Wavering

and

Going Across

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Tamie Okuyama

in Conversation with

Shuntarô Tanikawa

2000

A FLICKERING LIFE

Having cast off trees and grass, the mountain is bare.
Lighted by the light yet unborn,
it stirs its body in slumber.

The sun when looked at looks back.
The clouds swirl with ancient warmth
and the sky is pregnant with an impatient foetus.

As a dog-shaped human being
looks back at the horizon,
the planet's fauna softly blend into each other.

Night gives off a faint light
of the phantoms of balmy flowers
and its hues begin drifting toward distant darkness.

What is visible is the shadow of the invisible.
Wide-open eyes listen
to the faint stirring of flickering life.

The universe is a transparent placenta.
Elementary particles form into innocent bodies
in the morning studio steeped in serene light.

At the touch of a brush canvas awakens.
A hand unconsciously traces the orbit of the stars,
and soul, wavering, extends its aerial roots.

Shuntarô Tanikawa

I

T: Could you say something about how you began your career?

O: To begin with my birth [she chuckles], I was born in Jôetsu City -- now called Takada City -- which is known as Temple Town. The temple was called Jôkokuji. The city has Japan's heaviest annual snowfall and the day I was born was the day of the heaviest snow in forty years. I moved to Tokyo before I was two but even now I feel myself melting into the temple with all that snow, the memory is so strong in me.

T: I hear that your Tokyo house was very large.

O: Yes. It was my paternal grandfather's. The family took pride in its vast garden. But since my father refused to work, we were cash-poor. So I couldn't go to kindergarten, had no books or toys -- I was just left to myself on that big estate. I climbed trees or watched the edible rats the live-in gardener kept. That was my biggest thrill. But usually I just sat basking in the sun in the hollow of a rock by the pond or dozed on the grass. I wasn't a strong child.

T: Do you find childhood memories in your adult work?

O: I think so, yes. I often lay down among the ferns at a certain spot in the garden and the wetness of the fronds as I played there I recall very well. That sense of touch is something that still glues me to the world. I like those fronds or feel intimate with them; also the golden down of bees in sunlight. . . . I like that kind of beauty. In those days I didn't know they were bees and they stung me when I touched them. So I shrieked because it hurt so badly. I still recall very clearly the mysterious presence of all those creatures I was seeing for the first time; or the soft feel of petals. . . .

T: Would you say you preferred nature to human friends?

O: I had not one friend; no connection. I never went out of the estate and played with friends until I entered grade school. Only once a year on a festival day was our large gate opened and kids in their best kimono came up to our house pulling festival floats and ran after the portable shrines drawn by adults. The children got cakes and candy on the driveway, playing, laughing. While that was going on I used to hide behind a hedge feeling happy but a little scared.

T: Didn't you feel confused or weren't you bullied when you went to school? I mean, you'd had no experience.

O: I didn't talk to the kids about a whole year but I felt glad, also, at being with what I thought were strange creatures.

T: Do you recall the first picture you drew in grade school?

O: I'm in between a sister and a younger brother; my sister was very good at drawing and even as a child the newspapers often mentioned her as a 'prodigy.' When she started grade school the art teacher asked me if I were really her sister and she watched me while I was drawing a tulip from real life. When I covered the whole background in black the teacher looked astonished and seemed ready to stop praising me. Since I had never had confidence about my drawing, I felt terribly disappointed and depressed. My sister had had a private art instructor and whenever I touched her color box or brushes my parents scolded me harshly. But in the fifth or sixth grade my picture won first place in the National School Art Contest commemorating the tenth anniversary of the school-

lunch service. At first my father was surprised and laughed and said that one budding painter in the family was enough. He wanted me to be a politician.

T: Did you like drawing at that time?

O: I didn't like it but I didn't hate it.

T: How about in senior-high?

O: Well, I was glad I was better than others and I joined the art club and was elected as leader. At that time I was sketching on plaster with charcoal and bread.

T: I suppose you had no intention in those days of being a professional artist.

O: In senior-high I wanted to become an architect. The Spaniard Gaudi was my idol. The pictures I saw of his plastic, organic work shocked me into wanting to do the same kind of work.

T: When did you consciously choose to be a professional artist?

