

## The Possible in a Zanzou

Interview by Andrew Maerke

Andrew Maerke [M]:

*To begin, I'm curious to know how you think about reproduction in relation to your artistic practice. Mass-produced images and printed matter form the basic material of your works, and sometimes the same image will be used multiple times within the same work, or will reappear across several works. But the act of cutting something out and pasting it onto another surface transforms that thing from being multiple into being unique. In this sense, in terms of photographic media, the Polaroid seems to be a readymade collage – already cut out, and waiting to be pasted – so I wonder whether this might have been part of the attraction when you began work on the original Retina series.*

Shinro Ohtake [O]:

First let me explain how the *Retina* series got started. In 1988, shortly after I moved to Uwajima from Tokyo, I had set up a temporary studio and was having some works photographed there. It was common practice then to do test shots on Polaroid, in order to check things like exposure settings and shutter speed, before proceeding to the final shoot with film. Once everything had been tested, both the photos and the negatives would be thrown out, but I was collecting the thrown-out Polaroids as material for my *Scrapbooks*. On that day, one of the Polaroids that happened to be in the bin was a bad exposure, but I was surprised at how precisely it realized an image I had been vaguely conceiving at the time, and I felt its painterly potential.

Thanks partly to the influence of my father I had been interested in photography since childhood, but in developing *Retina* I had no particular intent of investigating “the medium of photography.” It was just a coincidence that the Polaroid revealed to me its painterly potential. It gave me the idea of layering a transparent “plastic resin” on top of a completely flat photographic surface. In oil painting the picture plane is necessarily the combination of both color and material, but I was interested in the process of how, when viewing the “planar colors” of the developed photographs through the “transparent material” of the plastic resin, the picture plane must be blended optically before it can be perceived as a single image, because the color and material are separate. I had in mind the Pointillist paintings by artists like Seurat and Signac.

[M]

*Could you explain more about how you understand the relations between unique and multiple?*

[O]

As you say, the moment I paste something into a *Scrapbook* it becomes unique, regardless of whether it is mass-produced or not. But the relations between unique and multiple are currently undergoing dramatic transformation. In the past there was a clear distinction between the idea of something that is original being unique and something that is reproduced being multiple – the difference between painting and prints, for example. But entering the digital era, those distinctions have collapsed. With analog printing, at least the plate was a real thing, but with digital printing the plate itself has no substance, because it's just data, and you can keep making copies indefinitely as long as you have the data. Strictly speaking, in analog printing the plate deteriorates with each print, and there are slight differences in how the ink is applied, so even in an edition of, say, 20 prints, each print could be considered unique in a sense. The exact basis for whether something is considered to be unique or multiple has always been ambiguous, but all the more so now. I think digital technology has brought us to a point where, above all, subjective perception is what drives art.

What I think is really interesting in this context is money. The form of paper money is basically that of a print. The same could also be said in a sense for coins, which are cast from a mold. But whereas a print loses its value if it gets damaged or dirty, with paper money and coins it doesn't matter whether it's brand new or in tatters – the money always has the same value, and people treat it the same way. So I think the idea of paper money already anticipates digital technology. Obviously there are fluctuations in value, so it's not quite the same, but everybody sees a hundred dollar bill as a hundred dollar bill. I think this is a really interesting issue for our current situation, because money is so primitive in a way – it's just a printed piece of paper – but everyone uses it as a tool and it continues circulating with a relatively constant value.

[M]

*Are you familiar with Marcel Duchamp's concept of the inframince (infra-thin)?*

[O]

Duchamp's idea of the *inframince* has always fascinated me. He came up with all these examples for it, like the warmth of a seat that has just been left, or the whistling sound of velvet trousers.

[M]

*If we try to define what an artist does, usually we would say that the artist uses his or her hands to transform some material. But with the introduction of the inframince, the action of using the hand to transform something itself becomes ambiguous. In your case, for example, when you take a supermarket sales insert from a newspaper and paste it without other alterations into a Scrapbook, the transformation that occurs there is almost imperceptible.*

[O]

You often hear about old movie posters selling for a million yen at auctions and such, right? The thing about printed matter is that when something is first printed in a run of, say, one million copies, each copy has no particular value. But 100 years later, any existing copy of that same thing is treated as a rarity, almost like an original, and is valued accordingly. The sales insert from the newspaper is the same. If I didn't paste it somewhere, it would just vanish. People throw these things away without a second thought. But that's exactly why they are interesting. There probably are collectors who save movie posters with posterity in mind, but how much more interesting would it be if there were a person who collects newspaper sales inserts?

[M]

*In your writing on the Zyapanorama series, you use the word kehai (sign, atmosphere) to describe what led you to the visual elements of the works. Is the kehai something like the inframince for you?*

[O]

I think it does have that aspect. In the case of *Zyapanorama*, when I found a billboard that caught my eye, I would do my best to "transfer" it to the work without any formal interpretation. The problem was that the billboard by itself is too graphical. So what I had to do was create a bodily memory of the place where the billboard was standing, and the atmosphere of that place, and apply that to the work. You wouldn't be able to capture that atmosphere through a high-resolution

digital photograph. And because the experience of that atmosphere is different for each person, the only thing you can do is to capture it through your own impressions.

