Shigeo Toya

I was a shy child, afraid even to go to school. I would run away, trying to avoid encounters, hiding in the back room of our house or in the mountains. I had such a fear of death.

There are two ways to ease such fears. One is to become used to the idea. The other is to escape from it. Both these approaches were mixed in my mind.

I felt oppressed by the society around me. I felt I was being watched by the community. Art became a form of freedom for me, a form of free individualist expression, a way of escape from this world.

I was not much influenced by contemporary or postwar American art. I studied it, but it never really moved me. I liked classical art. I was interested in Pompeii, in the sculptures of Pompeii, which were actually human bodies unearthed from the city. This image of Pompeii has remained very important in my work to this day. I try to visualize how the space around me would be filled with ash and how I would suffocate. My body would dissipate, but the shape of my body would remain like a fossilized surface. This is an interesting image but at the same time a frightening one. In the beginning I tried to express this image of a hollowed-out figure in my work.

The sculpture I made during my first two years at university was based on the work of French artists, such as [Auguste] Rodin, [Emile-Antoine] Bourdelle, and [Aristide] Maillol. The professors at Japanese universities studied in France and taught that type of work. They emphasized the creation of powerful forms with solid structure, the creation of forms that correspond to the structure of the human body. It is the kind of solid, rigid, inner structure found in all Classical and European sculpture. When I was making figurative sculpture, my works had surfaces that were as solid as armor, but they remained empty inside. This was quite different from the process of constructing from the center, which was what I had been taught at school.

I began to study Japanese sculpture after I came into contact with Mono-ha. The first modern Japanese sculptors were artists such as Kotaro Takamura (1883–1956), who went to France to study under Rodin. Rodin taught Takamura to create works in which the force of life emerged from within. Takamura's father had been a sculptor during the Meiji period, but to the son the father's work seemed decorative and superficial. After criticizing his father's work, Takamura began a series of fish carvings. These were of the type of fish that have no scales, mostly catfish, so he successfully created works that expressed mass.

Woods
Installation view, Satani Gallery, Tokyo
1987
Wood and acrylic; twenty-eight pieces, each 213 x 30 x 30 cm (83⅞ x 11¾ x 11¾ in.). Collection Neue Galerie-Sammlung Ludwig, Aachen.
Photo courtesy of Satani Gallery, Tokyo; photographer: Hiromu Narita.

Range of Mountains
Installation view,
Hara Museum ARC,
Gunma Prefecture
1985
Wood, paper, acrylic, and pastel; 70 x diameter 250 cm (27½ x 98⅜ in.).
Collection Taito Ward.
Photographer:
Tadasu Yamamoto.

Next he tried to carve a carp, but since carp are covered in scales, he was forced to use a chisel to pattern scales all over the surface of the work. The result was very decorative, similar to the work he had criticized his father for creating. Takamura agonized over its difference from what he had learned from Rodin. While he criticized Japanese sculpture for having this sort of [surface] element, I try to view it in a more positive light.

I was also interested in a younger sculptor, Heihachi Hashimoto (1897–1935), who followed a style all his own. All over the surface of a sculpture of a girl he carved flower petals in relief. In terms of European sculpture the petals would be considered meaningless since they interfered with the expression of an energetic mass. I was interested in Hashimoto because he did not care about such things. In his book *Pure Sculptural Theory* he wrote that the motifs and themes of sculpture are invisible phenomena. This seemed fresh to me since I had never heard of a theory of sculpture that was concerned with such things. I felt his approach had something in common with mine in that both deal with something that is ineffable. So I started a series of "invisible" sculptures and once did an exhibition entitled *Pompeii*. In this series I worked to "excavate" things that had been buried in plaster.

In my image of Pompeii I would be

Woods
1986
Wood and acrylic; 220 x 180 x 30 cm (86⅝ x 70⅞ x 11¾ in.). Private collection, Japan. Photo courtesy of Satani Gallery, Tokyo; photographer: Tadasu Yamamoto.

Death of Woods
1989
Wood and acrylic; 230 x 560 x 62 cm (90½ x 220½ x 24⅜ in.). Collection of the artist. Photo courtesy of Satani Gallery, Tokyo; photographer: Tadasu Yamamoto.

Animal Track I
Installation view, 20ste Biënnale Middelheim-Japan, Antwerp
1989
Wood and acrylic; 230 x 610 x 60 cm (90½ x 240⅛ x 23⅝ in.). Collection of the artist. Photo courtesy of Satani Gallery, Tokyo; photographer: Frans Claes.

buried in the space and become nothing. The space and I would be inverted, and my now hollow, empty existence would drift upon the integumentary husk between the outer mass and inner emptiness. I began to think that creation was similar to excavation.