O: In my second year of high-school. I was good at math; everything else I had to study and my family environment wasn't good for studying.

T: Which means. . . .?

O: My father used to turn off every light in the house at 7:00 -- 'curfew,' he called it -- and after dinner when I wanted to study I had to study my texbooks under the futon, using a flashlight.

T: What a strange family.

O: I thought I'd study sketching so I could take the entrance exam for a college art department, so I took lessons in the home of an artist who lived nearby. He introduced me to University of Tokyo and University of the Arts professors who told me useful information and both of whom said outright that a woman should not enter the architectural profession because it'd be a waste of the taxpayers' money -- 'Girls graduate, get married, have babies, and then don't work.' They warned no one would heed a woman's supervision; that if I insisted anyway I'd have to spend ten years apprenticed to a man with less talent than I had. So I gave up the idea in disgust and shock, and decided to apply to study design in Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music.

T: I hear you entered with the highest score.

O: No. . . . but in my first class I did come out on top. I was young and complacent and filled with the memory of my having given up architecture. I thought that since I'd come out on top I needn't study there any longer, so I went to the authorities and told them so.

T: How long after you had entered?

O: About two months, I guess. It was following the announcement of the scores after the first project. The professor called me to his office to praise me and that was not good for me. I feel strongly that I'm not good enough. I feel uneasy when I'm praised, though I like it. I think in my subconscious level, "Well, that's not what I'm really supposed to be. I'll try to change myself." But that would be not just a matter of simplistic complacence. So I thought I'd better go to the USA or somewhere. But someone said, "Wait a minute! In Japanese society your university is highly influential on your life, so please at least graduate." During those four years I infrequently went to classes. I just designed stage settings, scenery and the like as though I had a part-time job.

T: How did you decide to study in Spain after graduation?

O: I took an exchange student exam for a scholarship to be half-funded by the government. I wanted to study in San Fernando Art University, a famous university where Goya studied. It used to be

downtown and had a very emotional Spanish atmosphere -- a place young Japanese girls would have loved studying in. But on arriving I found that in the year I entered, a dusty modern sort of academic town with square buildings was built in the suburbs and the San Fernando school moved out there. Partly because I hated that and partly because the classes were repetitious for me, I lost all enthusiasm for studying there.

T: Having been exposed to all sorts of art, whose work did you especially come to like?

O: Piero della Francesca. . . Giotto. . . . Cranach -- liked them before I ever went to Europe. I found their works powerful indeed.

T: Did you study how to imitate other artists?

O: Well, that idea never occurred to me, because pictures are not a matter of technique.

T: When you were going to paint did you first of all have a composition in mind?

O: In those days I looked at the blank canvas and started painting from the edge.

T: Really? From the edge? Then you perhaps couldn't see the whole composition or the coloring pattern.

O: I started painting in my own style, so I couldn't see it. But I have some strange conviction.

T: Then you don't first sketch on the canvas and rough in the colors and shapes. You start painting from scratch.

O: For instance my "Hill Country" is a meter wide and three meters in length. One of my older classmates at university saw me painting from the edge and asked me in surprise what in the world I was thinking, painting on such a large canvas without a composition as though I were knitting or something. I can't paint like that now.

T: Are all these paintings done in that way?

O: Yes. Most of my early pictures I did in that way.

T: When looking at pictures one sees some sort of vision. I mean, not just everyday realism. Is that sort of vision in your mind to begin with or, I wonder, does it gradually emerge as you paint?

O: When one starts painting, I think something that's already in one's mind offers itself; a vision one unconsciously holds.

T: Can there have been some literary influence on you at that point?

O: No, I've read almost no literature.

T: Did you visit Europe east and west when you went to Spain?

O: In Eastern Europe only Poland and Czechoslovakia; but most of western Europe.

T: You were away about three years. Did you always travel alone?

O: My brother and I made a long journey back to Japan, but most of the time I travelled in Europe by myself, except that infrequently I went with Japanese companions; and I visited a Belgian and a German who were staying in Spain.

T: You had a lot of personal contact with Europeans? Were you very much interested in human beings?

O: No one person in particular interested me, but generally people and their life-styles often surprised me and I learned how to think anew, think more freely, about people. Looking at different foods, climate, life styles, values, esthetics, etc., my individual standard of judgment became useless. Living with a polygamous family that included four wives and their children, eating and sleeping

surrounded by them, my brain gradually grew blank and stopped working.

