

A Brief Visitor to the World of Outsider Art

Tadashi Hattori considers the work of Masao Obata



above
Masao Obata, 2006,
photo: Tadashi Hattori.

above opposite page
Untitled, n.d., pencil and
coloured pencil on
cardboard, 29.1 x 63.3 x 0.3
cm, 11.4 x 24.8 x 0.1 ins.

below opposite page
Untitled (Wedding), n.d.,
pencil and coloured pencil
on cardboard, 29.4 x 41.5 x
0.4 cm, 11.6 x 16.3 x 0.15 ins.

Masao Obata (1943–2010), whose works were shown in the recesses of the basement gallery at Halle Saint Pierre, Paris, last year (1) and who was allocated the first wall that confronted visitors at the Collection de l'Art Brut show in 2008, (2) was one of the most notable artists in recent Japanese Art Brut. He appeared in the world of outsider art suddenly, at the end of the 20th century, and, after receiving wide attention for about 10 years, he was lost at the peak of his fame through his sudden death.

Obata's work was first shown at a public museum in November 1998 as part of a group show of Japanese outsider artists held at the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Modern Art. (3) Although it was shortly before the deadline for finalising the artists in the show, I was able to slip him into the line-up for the show and 70 of

his pieces were included. He has frequently appeared in Japanese museums since then, and has become one of the most important and popular figures in the outsider art world in Japan. But despite his fame, little is known about him. We do not even know exactly when he first started to draw.

We do know that he began drawing some time after he settled in Hifumi-en, a care house for the mentally disabled in Kobe, Hyogo Prefecture, in 1989. He once lived in Sanraku-en, a care house in Tsuyama, Okayama Prefecture, which is bordered on the east by Hyogo, and worked in the poultry and textile industry. We can find no evidence that he drew in that time and, according to the records in Sanraku-en, he spent most of his free time sitting still in the corner of the room. This





'Obata collected cardboard boxes, brought them to his room, cut them up and drew through the night.'

is in surprising contrast with what I know of Obata in Kobe – always lively and friendly toward everyone. (4) He once said that he had been busy and had no time to draw when he was in Tsuyama, (5) but these records indicate that the lack of time should not be the only reason why he did not draw.

Then Obata set about making drawings some time after staying in Hifumi-en. He collected cardboard boxes from everywhere in Hifumi-en and brought them to his room, cut them apart into what he considered desirable sizes and drew through the nights. The drawings soon filled all available storage space in his room. So he then stacked them up on his bed and slept skilfully between them, twisting his body to fit. Consequently, his works invaded the storage spaces for his roommate. To deal with this, the staff at the facility disposed of his works once a year. (6) One can only imagine how Obata must have felt when he returned his room to find that it was completely cleaned up and all of his works had disappeared.

This was repeated for several years until 1995, when the contemporary artist Kaji Higashiyama (1934–2006) was invited as a teacher for the weekly art class. He lives in the suburbs of Sanda city, about an hour's drive from Hifumi-en, and was leading a farmer's and artist's life. As he was standing somewhat apart from the contemporary art world and making his own art works with irony and criticism against contemporary society, he

felt a natural affinity for outsider art. Such a mindset enabled him to discover Obata soon after. He was so amazed by the quality and quantity of Obata's drawings that he instructed the staff never to throw them away and to preserve them all. A few years later, he showed some of them to me in his studio.

The number of the drawings preserved after the instruction by Higashiyama must reach at least some thousands, although nobody has ever made an exact count. The dates when they were created are also unknown. In general, lighter colours such as yellow and green were often used for landscape backgrounds, in addition to the dominant red, around the time when his works were first introduced to the public, in 1998. These colours gradually disappeared and we eventually saw them only a little on plants and eyebrows. Finally, Obata came to concentrate exclusively on red sometime between 2000 and 2005.

The depicted motifs were also much more diverse in the earlier period, but little by little they were restricted to human figures. In the works prior to the mid-2000s, one sees vehicles such as planes, ships and trains, constructions such as bridges and buildings, and daily necessities such as tableware and clothing, along with animals and plants. The dominant motif, however, is the human figure – especially pairs of men and women. Even drawings which seem to depict a single man or woman often have their partner on the reverse side.

above
 Untitled (Wedding), n.d.,
 pencil and coloured pencil
 on cardboard, 60.6 x 70.6 x
 0.3 cm, 23.8 x 27.8 x 0.1 ins.



From a stylistic point of view, Obata's drawings are generally quite schematic. This does not make them fall into monotonous repetition, although they have multiple slight changes and thus surprising variety. Male figures, for example, are characterised by a tie, a crescent of smooth hair and a penis, while female figures often possess two sets of breasts (both frontal and profile), necklaces, a semicircle or cloverleaf shape representing dressed hair repeated rhythmically on the top of her head, and a vagina. They all look straight at us, and some are raising up their hands. Despite the combinations of such simple and symbolic elements, these figure-drawings form rich variation with their diverse design and decoration of clothing, their belongings such as flowers and swords, and the addition of animals, plants or buildings in the background. Thus we never get bored looking at a huge number of works, one after another.

