

Monique Frydman: Endless Conversations

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Monique Frydman's art, in its fundamental nature, is an endlessly transitory phenomenon, fluctuating, shifting, and Changing in relation to the other elements in its environment. Even so, it has a solid presence and great strength, based on the artist's extensive experience and the vast amount of research she has done throughout her career. This sense of presence and strength is coupled with a surprising openness, and the work is continually carrying on a conversation with the entities and conditions surrounding it. There are numerous parties to this conversation, including viewers, other works, the weather on a particular day, momentary conditions of light, movements of people, flows of air, and sounds. The interactions with these factors cause variations in the condition of the work and change the impressions and sensations that we receive from it. Frydman's art expands its meaning and impact by connecting with the other, understood in a broad sense. We are pleased to have been able to present her work in a way that brings out the chain of stimulus and response between it and other elements in the space of the 21st century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa. In this essay, I would like to discuss the exhibition in terms of several key concepts while moving through the varied spaces of the museum, passing from piece to piece. In order to understand Frydman's art, it is also important to know about her historical position and her view of art history, and for this information I would refer the reader to the article by Camille MORINEAU, curator of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, elsewhere in this catalogue (pp. 74-83).

### **Intelligence of the Hand**

Monique Frydman's creative work, begun in the late 1970s, has always been centered on the art of painting. After exploring a number of mediums and styles, she adopted an approach around 1988 that led directly to her current style. That was when she began using the large blocks of pastel rather than small sticks (p. 56, fig. 3). With these lumps of pigment, which look like pieces of stone, she carries on a direct and intimate dialogue between her body and the medium in the process of creating colors and images. She does not determine the subject she will depict beforehand; it comes to her through an interactive and empathetic process involving both the material and her body on a deep level. Influenced by the American Abstract Expressionist painters, she uses her entire body to engage in a kind of battle with large canvases in creating abstract paintings. She often relies on what she calls "the intelligence of the hand" as an important part of her approach to painting. She explains this concept with reference to the philosophy of Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY. "There's a connection with gesture, with the body, which is direct. The philosopher Merleau-Ponty spoke about that a great deal and I really believe in the intelligence of the hand. It's another form of intelligence, at once very responsive and very coherent." \*1 In Frydman's case, "hand" means the whole arm, not just the palm and fingers. The hand with which she grasps the block of pastel and creates colors and lines in a conversation between the canvas, the pigment, and her body embodies the physical intelligence discussed by Merleau-Ponty. It draws alongside the medium, notes its presence, listens to its voice, and responds to it. Beginning with the *Les dames de nage* series of the mid-1990s (p. 58), the artist began experimenting with a method of placing ropes, strings, and small branches randomly on the floor, laying a piece of wetted canvas over them, and applying pastel blocks to bring out traces of their forms on the canvas. The artist's hand senses the physical qualities of the objects under the cloth even though she cannot see them. This method is a kind of automatism, but the consciousness and intelligence of the artist (or of her hand and body) intervene in the process by which everything is determined, including what to include and what to leave out, resulting in a painting with great strength, sensitivity, and depth. She does not control and dominate her materials to bring her images into reality. The images emerge from a process of becoming in a profound relationship between the artist's body and materials in which she listens carefully to the voices of the materials, getting close and paying attention to them. \*2 "The intelligence of the hand is truly mysterious. I think that collaboration with materials or physical matter in doing things are important. If the artist attentively asks what the material says, or tries to say, it becomes possible to make better work." \*3 Nine of Frydman's representative paintings are displayed in Gallery 11, including *Le pavement jaune* (p. 64) and *L'Absinthe* (pp. 66, 67) of the late 1980s, *Les dames de nage* (p. 58), *Les Eclats* (pp. 60-63), *Calcaire* (pp. 56, 57), and her most recent work, *des saisons avec Bonnard* (p. 65). In almost all of these paintings, we can observe the rich traces of the artist's manual intelligence, her sensing of the call of the materials and her brilliant collaboration with them.

### **Fluctuation and Change**

One long wall of Gallery 11 is filled with a rhythmical arrangement of three paintings from *Les Eclats series: Or, Amarante, and Gris* (pp. 60-63). As suggested by the series title, light seems to glow from the depths of the paintings. They were produced through the same process as *Les dames de nage*, described in the previous section. The lines filling the pictorial space are momentary conditions of the materials that the artist has fixed with pastel. These traces surge up from the depths of the paintings, mixed with the light that inundates them, and fall back again, giving the viewer a sense of endless fluctuation.

The fluctuation characteristic of Frydman's paintings is brought out in a different way in her works made with the light, stiff fabric known as tarlatan. *Red Room* (pp. 30, 31) is an installation in which all four walls are covered with tarlatan in three layers. The artist tinted each piece individually, so the tone and gradations of color are slightly different in each one, and the three layers are separated from each other by approximately 15 centimeters of space, creating complex visual effects (pp. 32, 33). Our gaze is kept moving back and forth from layer to layer and out into the open space.

Glancing sideways, however, we notice stains and drips of pigment emerging in the cloth along with the wavy, moiré effect, and the fabric suddenly comes into focus as if it were a watercolor painting that we had just discovered.

The *Red Room* is exposed to the outside in two places, the glass ceiling and the entrance next to the glass walls surrounding the courtyard, and changes in the condition of outside light produce dramatic changes in the impression made by the red cloth. In the soft light of mid-day, the red space is gentle, intimate, and somehow nostalgic. When daylight begins to fade and the artificial lighting in the room takes over, the room takes on a stronger, more transcendent atmosphere. The room seems to breathe as if it were a living organism that changes its expression and mood from moment to moment. In the words of the artist, it is "like Alice in Wonderland," \*4 a space that takes us into another dimension.