T: Ever since your return you've been painting people.

O: Yes.

T: Did you start painting people as people or for their colors and shapes, just as those aspects of nature also concern you?

O: People appealed to me only as a painting motif; as a kind of genre. But the woman in my "Mid-day" is a woman I knew and remembered. I met her in a Turkish village. She wore a gold and copper coin headpiece -- far more than the painting shows—and I felt she belonged to a different race altogether. She put me in her bed and covered me with a veil before I fell asleep.

T: In 1974 you traversed North America. Did you paint during that journey?

O: No. [laughing]

T: What? Didn't North America interest you?

O: I'm afraid not. Nothing there really stunned me. I just went from place to place, superficially. I did enjoy the vivid fashion and also black music live.

T: After you painted ethnic Eurasian clothing you had a period when you did plants in great detail.

O: Not after, but simultaneously.

T: Then you sometimes do different motifs in parallel.

O: Yes, and for my first show, since I wasn't used to oils, it was like painting pictures for the first time and I couldn't quite make out what motifs would best suit my style, so I displayed numerous motifs and styles. Everything I had tried for ten years after I left school was represented in the show.

T: You painted a pregnant-looking woman along with other things.

O: Right.

T: But there seems to be a relation between her and the forms of your present paintings, though I sound a bit vague.

O: Yes, they're similar.

T: Where did that vision come from?

O: I'm not sure myself.[laughing] I just felt -- shall I say? -- I shouldn't separate the foetus from the pregnant woman. Women are both foetal and pregnant, and neither. I wanted to portray that observation somehow vaguely. Personified animals are akin to that. It's as if I don't want to distinguish between animals and people. Shall I say they share a common weight? Or I felt I shouldn't define too finely or objectify.

T: Chinese landscapes are a favorite of yours. When did that interest begin?

O: In 1980, I think.

T: Not from early on, then.

O: That's right. I wasn't yet acquainted with Asian art. One day in the Kyoto Museum I saw Chinese landscapes of the Sung and Yuan dynasties, and I felt amazed. That's how it got started.

T: Wasn't that after your first show, after your trip around the Indonesian Islands, Easter Island and South America. . . . ?

O: Yes.

T: How was your first show received?

O: "The Day I Became a Dog" in that show is thought to exemplify my work even now, according to

newspapers and magazines. At that exhibition since almost all were sold, a lot of money came in so that I could afford a second journey. . . .

T: So you were 'recognized.'

O: Well. . . .

T: Selling a whole first show is very unusual.

O: Apparently so.

T: Did you think you'd settle then into a productive career?

O: [Laughing] No, I didn't feel that way.

T: Well, you think you have money now and would like to go elsewhere?

O: Yes, I would. Walking around Eurasia on planet Earth afforded an unforgettable pleasure. Thinking about where I'd go tomorrow. . . . I keenly desire to caress Earth's surface, to explore the planet, to keep on walking. When I see money in my hands I might even travel to a danger spot.

T: What the Indonesian and South American journeys gave you seems to find a place in your very colorful pictures of soft, serpentine mountains.

O: Yes. Along the La Plata River and Amazon basin in South America, I saw flowers, fruits and trees I had never seen before. Once I barked a tree and thrust a knife into the trunk, and a crimson blood-like liquid streamed out of it. Plants are at once beautiful and fierce, like animals. Moreover, in the Andes, perhaps because of the old strata, many of the mountains are so plump and fat that they look as if they are really living creatures. I think that kind of thing has had a considerable influence upon my pictures. I felt the distance between fauna and flora getting increasingly shorter within me or the barrier between them being removed. And also, as I looked at the shapes of the mountain ranges, the earth itself began to seem like a living thing. Meanwhile, the sky, mountains, the earth and the whole landscape came to seem as if they belong to the same category as I. The trip to South America gave me this rare experience in which the landscapes and myself are unified into one.

T: Were your experiences there so different from your ordinary experience?

