

DRAMAS OF MEMORY — FOR AN ESSAY ON YOICHIRO YODA —

Yuichiro Asakura

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Probably the circumstances of someone who was born in Japan to parents who were painters and has lived in foreign New York as a native English speaker for 40 years since the age of three months may not be as special as I have imagined. Therefore, how Yoichiro Yoda himself has accepted and digested his situation may be of particular concern only for me.

A native of Tokyo, I have always lived in the same city without leaving, and the scenery of my life in Tokyo has been very ordinary, but I myself have never thought it to be so. Each of my memories may seem monotonous when piled together with other people's memories in a heap. However, being twisted here and there, these memories have taken on a continuity rather like that of a narrative story and they sometimes come to life with a force capable of crushing my presence, and at other times they remind me of emotional undulations that can choke me up. At such moments I do not think that my existence has evoked these memories to present to myself. On the contrary, I have a feeling that the very drama of memories is what comprises my present self. In other words, I feel it is not that my existence generates my memories but that my memories generate my existence. It is not that my memories exist, but rather that these memories create myself and the accumulation of memories is the very same thing as the existence of myself. To be precise, they cannot even be called memories. So for now I cannot help but call them "dramas of memory".

These memories are easily changed. They are overwritten many times, but when this happens, the original memory is not completely erased, while each memory accumulates many folds, and from a certain point onwards it becomes what is called "I" or "myself". *I myself based on memories* is a reversal of *memories based on me*.

Memory itself is not a particularly personal thing. In fact, there are no borders between the various memories, and at the risk of repeating myself, they are only monoto-

nous pieces thrown out as if they were piled together with the other people's memories in a heap. However, when I notice this accidental accumulation as myself, a delusion of grandeur as myself tends to emerge. The representative idea here is the question who I am, but somebody who can be satisfied with an answer such as "I am an accidental accumulation of floating memories" would never ask such a question in the first place.

1

I remember having a strange sensation when I viewed Yoda's work for the first time. I tried to take my eyes off the work, but I could not do so easily. Although I was finally able to look away, I still could not get it out of the corner of my eye. It wasn't that I thought the work was strange. Rather, I felt that this situation in which I could not look away from a work of art was dubious and odd.

All of Yoda's works are set in New York where the artist lives, but my one and only visit to New York took place more than 30 years ago. In the paintings I initially viewed, the figures he depicted were actors in movies, but none of them were very familiar to me. In other words, I could not see any images that I felt a direct relation to in his paintings. His method of depiction was not so-called realism, and I could detect particularly personal, and if may say so, post-modernist touches in his work. There was nothing to grasp my interest. Rather, one might say that this was a painting style that was of no concern to me. Nevertheless, my experiences with his paintings, through which the depicted images were apt to invade my mind from the front and rear, were quite odd ones, the like of which I had never felt before. It was as if these were my own experiences but at the same time not mine, and I found it difficult to put together the words to describe the sensation.

On that occasion, I only viewed perhaps five of Yoda's paintings. But although the number of works was limited and despite his painting style, I was confident that I did not sense any kind of tricks from his works at all. His was a

style in which some kind of tricks could be expected to appear up front. However, rather on the contrary, his works actually overcame the state of my concerns and penetrated into me.

At that point I thought about memory: the memory of a painter (or more precisely, of a man of whom I did not know even whether he was a painter) called Yoichiro Yoda, whose age and career I had become aware of for the first time. His paintings were neither dreams nor delusions, and they did not look like mere ideas or strained interpretations that the artist had struggled to make, and they contained traces of facts that he had dared to depict. Of course, what were depicted here were not so-called facts: These were not facts in the everyday sense of the word, but facts for the man who depicted these paintings.

Yoichiro Yoda depicts his own internal facts. He faithfully depicts his own memories. Moreover, these memories are created dramas and these dramas are accumulations of memories... This painter creates his own memories by depicting these works and fixes them in himself. These "dramas of memory" come out of the clothes called Yoichiro Yoda and penetrate into me, or, rather, they become myself at that moment... At least this is what I thought at that time, if I try to explain my experience in a way that makes sense.

2

When we view the works produced by Yoda from his school days to the present (a period of only about 20 years in all), we can discern a number of developments.

First of all, for Yoda, who was born in 1972, the first half of the 1990s was the period of his late teens and early twenties and during this period he depicted the girls he met and came to like at his art school and graduate school. Although it is difficult to say whether he depicted them because he liked them, or he came to like them (more and more) because he depicted them, I myself also frequently had the experience of coming to like the girls who appeared in my dreams. Of course, it can be said that you may dream of girls because you like them, but at least in my case I did not consciously reflect on the matter. In Yoda's case, I sense a kind of nuance that he depicted them because he wanted to come to like them rather than because he liked them in this period. The girls in these paintings appear in the dark backgrounds with aspects

suggesting they refuse to be identified, before being suddenly transfigured into erotic figures when their expressions come into view. Still, this is not real natural eroticism but something more fundamental that the artist finds in existence itself. This somehow distorted and uneasy eroticism gives the viewers a sense of some muffled power to live as if the artist was trying to transfer to another place or to escape from his present self to another self by coming to like these girls.