About the same time I was working on a series of sculptures that I set on fire. This series and the "excavated" sculptures are similar in that they both deal with how a surface—the boundary between a space and an object—moves.

I have been working on my current Woods series for about five years. I prefer working with wood because I like the way it responds when I work with it. Wood has small openings in its surface; these contain air, water, and other substances. It is not just one material. Stone may contain many elements as well, but to me it seems monotonous, uniform. With stone you must have a clear image in your mind and work from a fairly detailed plan. I start out with a vaguer image and develop it as I go along. For this approach stone would be too hard. While my

Woods II
Installation view,
Hara Museum ARC,
Gunma Prefecture
1989–90
Wood, acrylic, and wood ash; thirty pieces, each 220 x 31 x 31 cm (86⅝ x 12¼ x 12¼ in.). Collection of the artist.
Photographer: Tadasu Yamamoto.

consciousness of my work is very strong, my consciousness of surface is stronger than my consciousness of shape. While I have certain meanings or ideas in mind, these ideas don't always result in definite shapes. I search for a form while working with the material. You have form and you have mean-

Woods II
Installation view (detail), Hara Museum ARC, Gunma Prefecture
1989–90
Wood, acrylic, and wood ash; thirty pieces, each 220 x 31 x 31 cm (86⅝ x 12¼ x 12¼ in.). Collection of the artist.
Photographer: Tadasu Yamamoto.

ing. In minimal art there is a clear and definite relationship between form and meaning, but I tend to wander between them; this is the essence of my work. I want my work to be a place of encounter with something that is greater than I am.

Sculpture only exists as an icon when it has some relationship to religion. Yet even before sculptures became icons, there were places that were regarded as special. Sculpture came into existence as people used stones to mark these places; the stones gradually assumed meanings of their own. They became icons.

This sort of thing has been an influence on my work. The type of place where a stone might be set has a power, a sort of spiritual attraction for the people who would see the site or be connected with it in some way. The forms that mark such places could be called presculpture, shapes that predate sculpture. They are an animistic form. I want to give shape or surface to this presculpture, though in my work I have deliberately avoided the creation of Western-style icons and the method of constructing a work from the center outward.

I probably would not feel a sense of pressure from the space around me if I were not living in Tokyo, but when I walk through Tokyo I imagine the city filled with ash and becoming a ruin. Sometime in the distant future I would dig up these ruins. In my work I am not expressing an image of a lush forest filled with life, but a dead forest, a lost forest. My work is like a burial ceremony for a forest. In a sense it is a form of purification. Burial ceremonies are not for the dead but a way for the living to possess death, to define and humanize it, to accept it. The image in my work, then, is that of a person living in a city such as Tokyo. If I were living in the middle of a forest in the mountains, I doubt that I could ever have created such work.

■

I live in Matsudo, about thirty minutes from Tokyo by car. When I moved there seven or eight years ago, the area was surrounded by dense forests. Until recently it had never seemed doubtful that I might live surrounded by the green of trees, but development has destroyed the natural environment so quickly that it sometimes felt as though I myself was being destroyed. As the trees were cut, I began to question this holocaustlike behavior and to wonder if I could somehow use this wood. That is when I began collecting the remnants of this destruction.

I don't feel that there is any great difference in the value of a human life compared with the life of a tree, but the human ego is such that people feel free to cut whatever trees they wish, to destroy trees they have no use for. Seeing this attitude in Japan, and in other parts of the world as well, raises serious questions about human behavior. In using wood, I am questioning where we come from and where we are going, what it is to live and what it means to die.

Although I could use fine wood to create a work—and there are many sculptors who do—I have no desire to. The wood I use is wood that cannot be used for construction or for traditional sculpture. It is wood that may have been beautiful when alive but, once cut, is thought to have only the potential to rot and decay. This wood has no commercial value, so it is just broken up and plowed under by bulldozers to get it out of the way. Watching this I feel as though the bulldozer is plowing into my own flesh. It is as though the wood is a part of myself, as though the wood has the same level of life force: I am living and the tree is living. Wood is not just matter. Maybe this is just how I feel, but there seems to be some kind of complex relationship, a closeness. I have been using such wood for many years, and it doesn't rot; it is strong and depending on how it is used, various things can be made from it.

Everyone loved the beautiful green of Matsudo when it was a forest, but now that the trees have been cut and the wood has begun to decay, people think how ugly and terrible it is. I don't like this type of human egocentrism. Even when a tree has been cut, it is still a tree. Even when the wood begins to decay, it is still wood. Even when it burns to ash, as ash it still has life. It is from this point that I want to consider and create art.