O: Oh, yes. What happened on a high desert some 5,000 meters up happened to me for the first time. I went to the summit of a mountain 6,000 meters high to see a cosmic rays institute and on the way down the driver said for me to wait while he went back for something he'd forgotten. I thought that was great. I'd just wait there under that dark blue sky and the desert around me yellow. The river was red with iron. I couldn't see anything but the snow-covered Andes. It was above the vegetation line, except for lichen or whatever. Among living creatures, I was alone. In about an hour I felt that the consciousness of being *I* was melted and oozing out of my skin and had a strange sense that the landscape was creeping into oneness with me; as if the life of the Earth and that of my being had intersected. That was my first experience of that kind; it happened at other times when I was travelling alone in South America. Travelling alone raises the voltage of sensations. I must have been much more sensitive than I usually am. Even so I think it had a great influence, because it enabled me to feel the certainty of my selfhood.

T: Would you like to render those unusual experiences as paintings?

O: At one time I felt that quite strongly, yes. And I painted a humanoid mountain, a mountain that I felt intimate with, a mountain with a human form. But I soon realized it was overdone; that that

wouldn't do. A deeper sense of oneness couldn't be depicted in the way I'd done, so I began the "Wavering " series in the 1990's.

T: So along about then you began to know you'd have to express a certain kind of your emotions -- and not just paint a subject. . . . . .

O: That's right.

T: . . . . . the big problem being how to do just that?

O: Yes. In any case, my life was lived at that level, and how to give a visible shape to inner emotions was the problem, the challenge. It's hard to realize. Plants as animals, mountains as human bodies -- to think or paint in that way is too 'explanatory.' They shouldn't be illustrations.

T: I doubt that viewers think that. They just think the pictures strange. . . .

O: [Laughing]

T: Somewhere you said, to someone's question as to why mountains are like that, that when looked at attentively mountains *are* like that. So the pictures may seem 'explanatory' to you whereas others find some inexplicable aspect.

O: Oh, really? I felt that I talked too much, explained too much. I was worried and for two years couldn't paint at all.

T: You mean you didn't paint; or were you dissatisfied with what you painted?

O: I painted but was not satisfied and became increasingly unable to paint. In 1986 there was some talk about publishing a collection of my work and I was surprised while preparing that my work was too explanatory. I thought that there was a gap between the emotions I felt at the moment of painting and the actual work before me. The work seemed a sort of coquetry, and too decorative, too talkative, had lost touch with Nature. I was shocked. 'This is no good at all', I realized. That kind of work, I thought, would cripple my very life. Had I been really grappling with what I wanted to paint, then it could have been meaningful to some degree for me to go on painting day after day, but if I did just that sort of decorative, explanatory work of a dubious character then my very thinking -- indeed my life itself would become dubious.

T: Do any of those pictures please you? Some that might have given you hope about painting as you wanted to paint if you continued in that vein?

O: Not a one.

T: Do you regret having painted *all* of them?

O: I thought about them a lot. I can see them now with different eyes, but at the time I felt trapped absolutely and wanted to get out of it at any cost.

T: Didn't you feel it a problem that those pictures sold well and were well-received by different sorts of people?

O: But that meant a lot in that I could support myself.

T: Sure, there was that of course. But you didn't think that because you were supported in that way you could go on along that line, no problem at all? On the contrary you thought judging by your own standard it was no good at all.

O: Right. No good at all. That feeling grows stronger and stronger. There's no putting an end to it.

T: Yet you're lucky -- you live by painting alone. Think of all those artists who have to do 'illustration' work or write essays.

O: That's true.

T: There was a controversy when you won the Yasui Prize over whether your works were concrete or not. Is that right?

O: Something like that. But those matters are not my responsibility.

T: You are not conscious that you are painting abstractly?

O: No, not a bit. Abstract pictures might also be some brand of realism, but I say they're just plain realistic.

T: Realism means many things, but yours is not the kind, once in fashion, called hyper-realism, of which an extreme example is photographs?

O: Yes it is! My pictures are *exactly* that kind of realism.

T: What? Then this bun-shaped mountain is the way you actually see it?

O: Yes. I in fact saw a mountain with that shape. Of course I changed it but what I paint is based on what I really see.

T: Well, then by 'realism' you mean what you saw with your naked eye.

O: Right.

T: But a human body in your paintings seems to be moving the way it usually cannot. We think it's a little different from an ordinary human body. Is that, too, based on a body you actually saw?