The new work, *Kaleidoscope* (p. 46), made with the colored film used to coat glass, is intended to create a variable experience of a similar kind. It is placed in the glass-covered passageway crossing the courtyard in the middle of the museum building. The glass tunnel is covered with large sheets of film composed of squares in some 20 different colors, causing multi-colored light to fall on the visitors walking through it. Depending on the weather and the position of the sun, the colored shadows shift from the floor of the courtyard to the floor of the passage or the walls, and the intensity of the colored light entering the passage also changes. As a result, the view seen by people walking or stopping inside *Kaleidoscope* (Frydman's other works in the nearby corridor, permanent exhibits by other artists on the periphery, the figures of visitors, the sky, etc) is never fixed. The view from the outside (the passage itself whether vacant or filled with people, puddles in the courtyard that reflect the multicolored checkerboard pattern of the film sheets, the backlit passage after sunset, etc) also keeps changing. The essence of *Kaleidoscope* is its capacity to change in response to the architectural space, the many elements in the environment, and the movements of visitors.

### **Seeing with the Ears, Sensing with the Heart and Body**

Frydman creates a kind of passageway between the artwork and the people contemplating it, quietly drawing the viewers' awareness into the work. Her art is a personal expression, but at the same time it contains a deep strength and spirituality that relates to a more fundamental level of human awareness and emotion. It also encourages viewers to use their ears to see the work and the space, not just observing their external appearance but mobilizing the sense of hearing and other senses to experience the space of the work as well as confronting things in their own minds and memories.

Among the works shown in this exhibition, let us look at the example of *Murmure*, a piece that is remarkable for its restriction of compositional elements and color. In her *Whisper* of 2008, which might be thought of as a forerunner of *Murmure*, the artist used a large quantity of a thin, semi-transparent, resilient paper known in Europe as Japanese paper. \*5 In *Murmure*, she pinned approximately 800 pieces of this "Japanese paper" to the curved walls of the exhibition space in 13 rows. The walls behind the paper are colored with five slightly different shades of pale mauve. Because the color is so faint, some people may not even notice that the walls are not the usual white-painted walls of an exhibition room. The gentle air currents generated as visitors walk around the room act on the pieces of paper, lifting them up one after another and letting them down again (pp. 54, 55). Visitors have a momentary visual experience of the mauve walls, catching glimpses of them as the pieces of paper dance about for a few seconds at a time. At the same time, they use their ears to catch non-visual information occurring in the space such as faint sounds and slight air currents. This work gently guides the way we experience it, making us see with our ears, taking in the unexpected movements of the paper lining the walls in a 360-degree circle, colors that appear and disappear, sounds caused by the movement of visitors, and other presences that are felt but not seen.

*Murmure* is not the only work that causes us to experience it in this way. The *Red Room*, its walls covered with tarlatan, has the same effect. The red is so subtly expressive that one hesitates to describe it with the single word red. Unlike *Murmure*, *Red Room* is best contemplated in solitude. Even if viewers are not literally alone, they should confront the work by themselves, pricking up their ears attentively to hear what it conveys to their minds, hearts, and bodies, experiencing it in the way suggested by TANIKAWA Shuntaro's poem, *Listening*, \*6 or in the way a baby sees, hears, and feels with its entire body.

### **Monique Frydman's Journey: In Lieu of a Conclusion**

Camille Morineau has spoken of Frydman's "desire for displacement (mental or real)." \*7 After journeying to India, Australia and Japan, she is now presenting her first large-scale solo exhibition in Asia here in Kanazawa. She has reached the farthest point in her journey, but at the same time it may seem to her that she has returned to the starting point.

We deliberately avoided giving a specific title to this exhibition. The reason for this decision was that we did not want to impose an introductory description on it that would give viewers too many preconceptions. Since this is the first substantial presentation of Frydman's artistic world in Japan, we wanted the audience to experience it as directly as possible. As I was writing this essay, I felt that I would lose the essence of Frydman's art if I tried to sum it up in a single word or phrase. That is because the works themselves are questions without set answers, expressions open to interpretation, and stages on an endless journey. The things we see and feel while experiencing Frydman's work are unconsciously synchronized with distant memories. We hear faint sounds emerging from them, see shifting colors, and sense their expressive qualities as they flow into our hearts and bodies. They take us on a journey where we experience this world that we see and feel and at the same time confront ourselves, which are also a part of this world.

Translated by Stanley N. ANDERSON

\*1

Interview with Monique Frydman by the author.  
See p. 47 of this catalogue.

\*2

There are certain things in common between Frydman's approach and the type of expression and values featured in the exhibition "Alternative Paradise" (2005-2006) curated by FUDO Misato and Yoshioka Emiko. See the articles in the catalogue of that exhibition: Fudo Misato, "In the Process of Becoming," and Yoshioka Emiko, "Life Given Shape by the Corporal Gaze."

\*3

Artist's talk at the opening of the exhibition "Monique Frydman," given at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, November 23, 2011.

\*4

Comment by the artist at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, November 24, 2011.

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\*5

Paper made of Manila hemp fiber sold in Europe as "Japanese paper" under the name "BIB TENGUJO."

\*6

Tanikawa Shuntaro, "Listening," Kyobunsha, 2004. Part of the poem is quoted below.

I listen

to roadside

pebbles

I listen

to a feebly groaning

computer  
I listen  
to my neighbor's  
muttering  
I listen  
Somewhere a guitar is being strummed  
Somewhere a dish breaks  
Somewhere a-i-u-e-o  
To the now  
at the bottom the din  
I listen  
I listen  
to a brook's  
still-unheard  
murmuring  
of tomorrow  
flowing into today  
I listen  
(Translated by William I. ELLIOTT & KAWAMURA Kazuo)  
\*7  
See p. 75 of this catalogue.