In commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the Japan-Vietnam Diplomatic Relations, the Fine Arts Museum Ho Chi Minh City hosted the exhibition ‘Sceneries remained forever in one’s soul’ from 23 November to 15 December 2013, displaying the works of the Japanese artist TOBA Mika. Deeply inspired by her various journeys to Vietnam starting in 1994, the artist creates colourful, impressive and thought-provoking images of a land in transition by using katazome—a centuries old unique Japanese dyeing technique.¹

Stefan Jeka
Fading old Vietnam as reviving inspiration

When TOBA Mika realised that the traditional katazome designs—mainly flowers, abstract patterns or scenes of folk and popular tales—did not any longer contribute to the development of her artwork, she took a flight to Ho Chi Minh City in 1994 to search for new inspiration. She went there without any real idea about the country or people, but from the first impression and impression she received by the vigour, the heat and the landscape of the city.

From then on, she visited Vietnam every year and travelled all over the country: from north to south, to tiny fishing villages, to paddy fields, the old imperial town of Hue and, of course, the cities of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the former Saigon. It was the time when Vietnam had begun to undergo vast changes due to the rapid economic development the government pursued with the Doi Moi (‘reforms’) reforms. Starting in 1986 these reforms eventually led to a so-called socialist orientated market economy and the growth of private enterprises, emerging from the existing shadow market of family oriented enterprises. But, alas, this development was strongly influenced by foreigners and the businesses TOBA Mika witnessed and the places she selected for her paintings, and very often these would no longer exist upon her return. Stimulated by the rapid and dramatic changes in scenery, she felt she simply had to paint to keep hold of the memories of the moment—place and time. The objects of her pictures were more or less telling so fragile. The streets, houses, landscapes, they contained the real essence of the Vietnamese history. TOBA Mika explained: “The houses opposite the river were as if they were telling the history of the journey of the Vietnamese people. The decaying houses with the French colonial style buildings behind them seemed like living artworks. It was the scenery I painted for the picture ‘Monsoon’, but as time passed the scene was completely gone, replaced by a highway.”

Assembling the patterns of life

‘Monsoon’ (モノスーン, 1998) is an impressive work consisting of six panels, more than 5 meters in length. Many of her artworks come in the form of a byobu (折屏, a traditional Japanese folding screen) — reminiscent of the heritage of the Japanese arts TOBA Mika pays tribute to. Although the seemingly deserted colonial houses in ‘Monsoon’, with their dark empty windows, and the nearly collapsing roofs of the crooked stilt houses in front, give us a somewhat dreary and desolate impression, the focal point is a bright awning that covers the freshly laundered clothes hanging out to dry. The absence of people is a distinct feature of nearly all of her works, but like in ‘Monsoon’ or ‘Labyrinth (迷路, 1998) the decaying houses and empty streets are nevertheless filled with life — represented by the bright yellow lights shining from inside a shop, a set of chairs, parked bikes or motorbikes and boats floating on a river, all just waiting for the imminent return of the people onto the scene. In this regard, because of the intimate and personal relationship with the landscapes depicted, her pictures focusing on Vietnam are filled with neither nostalgia nor sadness, but rather with an idea of future expectations. TOBA Mika is witness to the inevitable historical process happening in Vietnam at this very moment, which in contrast to that process she tries to catch by using the elaborate and time-consuming process of the katazome technique.

Keeping the before mentioned process in mind, large sized paintings require more effort. But, TOBA Mika felt as if the Vietnamese scenarios she wanted to draw demanded such proportions. “So, it requires a lot of hard work to produce a large scale painting, but somehow, the Vietnamese scenarios I wanted to paint seem to fit only to a large scale art work. The energy of the Vietnamese life and the heat of the city, they all gave me a lot of power.”

It is the large size of the paintings that allow the viewer to stand back, at a distance, and take in the astonishing effect of the abstract puzzle of sharp edged coloured fields forming themselves together into a coherent image. It is this combination of abstraction and photo-realism that makes her work such an impressive experience.

Current works and future projects

At the time of this interview TOBA Mika had already begun working on a special project; presumably for the first time, the katazome technique will be used for the painting of ‘Fusuma-e (絵絵, pencillined sliding doors) for the Zen-temple Kennin-ji in Kyoto. In preparation for the 800th anniversary of the death of monk Eisai (1141-1215) in 2015, sixteen panels for the temple’s small library room will be decorated by the artist and shown in the exhibition ‘TOBA Mika — dyeing the ZEN spirit’ at the temple from 29 November till 14 December 2014. Again, much of her inspiration derives from her journeys to Vietnam, for it is the tranquil image of the mountains and waters in a small Vietnamese village that she finds most appropriate for the ‘Fusuma-e in the oldest Zen-temple in Kyoto. In the project’s second phase another 36 panels of ‘Fusuma-e are to be completed for the temple’s large library room, depicting the four seasons in various Japanese landscapes.

TOBA Mika also plans to present her work in France in the near future. There she wants to show panels from her current project at the temple in Kyoto, as well as her works that were inspired by her various travels through Vietnam. This will be a fine selection from what she has produced in the past twenty years and the first opportunity to experience her art in Europe.

Stefan Jekas is a doctoral candidate at the Centre for Japanese Studies at Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University Frankfurt am Main with focus on the history of contemporary Japanese art.

