), p. 6.
- (5) Iezumi Toshio: *Katachi to hyōgen* (Form and expression), ex. cat. (Tokyo: ExhibitionSpace, 2001), p. 1.
- (6) This kind of thing presumably applies not only to Iezumi's art practice, but in essence to the making of all artwork. See chapters 7 and 8 in Morita Aki, *Geijutsu no chūdōtai*.
- (7) Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1960), in *Art in theory, 1900–2000: An anthology of changing ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), p. 755.
- (8) Ōoka Makoto, *Chūshō kaiga e no shōtai* (Invitation to abstract painting) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1985), p. 123.
- (9) Regarding the process leading to this way of thinking, see Sasaki Kenichi, "Kinseibigaku no tenbō (Survey of modern aesthetics), in *Kōza bigaku 1: Bigaku no rekishi* (Aesthetics course 1: History of aesthetics), ed. Imamichi Tomonobu "Aesthetics 101: History of Aesthetics" (University of Tokyo Press, 1984).
- (10) Étienne Souriau, *La Correspondance des Arts* (Paris: Flammarion, 1947/1969), p. 48.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- (12) The concept of art was established in Western civilization's modern era and introduced to Japan in the Meiji era. Regarding the West see Sasaki Kenichi, "Kinseibigaku no tenbō"; regarding Japan see Kitazawa Noriaki, *Me no shinden: "bijutsu" juyō-shi nōto* (Temple of the eye: Notes on the history of the reception of "art") (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppan, 1989) and Satō Dōshin, "Nihon bijutsu" tanjō (The birth of "Japanese art") (Tokyo: Kōdansha Sensho Métier, 1996).

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