[M]

*Getting back to Retina, although it doesn't seem to have been a priority for you at the time, do you find any meaning now in the way you combined painting and photographic media in the works?*

[O]

It was around the time of the 150th anniversary of the invention of photography, and photography was being featured all across the art world, but I don't think that influenced me. And since my student days I had been aware of Man Ray's rayographs, made by directly exposing objects against photosensitive paper, so I certainly was aware of working with photography in different ways. But prior to the incident during the photo shoot in my studio I had never thought of connecting "painting" and "photography."

As I said, in the case of *Retina* I was thinking more of Pointillism. By covering the film with an essentially flat color and then overlaying that with transparent material, the material and the color would form a single picture plane while still remaining separate, and it would create an image with a kind of Pointillist structure. In Pointillism, each of the colors remains distinct, but depending on the distance and angle from which one views them they will be perceived in the brain as new blends of color. Similarly, with the early *Retina* works the emphasis was on this idea of separating the raised surface and the underlying colors so that they would only be integrated optically in the mind as a kind of illusion.

[M]

*What you describe actually reminds me of film. A film has a material support, but once projected it is turned into an immaterial medium, or rather something that moves between the material and immaterial.*

[O]

In a normal painting the material and the colors overlap, and we perceive them as such, but in Pointillism, as in the *Retina* series, because they are separated, we perceive something that has no actual physical substance. And the degree to which those separate elements get blended varies greatly upon how people perceive

them – far more so than in a normal painting. That was what really interested me at the start, and I suppose you could say there is an aspect of film there as well, in the sense that when we watch a film, we are not looking at the film itself, but rather at the light that has been projected through the film.

[M]

*So what does the support mean for you, whether it's the canvas of a painting or one of the pages of your Scrapbooks?*

[O]

I have always felt that the basis for art is “painting.” I work on the assumption that what I make will result in a “material” form. But neither is it my intent to make something that is material as such, so if my interest turns to something immaterial, then I will make it into a work. This is something I’ve written about previously, but when we see neon signs on the street, we are not looking at the material of the neon tubing itself but rather the light discharged by the luminous gas inside the tube. It may be a jump in logic, but in the same way you could say that it is possible to collect sound and light from the street, not just material things as such. You can turn all these things into a work, whether light or even smells. They don’t really require a support in that sense.

[M]

*You also often work with chance processes. For example, it's my understanding that the visual elements of the Retina works are all determined by the chemical reactions of the development process.*

[O]

Right, I don’t manipulate them. The colors and the patterns they create are the result of chance interactions. The interesting thing is that with the new prints, all the original exposures have been sitting around for 25 years now. Over that time, the chemicals in the film have reacted and new colors that were not there before have emerged. That was a big discovery. The chemicals have continued changing the entire time. It was just by chance that I waited as long as I did, but all the same I feel the new works would not have been possible without having them sit for all that time.

[M]

*Movement is another theme in your work. The Scrapbooks give me a strong sense of “circulation,” for example. There all these printed materials circulating around the world, and then you come across them, pick them up and paste them in. What are your thoughts about the relations between “circulation” and “production”?*

[O]

When I come across printed materials from all over the world here in Japan, it really is a powerful “encounter.” In that sense the *Scrapbooks* are like the accumulations of these encounters, and it is the combination of these encounters that creates the *Scrapbooks*.

[M]

*But it’s not like the things are just waiting for you by the roadside – which is the image people might initially have. In a sense they, too, are moving on a trajectory toward you.*

[O]

There are definitely times when I feel that way. Sometimes I hesitate about whether to pick something up – like when I’m in a rush somewhere. For instance, one time in New York I was riding a taxi on my way to the airport when we passed a photo shop that had just been shuttered, and there were all these large-format color portraits that had been piled up and thrown out in front. I immediately thought it would be great to use for the *Scrapbooks* and was overcome by a strong desire to grab them. I ended up continuing on to the airport without stopping, but I still have a vivid memory of that sight, which is tinged with regret. I feel that actually it is the things I don’t pick up which leave the strongest impressions, and ultimately feed into my later practice in some form.

[M]

*The other day I was reading an old interview with the American novelist William Faulkner, and something he said seems apt for your work: “Life is motion...The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life.”*

[O]

The way we perceive language changes over time, and the images that words evoke for us also change. The word “arrest” strongly evokes for me something like

a *haiku*, where you try to capture or convert an “atmosphere” with as few words as possible. You convert the atmosphere at its most simple, basic level, and then when people see it several generations down the line, they are inspired to imagine all kinds of other things. I really relate to that.

This might be a bit off topic, but in thinking about the *inframince*, I just remembered that when I develop and expose the Polaroids, I project some kind of meditation or psychic transference onto the film. It’s like this occult sense of using psychic photography to capture the dark side of the moon. More than just doing something unthinkingly, it is when you put your spirit into it that you get the most interesting results. So with *Retina*, I’m not actually doing anything to “paint” the works but I think that in this sense of meditating on them I have an effect on them. It’s hard to explain, but I think there is this approach to the work. In that sense, although I’m not physically involved, and can’t control things once I do the exposure, I’m not simply leaving everything up to the development process. There is still some kind of painterly mentality that informs the work.