O: Yes, it is. I was remembering having seen naked bodies like that.

T: Why do you have to paint such acrobatic movements?

O: Since it occurred to me as I painted, there must have been some necessity.

T: You're not 'playing' in these paintings?

O: Oh, there is some element of playing.

T: You're playing, too?

O: Yes.

T: Maybe you think there is something you can't express except in such a shape?

O: Yes, I do.

T: In other words the body is potentially more than its usual ways of standing or sitting.

O: That's for sure! I don't want to forget about evolutionary processes, biological contradictions of a human body or the mystery of life, so I try to avoid self-evident shapes.

T: Back to the theme of your interest in Chinese landscapes, when was it that you were amazed at the Sung and Yuan pictures in the Kyoto Museum?

O: I think it was along about 1980. There were works showing flowers and birds, and thereafter I plunged headlong into doing landscapes. I was charmed by those works and that's what led me into painting mountains.

T: Can you specify what aspects struck you most?

O: Actually I liked only a few of them. Not all. I liked the ones that seemed unique in spite of the mannered style they represented. They thrilled me. As for a common element, it was a grand eroticism that is found in Nature, in mountains, on Earth; or something similar to LaoTse's thought, namely, the sense of seeing the invisible or that sense of oneness that I felt with Nature in South America. And those Chinese works were radiant enough to make me tremble. Besides, the extremely fine technique and the noble character set them apart from anything I had yet seen.

T: How would they differ most from, say, a Cézanne mountain?

O: Western landscapes, it seems to me, distinctively objectify natural settings. Instead of showing man absorbed into and as a part of Nature, Western landscapists look at natural objects as things, as things in themselves, apart; as something seeable by someone who sees. But the Chinese painters breathed in and breathed out the mountain's breath, and there is no knowing where the thinking self begins and ends. . . . The landscapes are both the mountain and the painter himself, and the entire scene exudes 'life.' They seem to take into themselves vague, unknown and contradictory things just as they are. Their momentousness mesmerizes me.

T: There are some Western painters who painted in that way in their old age. The impressionists and, for example, Turner's later work.

O: I don't know Turner well.

T: Listening to you talk about your inability to paint, I am reminded of Giacometti. Sitting before a human model, Giacometti made something like a wire which is quite different from the real model, saying he just couldn't express the real depth of a human being. That distressed him. Your case rather resembles Giacometti 's, doesn't it?

O: What? Really?

T: Yes.

O: I wonder.

T: In my view there are not many painters who, having in mind a non-verbalized something, a non-visualized something, struggle desperately to turn that something into a picture.

O: Well, it's difficult. I'm not sure. But I think Giacometti and I are quite different in our heart of hearts.

T: Oh, quite different. But there are some painters who believe that what they see does not really exist, but who nevertheless have a vision of something more internalized and with a surer shape.

O: Who? Giacometti?

T: Both Giacometti and you -- though both are different from each other. One heads towards the abstract, the other surrealism, because it's easier to express the non-existent in vagueness. Yet you do resemble Giacometti in that while you stick to the visible you are searching for something behind that at a deeper level.

O: Take that leaf there. If you stop seeing it as a leaf and eliminate the idea of a perennial plant or some kind of vegetable family, etc., and you look at it as at something you're seeing for the first time, then the leaf begins to look like something different, doesn't it? What you've learned and your prejudice spread a film over your eyes and you can't see things directly, honestly. My strong desire is to see things directly, without prejudice. If one succeeds at seeing a camellia leaf honestly, then it begins to appear not merely as that but as a mysterious treasure.

T: You mean a real leaf, not the picture?

O: A real leaf, yes. If you look at everything that way then, I think, that result is inevitable. Then if you paint it as such, it's realism. [laughing]

II

T: According to Chûya Nakahara, the poet, what's important is things pre-existing, before we name them. That's of course true. In *Nausea*, for instance, Sartre describes his looking at tree roots which soon became very mysterious looking, and then vomiting. When one looks at an object as something unnameable, in other words, as something truly real, there is a possibility of the break-down of one's own sense of order. So I can easily understand Sartre's nausea. On the contrary, that object begins to emit genuine radiance.

O: The opposite should be true. Vomiting is wrong.