As for the sources of Obata's imagery, Lucienne Peiry, who first presented his work in Europe, referred to some traditional Japanese images such as *kokeshi* and *jizo*. (7) It is true that his strong obsession with red can be associated with *kokeshi*, and that the sharp crescent eyebrows and long and narrow eyes of his drawing bear a resemblance to both *kokeshi* and *jizo*.

Having been born and raised in Japan, Obata was doubtlessly steeped in traditional Japanese culture. Nonetheless, his expressions are quite original and

generally differ from these images. Breasts and genitals which are so common in his drawings, for example, are never shown on *kokeshi* and *jizo*. Moreover, when he draws human figures in a landscape or building and often with their children, he seems to conceive of it as a two-dimensional representation in a pictorial space rather than as a single object in a real world like the *kokeshi* and *jizo*. In this sense, Japanese imagery functions partly in his process of encoding human appearance into a unique pictorial language, but never dominates the overall structure of his drawing as a whole.

One also wonders why Obata tended to depict human figures as couples. Examining various works of his, one finds that many things are also represented in pairs – not only are there two plants, but their leaves are also grouped in pairs. The leaves are not only in pairs but are also arranged symmetrically, with decorative patterns applied to both sides of clothes and the same plant or flower motifs being drawn close to either side of a body, and the position of both arms is almost always shown as symmetrical. Obata's affection for pairs must nearly match his longing for a state of symmetry.

As mentioned above, Obata began drawing after he settled in Hifumi-en when he was 45 years old. Born in 1943 in Okayama, his parents divorced around 1955 and he was raised by his mother on her native Manabe-shima, an island near Okayama. After his mother died in 1975, he was sent to Sanraku-en in Tsuyama and

'The drawings filled Obata's storage spaces. So he stacked them on his bed and slept between them, twisting his body to fit

above
Untitled, (Birds) 1997,
 pencil and coloured pencil
 on cardboard, 33 x 38.2 x
 0.5 cm, 13 x 15 x 0.1 ins.

1. Exhibition *Art Brut Japonais* at La Halle Saint Pierre, Paris, from 24 March, 2010, until 2 January, 2011.

2. Exhibition *Art Brut du Japon* at the Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne, from 22 February until 28 September, 2008.

3. Exhibition *Overflowing Power of Expression: Aspect of Outsider Art*, at Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Modern Art in Kobe from 28 November 1998 until 17 January, 1999.

4. For further information on his biography and the motifs in his works, see Tadashi Hattori, 'Interview Survey on Masao Obata' in *Professor Eiko Wakayama Memorial Volume*, Department of Art History, Osaka University, 2006, pp. 312–328.

5. Yoshiko Hata, *DNA Paradise*, Japanese Association on Intellectual Disability, 2003, p.78.

6. On the reverse side of one of his drawings, one finds the following heartbreaking and unforgettable message: 'Please do not take my works without asking me!'

7. Lucienne Peiry, 'Déviance au pays de la norme' in *Art Brut du Japon, la Collection de l'Art Brut en collaboration avec les éditions Infolio*, Gollion, 2008, pp. 9–20. A *kokeshi* is a type of handmade wooden doll that is a popular souvenir from northern Japan, frequently displayed in many Japanese houses, and a *jizo* is a stone statues of the Buddhist monk, commonly found along the roadside in Japan.

8. From a documentary directed by Makoto Sato for the exhibition *21st Century*, See *into Energy of Art* in O Museum, Tokyo, from 23 March until 4 April, 2001.

With thanks to Christopher Stevens for his advice on English language.

Tadashi Hattori is a curator of Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art, Kobe. He writes for numerous publications about outsider art and the art for the mentally disabled.

above
Untitled, n.d., pencil and coloured pencil on cardboard, 33.5 x 57.2 x 0.4 cm, 13.2 x 22.5 x 0.15 ins.

below
Untitled (Happy New Year), n.d., pencil and coloured pencil on cardboard, 38 x 57.5 x 0.4 cm, 15 x 22.6 x 0.15 ins.