References

1 This article is based on both personal and online interviews with the artist and used with her kind permission. General information about the artist and her artwork was mostly derived from the artist’s website (toba-mika.net) and the catalogue of the exhibition Nara and Hanoi bound together with Katozome, held in commemoration of the 1300th anniversary of Nara Heijo-kyo and 1000th anniversary of Thang Long-Hanoi at the Yukihi Temple in Nara and the Temple of Literature and the Vietnam National Museum of Arts in Hanoi in 2010.
2 Committee for the TOBA Mika’s Katazome Exhibition (ed.) 2010. Nara and Hanoi bound together with Katazome (Exhibition Catalogue), Tokyo: Sankai Shimbunsha, p.111
3 Interview, January 2014
4 idem

BORN IN AICH PREFECTURE, TOBA Mika 福田美香 graduated from Kyoto City University of Arts in 1987. At that time she had already developed her very own approach to the old dyeing technique katazome 剪絵, reviving the traditional craft to use it for her contemporary art. Prior to her graduation her works where shown in exhibitions throughout the country – at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum and the Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art – and she won several art prizes in Japan, like the ‘Kyoto New Art Prize’ in 2003 and the ‘Urban Culture Incentive Award’ in 2003. Her remarkable works focusing on Vietnam were also exhibited abroad at the Vietnam National Museum in Hanoi, and in 2005 TOBA Mika was eventually awarded with the ‘Cultural Testimonial Award’ by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. As a current professor at Kyoto Seika University of Arts, TOBA Mika is able to personally introduce this old tradition to her students.

Katazome—dyed patterns

Among the several elaborate dyeing techniques, katazome — the term could be translated as ‘stencil-dyed’ — is a particular example of Japanese wits and craftsmanship. Resembling the expensive woven brocades, katazome was used to dye inexpensive cotton or linen garments. Therefore it gained wide popularity and was produced in large quantities to meet the growing demand among the commoners in early modern Japan. Like the famous batik dyeing method of Indonesia, the fabric is partially covered with a resist to hinder the colour from penetrating the parts where it is not desired. This technique produces well-defined patterns, that resemble sharp edged prints rather than painted designs. In batik these patterns are realised by applying liquid wax by hand or stitch. This method of using wax was not practiced in Japan, perhaps the production of wax was not sufficient or the wax was used for other purposes, for example, the fabrication of medicine. Instead, the wax is made from the persimmon fruit — a tannin made from the persimmon fruit — ‘put into ground’. ‘To dip’ in soybean juice overnight (浸し, put into ground).

Depending on the size of the picture, cutting the stencil — katagami (カタゴマ) — ‘dip out the pattern’ — can take up to two months from start to finish. As several of these steps are necessary when more colours or patterns are desired, the creation of even a single picture becomes a very complex and time-consuming endeavour. Though the katagami is quite durable and can be used several times, the overall timing will be unique each time.

Assembling the patterns of life

‘Monsoon’ (モノスーン, 1998) is an impressive work consisting of six panels, more than 5 meters in length. Many of her artworks come in the form of a byobu (折屏, a traditional Japanese folding screen) — reminiscent of the heritage of the Japanese arts TOBA Mika pays tribute to. Although the seemingly deserted colonial houses in ‘Monsoon’, with their dark empty windows, and the nearly collapsing roofs of the crooked stilt houses in front, give us a somewhat dreary and desolate impression, the focal point is a bright awning that covers the freshly laundered clothes hanging out to dry. The absence of people is a distinct feature of nearly all of her works, but like in ‘Monsoon’ or ‘Labyrinth (迷路, 1998) the decaying houses and empty streets are nevertheless filled with life — represented by the bright yellow lights shining from inside a shop, a set of chairs, parked bikes or motorbikes and boats floating on a river, all just waiting for the imminent return of the people onto the scene. In this regard, because of the intimate and personal relationship with the landscapes depicted, her pictures focusing on Vietnam are filled with neither nostalgia nor sadness, but rather with an idea of future expectations. TOBA Mika is witness to the inevitable historical process happening in Vietnam at this very moment, which in contrast to that process she tries to catch by using the elaborate and time-consuming process of the katazome technique.

Keeping the before mentioned process in mind, large sized paintings require more effort. But, TOBA Mika felt as if the Vietnamese scenarios she wanted to draw demanded such proportions. “So, it requires a lot of hard work to produce a large scale painting, but somehow, the Vietnamese scenarios I wanted to paint seem to fit only to a large scale art work. The energy of the Vietnamese life and the heat of the city, they all gave me a lot of power.”

It is the large size of the paintings that allow the viewer to stand back, at a distance, and take in the astonishing effect of the abstract puzzle of sharp edged coloured fields forming themselves together into a coherent image. It is this combination of abstraction and photo-realism that makes her work such an impressive experience.

Current works and future projects

At the time of this interview TOBA Mika had already begun working on a special project; presumably for the first time, the katazome technique will be used for the painting of ‘Fusuma-e (絵絵, pencil-lined sliding doors) for the Zen-temple Kennin-ji in Kyoto. In preparation for the 800th anniversary of the death of monk Eisai (1141-1215) in 2015, sixteen panels for the temple’s small library room will be decorated by the artist and shown in the exhibition ‘TOBA Mika — dyeing the ZEN spirit’ at the temple from 29 November till 14 December 2014. Again, much of her inspiration derives from her journeys to Vietnam, for it is the tranquil image of the mountains and waters in a small Vietnamese village that she finds most appropriate for the ‘Fusuma-e in the oldest Zen-temple in Kyoto. In the project’s second phase another 36 panels of ‘Fusuma-e are to be completed for the temple’s large library room, depicting the four seasons in various Japanese landscapes.

TOBA Mika also plans to present her work in France in the near future. There she wants to show panels from her current project at the temple in Kyoto, as well as her works that were inspired by her various travels through Vietnam. This will be a fine selection from what she has produced in the past twenty years and the first opportunity to experience her art in Europe.

Stefan Jekas is a doctoral candidate at the Centre for Japanese Studies at Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University Frankfurt am Main with focus on the history of contemporary Japanese art.