T: [Laughing] Hold on a second. Surely there are the two sides, though, and you're the sort of person who gravitates to the radiant side. Some people can't go in that direction. In the sphere of dementia I think there are people who become confused when things are deprived of their names. As for you, you seem to have the ability to communicate with leaves so well that you can endure name-deprivation.

O: That could be because I played with leaves as a child. Being left alone means we learn nothing from adults and are, so to speak, left in the garden untamed. Somehow I suspect that by painting I'm trying to return to the sensations of my childhood; to reach peace of mind in that way.

T: So I suppose you long for primitive feelings.

O: Not really. It's just that I believe ancient peoples must have felt as I do. I have that feeling when I'm looking at the sun.

T: Also I find it very interesting that there is a relation between your feelings and your mathematical brain .

O: My mathematical brain by now is dull, corrupt and flabby. Nowadays I can't even add. [Laughing]

T: You're getting old, that's all. But in your case you're following somewhat logically your true disposition. You talk rather logically about your own work and I can see how your logic is at work as you analyze and describe. Getting back to the subject, in the painting "Yellow Hair," which took you about six months, you weren't yet into your "Wavering Life" phase.

O: After "Yellow Hair" my problems grew very serious.

T: Nevertheless you faced your canvas.

O: Well, I don't quite recall. Anyway I was afraid; I mean, about how to make a living -- with what sort of pictures.

T: That's quite a practical thing.

O: It certainly is, but I live by painting, you know.

T: Yet you don't think of sales when you paint and you don't like imitating yourself.

O: That's right.

T: That's great, that you try to make money without doing that.

O: Is that arrogant? [Laughing]

T: [Laughing] No, that's not arrogant. You could say you're putting your life on the line. It's great that you've discovered something you really want to express in painting.

O: It was the time of the economic bubble. Art dealers urged us to paint and paint. "What a fool not to take the chance!", they seemed to be saying. But I couldn't paint at all.

T: How did you spend the time when you couldn't paint?

O: Well, I thought a lot about what kind of pictures I'd paint if I painted. That blank period lasted a

year or two and not exhibiting anything at all really made me feel frustrated. When I was determined to escape that situation I suddenly had a mystic experience.

T: I'd like to hear something about that.

O: Exploring my own mind, what scared me most was that I found myself unable to paint what in the depth of my poverty I wanted most to paint, and a sort of wretched image of myself emerged as physically and mentally ill, such that I might die in a sense of terrible loneliness. It was scary, but I thought if I accepted all the horrors then all of it would vanish. If I did that and became so poor I couldn't make a living and yet didn't want to do any other kind of work, then it would be all right if I just died. If I could accept that, I'd have nothing to fear. And then it struck me: ok, I could die at any moment. Then, just at that moment, the luxurious camphor leaves which covered the whole window began to shine and appear unworldly, as if each leaf had become a particle of light.

T: That experience of bliss, of the world dazzlingly beautiful -- how long did it last?

O: Intensely for about three days.

T: Three days!

O: Yes.

T: Even while you were sleeping it didn't fade?

O: When I woke up in the morning my brain was clouded over. I was half-asleep. And when I looked with eyes half-asleep at the clothes on the chair I was going to put on, I suddenly felt the emotions of the people who were involved with making those clothes well up in me. I was taken aback by that and felt gratitude to them as I was getting dressed. From the very beginning of the morning I was blissful, as if in paradise. I felt grateful for everything and everything felt so beautiful. Everything was sufficient in itself just because it existed there. I sensed that the shining of things came from within their very existence. That feeling stunned me.

T: When did you decide on the name "Wavering"?

O: I chose the name because I love the Chinese character "wavering." Even something as unmoving as a mountain moves with this character. Everything is moving at the levels of molecules and elementary particles. Like life, even time and space move organically. 'Mountain' is itself fascinatingly incorporated in the shaping of this character. In the studio where we paint, the act of painting and the objects of our painting -- that is, the human power of observation, our sensibility and the world's real aspects -- all these are contained in this 'wavering', and that's why I thought that character most apt for my mountain sequence, though it's a character rarely used and only a few can read it.

T: Did you give it that title even before your earlier mystic experience?