Wood is such a material that even if I were to hang a branch on the wall, it would become a form of art, though it would not be interesting. It would be better to leave the

tree alone since it is beautiful as it is. If I am to use wood then, I would rather create my own secondary, optional forms. So, for example, in the type of semicircular work I showed at the Hara Museum (1987), I boldly used the tree's former, natural shape to create my own secondary form. By *secondary form* I don't mean a mathematically correct form—such as a semicircle drawn with a compass—but a semicircle or circle or square that exists within me.

Viewers are free to make whatever interpretation of my work they wish, but I am not simply interested in presenting wood, and it would be disappointing if I were seen merely as a wood sculptor. My work in wood has its own drama. There is a stone garden at Ryoanji temple in Kyoto. I like this garden and have been there more than ten times. To me this Muromachi-era [1392–1568] garden represents circles, squares, and triangles: the garden itself is a square, its stones are triangles, and the visitors form a circle. While this may be taken as a uniquely Japanese or religious perspective, I believe that each individual has these basic forms within. In my work I want to question what these simple shapes are.

Recently I have been using driftwood from Tokyo Bay, wood that has been tossed around by typhoons for thirty or forty years. I have been collecting this wood piece by piece and assembling it in semicircular and wavelike forms. With these works in particular I feel that I have been able to express the life of wood. Life still remains in this wood, and I try to becomes engaged with that life force. This wood is like human bones; I gather this discarded wood, and reassembling it, I give the wood a new life, a new soul.

There is a basic difference between Western and Japanese artists. I feel that there is a very clear difference between artists who,

like me, have selected nature as a sort of theme. Westerners, when looking at nature, see it as a threat. Humanity is always seen as being in opposition, as though there is a history of confrontation with nature. Yet while there is a concept of nature as a potentially threatening force in Japan, the Japanese still attempt to bring nature into their lives. In Europe, for instance, looking at a stone house, the distinction between inside and outside is very clear. But in Japan there is very little separating them. Natural light enters the traditional Japanese house through a single layer of *shoji*. If that single layer is removed, the inside of the house becomes the outside. The typical veranda also gives the impression of drifting between inside and outside, and in Japanese gardens, it is hard to differentiate between what is natural and what is human effect.

The growth rings of trees are beautiful in design, but their meaning goes deeper. They represent the history of the tree, the history of humanity, and therefore the history of the earth. I feel I must show this deeper level in my work. I was once given a piece of wood that was about fifteen hundred years old. I'm only thirty-four, so compared with this tree, I'm still just a child. As I counted the rings, I kept thinking, "This was when I was born. This was when the atomic bomb was dropped at Hiroshima [1945]. This was when the war began [1941]. This was the Meiji era [1868–1912]. This was the Edo period [1615–1868]. This was a time when Japanese culture underwent great changes." We have learned these things at school, but this piece of wood had witnessed all of these changes in silence. I felt this change of time in those growth rings. It makes me wonder how people can cut down such valuable trees without hesitation.

It is impossible to see a whole tree; a tree actually lives underground as much as above ground. So what we call nature is actually something very much on a surface level. I use wood in order to reexamine my deeper thoughts about trees, wood, and life. I would like it if people could feel the essence of a tree—the essence of life—from my work. While I don't particularly want to make statements about how people should live, I hope they might learn to understand and feel something about wood. Through this experience they will be able to visit a forest, to breathe fresh air, to think about nature on more than just a surface level, to feel a unity between their own lives and those of trees, unity with nature and the need for nature and humanity to exist together.

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Memory No. 2
Installation view, "Hara Annual VII," Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo
1987
Oak; 300 x 250 x 60 cm (118⅛ x 98⅜ x 23⅝ in.).
Collection of the artist.
Photographer: Shunji Takanabe.

Horizon Line
1988
Tokyo Bay driftwood;
270 x 450 x 50 cm (106¼ x 177⅛ x 19⅝ in.).
Collection of the artist.
Photographer:
Shunji Takanabe.

Landscape
Installation view,
Moris Gallery, Tokyo
1987
Tokyo Bay driftwood;
280 x 500 x 400 cm (110¼
x 196⅞ x 157½ in.).
Collection of the artist.
Photographer:
Shunji Takanabe.

Silence
Installation view and detail, Hara Museum ARC, Gunma Prefecture
1990
Used wood, driftwood, and old magazines; 300 x 580 x 100 cm (118⅛ x 228⅜ x 39⅜ in.).
Collection of the artist.
Photographer: Tadasu Yamamoto.
This work was made possible by a grant from the Lannan Foundation.

Premonition
Installation view,
Moris Gallery, Tokyo
1988
Tokyo Bay driftwood and iron; 270 x 300 x 200 cm (106¼ x 118⅛ x 78¾ in.). Collection Moris Gallery, Tokyo. Photo courtesy of the artist; photographer: Shunji Takanabe.