Taking a dream as an example again, a dream you reflect on after you wake up is nothing but a dream that you have edited by yourself. It cannot be an original dream itself (although of course, what is "a dream itself" is another question). The girls Yoda depicted and tried to come to like were, naturally, not the actual girls themselves but female figures that were edited and composed by the artist, and the depicted images reflected the figures inside the artist as a solitary drama, and then time transformed this drama to reality for Yoda himself.

Probably we will be able to view the works of this period calmly. At least I can. Both the distortion and the uneasiness adequately belong to the other person, and, therefore, in a way it is possible for us to view them in peace. Their apparent weirdness can be sensed as an encoded "weirdness", and this does not move us although it is sufficiently understandable. Nevertheless, this "weirdness" is something I have not gotten used to (not gotten used to feeling), and it forced me to revise my former ideas about weirdness.

3

I heard that when his class at Tyler School of Art went on a bus trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, their bus passed through 42nd Street accidentally (probably because the driver strayed from the original route). Yoda was looking out through the bus window and saw an old theatre facing the street. According to the artist, he was not sure when he began to take an interest in this subject, but when he started making various researches on his own, it seemed to him that the theatres were his own true hometown, and he had a feeling that these totally neglected buildings were saying, "WELCOME HOME!" Then he became interested in the music of the period when those welcoming theatres had been at the height of their popularity and he began to watch more enthusiastically the

films of those days that he already loved.

One of the most important series by Yoda that he has continued working on up to the present time is the series of old theatres in Manhattan that he started painting in this way. In the beginning it was important for the artist to depict the theatres as his "hometown", and this meaning has always been the most important consideration, at least from the standpoint of the consciousness of the artist. Despite this, however, this meaning has undergone a change of quality little by little. In other words, the act of depicting the theatres can be described as tied to the needs of the artist at a deeper level. The first sign of this was the appearance in his works of Lillian Gish, a film star of the silent era.

Yoda says that "Lillian was my goddess" during his Queen's College era from 1996 to 1998. And he let this goddess appear repeatedly in his paintings. In 1993, Lillian died just a few months short of her one hundredth birthday, and Yoda, who was 21 years old at the time, didn't get an opportunity to meet her. Therefore, the real Lillian cannot appear in his memory. Still, the figure of Lillian, who does not appear in his memory, has been repeatedly depicted by Yoda in his "hometown," and I cannot help considering such activities as a kind of unconscious operation to create an alibi aimed at nobody but the artist himself. For Yoda, the old theatres in Manhattan that he takes as his "hometown" are not a mere "hometown" but also play a role as a stage for his memories.

4

The artist pursued this role as a stage for memories in the old theatres on 42nd Street, and, of course, such a stage could not exist without these theatres as his "hometown". However, it seems that this stage has been spreading out from the theatres. For example, Yoda places former great actors and, occasionally, presently active actresses in the seats of shops he himself has visited frequently, such as the diners and hot dog stores on 42nd Street. He employs various ways of depicting including accurate representations to trace the actual objects and rather synthetic ones onto which outside views are superimposed, but each image faces the viewer with a strange reality as if it has captured a moment in which a dream is enfolded into a memory rather than being a scene from a film. His use of colors is unique and many of his works continue to exude

a strong impression. The characters cast in his "hometown" extend their trips into the real life of the artist, and they seem to come and go on 42nd Street from the theatres to the diners and vice versa.

The actors in the theatres are not only acting on the screens but also sinking their bodies in the seats as members of the audience, while the artist sometimes depicts the broad theatrical space from the viewpoint of the actors appearing on the stage or the screen. And when the purple seats filling in the theatre come to be represented as an independent motif, all the figures fade away and only a single row of seats rises in the darkness. For Yoda, these seats are symbols of the old theatres that represent what is going to be lost, and at the same time they serve as signposts of his "hometown" when he depicts his memories. Perhaps the starting point of Yoda's works continuing up to now was in a hall filled with crimson-colored seats resembling the night sea. The work representing only the seats can be considered a mirror on which the artist can reflect and view himself. The profound self-realization that this is a stage for memories is provided by the awareness that the memories are a drama and that simultaneously the drama is an accumulation of memories, and this particular awareness has been gained by reflecting himself onto the nostalgic silent purple seats in the theatre. And we, the viewers of his paintings, also view ourselves there. This was the meaning of the signposts of his "hometown". However, the artist was to have another new encounter as well.

5

In 2008, Yoda depicted the Hotel Pennsylvania (thereafter, Hotel Penn) for the first time (cat. no.35). The 22-storey hotel was built in 1919 with 2,200 rooms (currently there are 1,700), and it can certainly be called a historic hotel. Once it had celebrity guests, including William Faulkner and Charlie Chaplin, and in the Cafe Rouge (which is very shabby now) on the ground floor, leading jazz musicians, such as Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Glenn Miller, used to perform with their orchestra.