O: No. Afterwards. And the next sequence uses the character for 'going across'. What the title means is something like this: 'Here and in this moment, there and everywhere, past and future are enclosed, and everything is overlapped spatially and chronologically.' I liked this idea very much, too: I felt that I have had, as a result of my experience, a glimpse of an aspect of the real. And illusion or not, that experience was for me one with such a reality that since that experience I feel acutely that the world is made such that different things and different aspects, though invisible, overlap the world I am looking at now. I may also be influenced by my study of 'breath-therapy.' I got more and more interested as never before in grasping the world via the body and I felt that I was succeeding, which

was a feeling that goes well with the character of 'going across.' So I used it for my next series of pictures, bearing in mind a traversing of centuries.

T: Is the motif of "Going Across" more or less fixed throughout?

O: I decided I was through with mountains and since I hate repeating myself I started painting fruit and sprouting grass, and then began to think about the sky -- clouds, you know, are fascinating to look at. Just before the sequence of "Going Across" I moved to this studio. Here I can climb up to the roof. Now I lie about on the roof and look at the sky a lot. So I began painting the sky, sun, moon, and entitled the sequence "Going Across." Recently I've felt like eliminating the clouds and just doing the sun or celestial bodies, and that explains why my paintings are getting so simple.

T: There must be a reason why you keep changing your motifs besides the fact that you abhor self-imitation -- I mean the reason why the essential thing that you want to express takes a variety of shapes.

O: Motifs are like materials, I think, in that the purpose is not to paint the shapes of the materials but in borrowing their shapes to try to paint my feelings about the present world. What emerges beyond the motifs I have dealt with is the essential part of the expression of the paintings.

T: For instance, do you mean something that looms up, transcending, for instance, the shapes of mountains?

O: Yes. I decide on materials and my method, and paint by borrowing the mountains' shapes, as one means of proceeding. But in this process there emerges something, whether it is a mountain or the sky, which transcends the motif through the media of the artist, who happens to be, in this case, *I.* This is what is at the center of my painting. Only when this is something attractive, the picture is good, I think. In other words, in my case, only when what emerges beyond my intentions is most closely related to what I want to paint, it seems to me an ideal picture.

T: Do you feel this same way when you look at your favorite Chinese landscape paintings?

O: I do, yes.

T: Are there Western paintings that have comparable effects?

O: Of course. All expressions by my favorite painters are like that. The Chinese landscapes attract me now because what emerges is what I am most interested in at the moment, that is, something like the feel of the world, the radiance of life writ large, so to speak. Let me add that it is probably because of my oriental blood that I can so deeply perceive how the painters vibrated in unison with the mountains and atmosphere -- the moving of the waves of the souls.

T: Rather than being, as I said, like Giacometti, I now begin to think you're closer to Vermeer; not that your paintings are alike but the way you approach paintings is similar. Vermeer didn't paint quite ordinary things realistically. He just painted, it seems, as he saw it; though technically he used the illusion of the eyes. A picture of his ordinary life conveys at times the radiance of the existence of things and something like the eternal in a brief instant. Didn't his Dutch contemporaries use the same motifs, but without Vermeer's effects? We usually don't look at ordinary things and people in their own right but how they function and the role they play in our lives. Although Vermeer also saw the roles of things, he nonetheless while painting grasped the feel of the existence of objects in themselves -- the unknowable nature which even the commonest things have hidden in themselves, something that refuses a name like a riddle, and yet which is plainly visible to the naked eye.

Perhaps those things you feel to be beautiful. But -- how shall I put it? -- the problem is, what is "reality" when you say your paintings are those of realism? That "reality" at one and the same time is an exterior aspect visible to the naked eye and something that radiates its own inner being. If you could paint that, the meaning of realism would change. If there is something in common between Vermeer's paintings, the Chinese landscapes and your work, they all, despite different methodologies, approach a reality called beauty through what each of them regards as realism. But there is, I suspect, a surrealistic aspect in your work.

O: I don't like the term 'surrealism'. We can't transcend reality that simply. Reality is not so fixed and final as surrealists may think.

T: What's your view of abstract paintings?