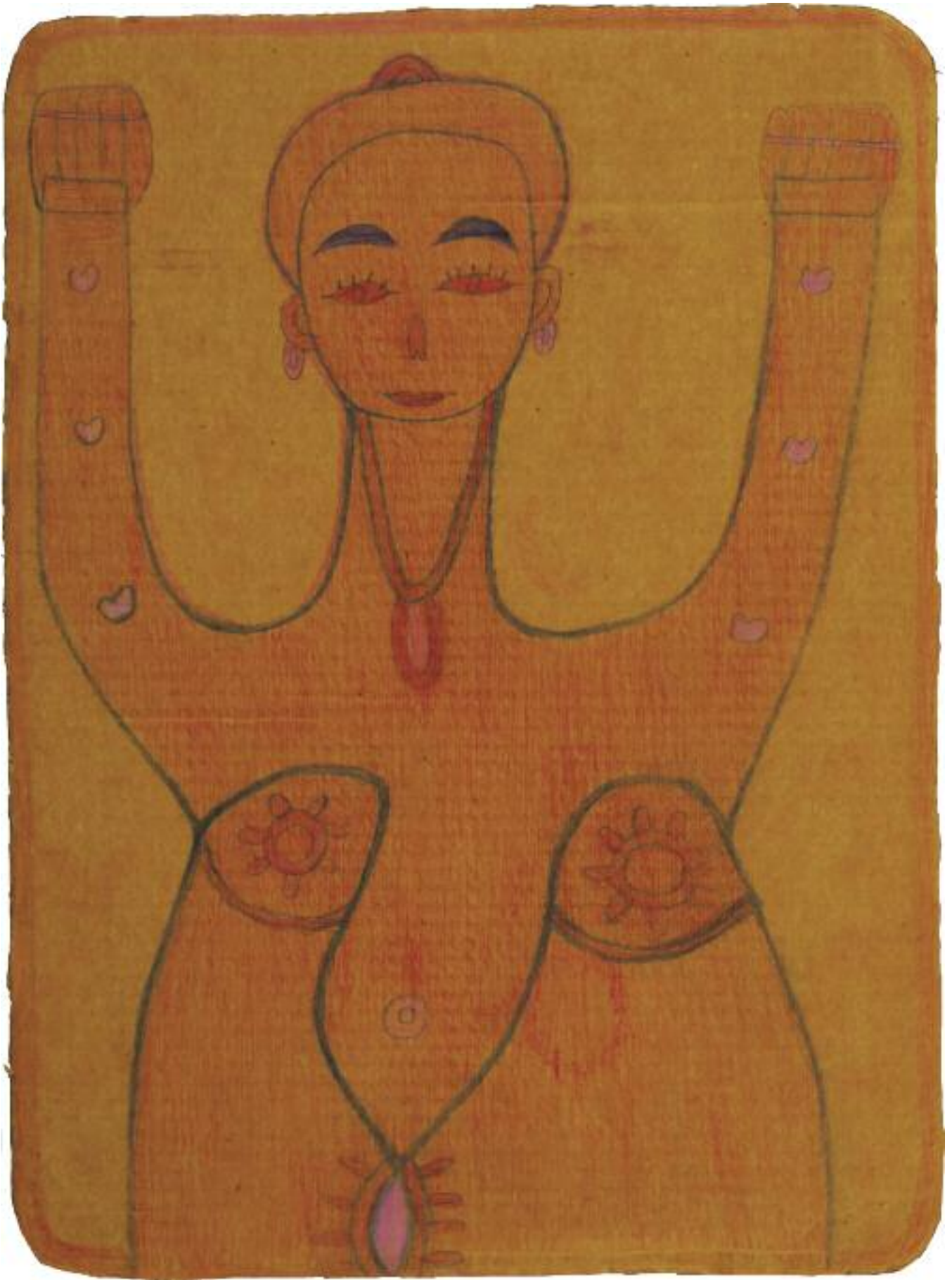


worked in various jobs. Then, suddenly, in 1985 his father, with whom he had been out of contact for 30 years, was found to be living in Kobe and the two started to live together. However, this new way of life did not last. After his father became ill in 1989, Obata was forced to move to the Hifumi-en.

In his drawings, one finds many couples, families with children, and nostalgic memories of Okayama in the form of festival ships and floats. These unsatisfied desires and longings possibly drove Obata to express himself through art. Perhaps such sentimental and romantic words as 'nostalgic memories' and 'longing' are not enough. When asked why he drew couples, he asked back instead of answering it, 'Can a woman marry a woman? That would be difficult, wouldn't it? For

example, could they have a child together? That's why there has to be a man. There is a man and there is a woman. Isn't that natural?' (8)

Through his drawings, Obata conveyed his philosophy on how human beings should live – not thinking about his personal longing. His affection for symmetry is surely his lesson about human life itself. In his mid-40s, he finally found himself all alone in the Kobe facility after a short reunion with his father that had followed 10 years of solitude in the Tsuyama facility after his mother's death. The drawing must be the final destination he reached, where numerous couples of men and women with children were living and everything was arranged with stability and peace. For Obata, it must have been an ideal representation of how human life should be.



above
Untitled, n.d., pencil and coloured pencil on cardboard,
43.9 x 32.3 x 0.2 cm, 17.3 x 12.7 x 0.08 ins.