In 2007, the year before Yoda started this series, a plan to demolish Hotel Penn was announced, and according to this plan the site was to be rebuilt as an office building by 2011. However, a foundation to rescue the hotel was promptly established and since then the threat of demoli-

tion, which had been put back to 2010, has been further postponed. Yoda himself has actively supported the rescue effort, including by taking part in civic demonstrations opposing the demolition.

He once told me that all of his works were races against time. As he explained it, he is running a race against time that he can never win, and that is why he is creating works of art. I think this clear recognition welling up inside of the artist has its origins in his encounter with Hotel Penn. The empathy towards his “hometown” superimposed on the theatres became established as a methodology, and the rudder was set in a direction that aroused the enormous power that this space has as a stage for memories.

In the series where the film “The Shining” is treated as a set of motifs, each hotel scene in the film is depicted superimposed on Hotel Penn. I had an opportunity to go with Yoda on a guided tour of Hotel Penn, visiting the Cafe Rouge, the unused kitchen and several other facilities, and actually this hotel had an atmosphere that reminded us of “The Shining”. To be more precise, I had a kind of sense as if the accumulation of memories that was likely to recall a non-existent reality was crouching down here and there. In the series in question, the artist postures other familiar actors as well as those in “The Shining” in various situations and digs up their memories, and then he puts the reality into those memories, stirs them, and continues consistently even now to update them as his own memories.

6

Bunny, who has been Yoda’s idol and was a roller derby star, shows up on the stage of an old theatre, or faces Charlie Chaplin in a room at Hotel Penn, and in Coney Island she gives someone a body blow, completes a wonderful pose and passes in front of the artist.

Yoda also told me that he started to depict old theatres because he had been interested in their neglected and decaying beauty. Were these kinds of beauty images of his “hometown”? It is true that some of the theatres Yoda saw had already declined into ruins. It seems that the halls of the theatres he depicts, where no signs of life exist, are merely waiting to die without anyone reminiscing over them. Unfortunately, however, I cannot simply think of those theatres as being examples of “beauty” as they are. They seem like the dregs of people’s memories, which

makes me hesitate to touch them, but at the same time I feel drawn toward them.

Similarly, when we had an opportunity to stay at Hotel Penn, I selected a renewed room instead of an original room at the time of the hotel’s foundation that Yoda strongly recommended. This was because when I was shown the original room, I felt I would be unable to endure the accumulation of memories that pervaded the place. The feel of the air conditioner’s switch, the texture of the sofa sensed from its appearance, the layers of paint covering the walls, and the smells—these were never my own memories. They were the memories of innumerable other people.

Yoda makes Bunny appear on these various kinds of stages. And it is Bunny who has a real and adored existence as a roller derby star. Bunny plays together with Chaplin, who exists only in the movies, and the neglected beauty that the artist treats becomes more active through this interaction and shifts into another dimension. No, on the contrary, Yoda himself is updating his own memories in order to live, or in other words, to step forward into another dimension that is tomorrow.

To live together with one’s memories is the same thing as noting that one consists of an accumulation of memories. On the stage of his “hometown” with its neglected beauty, he casts former film stars that have imaginary existences and makes real adored figures act with them in the same play. This play accumulates as the artist’s new memory in line with the number of his works, and then the artist himself is newly born with each new work. It may be said that the artist is living his own drama.

7

After having caught a glimpse of a little of the background of his works (which the readers of the texts in this catalogue, namely “Commentaries on the Works by the Artist” and “Yoichiro Yoda Biography”, will share with me to a certain extent), I have come to a fresher and more profound knowledge of Yoichiro Yoda’s talent as a painter. The various phenomena that the artist has talked about frankly with me include, for example, things that I myself cannot recognize as beauty, but each nevertheless accomplishes its own fermentation as an element of the work and is regenerated as a drama of memory to be shared by the viewers as well as by the artist himself. After all, these are the artist’s acute thoughts on his hometown. They make up

the memory called the hometown.

Even though the hometown is an object of nostalgia, it is at the same time the basis of immature eroticism and delusion without connection and also the spring of uneasiness. I for one have not had any experience of taking a seat next to Hermione and eating a hot dog with her at the diner counter on 42nd Street. But even in the absence of such memories, I can realise that the smell floating around the place, some expectations, and the feel of asphalt at night with no street lighting are drawn exactly from my own memory. Moreover, I do not feel it in any way strange to be thinking like that. Likewise, I have never been present at the scene where Chaplin and a star player of the roller derby were together in a hotel room. But although I have never been there, the profile of Chaplin standing vacantly is definitely myself, and the upper arms seen between her T-shirt and protector and her gesture of bending her knees behind lightly were something belonging to a girl I still dream of.

To repeat myself once more, I do not have memories, but the accumulation of memories results in me. The conduct that looks like little stories made up by the artist sighing for his own hometown continues to update his own memories towards this hometown and also towards tomorrow, and in addition, his work tears off the membrane of my memories piece by piece and leads me towards his unseen hometown. And it can be said that it is only there that Yoichiro Yoda exists and so do I.

Chief Curator
Mitaka City Gallery of Art