O: In my childhood, when I was given crayons I drew nothing but eddies. My sister's exam papers had concentric circles on them made by the teacher, and I noticed that the more circles she got the more my parents praised her. I was introspective and not very self-expressive, but because I secretly yearned to be praised like my sister, this was a great discovery for me. So when my parents gave me crayons and told me to draw something, I drew three, four, concentric circles. But no one praised me. Not only that, they said I was not a natural artist like my sister. So I lost all my confidence and when given crayons I made gloomy faces and kept drawing concentric circles. On one occasion, though, I felt a sort of joy in drawing eddies; joy, that I could go on drawing them larger and larger. To my child's mind I counted it a great hidden possibility in my behavior and that moved me deeply in a way that climbing a tree did not. Now I think of it, that endless expanding of eddies still continues in me as my "abstract expression", as a physical feeling.

T: Your paintings of the sun seem to trace back to your childhood experience.

O: I wonder. While I'm basking in the sun on the roof my loneliness vanishes, or I grow warmer and warmer and happier from the belly on up. I want to face up to this sun more squarely that moves me so profoundly. You can face something by painting it, especially in the case of painters. That's why I wanted to observe the sun carefully and paint it.

T: You paint a lot of pictures of the sun. Do you paint it as it changes minute by minute according to atmospheric conditions and the time of day, or are you, as it were, questing after the sun as it actually is?

O: Probably the latter. The true aspect of the sun that is real to me, to Tamie Okuyama. Yet when I paint it's always just at the moment when I think, 'Oh, that's wonderful!'

T: The sun's too bright. I have to close my eyes.

T: You use small and large canvases. Do you use one size for one subject, one size for another, or is that not an issue?

O: I'm still trying to determine that -- the size? And how much space should be left to express satisfactorily what I feel at the moment? Would it better if I filled the canvas to its limit or if I made the image as small as possible? I don't know.

T: Does painting the sun wear on you? Or are you aiming to avoid self-imitation? You mentioned wanting to paint the sea. Is that next?

O: Yes. Returning from the sky to Earth. [laughing]

T: On the whole, are you moving toward simplifying? Getting rid of the superfluous and doing just the

things themselves?

O: That's what I'm currently doing, but when it comes to the sea I'd like to look at it with a fresh feeling. I don't want to know which way I'm going.

T: I think you could do the sea -- but never ships. Clouds, moon -- that'd be all right but …

O: No. Not ships.

T: I wonder why you won't paint ships.

O: I think it's a shame not to paint human things. . . .

T: Why is it a shame not to paint people?

O: I once was criticized for not doing it. [laughing] My heart is being detached from people, I was told.

T: You don't mind if they say that about you, do you?

O: It's not a matter of minding or not -- it just can't be helped.

T: Everyone has his or her own temperament. But you could bypass people and go directly to nature or the universe. That might be a privilege of so called artists. Some people paint only people. Novelists of course write just about people, yet painters and musicians could make marvelously beautiful things utterly unrelated to the human world. Such artists may be thought human failures in society at large, whereas in the world of art their very 'failure' can be their strength.

O: That's somewhat different from by passing people. There is a sense in which as we go deeper into our lives we finally come to the universe, that is, that's the way things are -- we are ourselves the universe.

T: That's true as an individual. And also as human beings as a whole we are altogether inseparable from the universe; however, while we live our daily life we can't avoid human relationships, can we?

O: Well, of course I live in human relationships, but looked at carefully those become very mysterious, don't they? My mystic experience taught me that the world is originally one and I felt it all a living network. In this network there are birds, dogs, men --Tanikawa -- I. . . . They constitute a network of peers which, however, does not mean that people are devalued. People, animals, plants, all, I'm sure, exist in a network of higher value.

T: That idea of "equal value" is what seems to me somewhat peculiar.

O: But on the level of our daily life, we locate humans here, animals here and plants here, evaluate them to some extent, classify them, diagram them so as to be rationally and effectively recognized -- that's what we are doing, aren't we? People create their own yardstick selfishly, right? I think that the true picture of the world isn't like that. Besides, if we suppose an equality of all things, or if we can believe in it, then people, I think, can be more tolerant, freer and perhaps happier.

T: In other words you reject perspective.

O: Yes, my kind of perspective does not use a human viewpoint or vanishing point.

T: So you look at all things as at a constellation. That is Tamie Okuyama's point-of-view.

(Translated by William I. Elliott and Kazuo Kawamura from *Wavering, Beyond*).