

PRESSBOOK

Izumi KATO

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CHAINSAW, HANDS, TOTEM: INTERVIEW WITH IZUMI KATO

BY PAUL LASTER



Portrait of IZUMI KATO. Photo by Guillaume Ziccarelli.



IZUMI KATO. *Untitled*, 2017, stone, wood, acrylic, iron, leather and pedestal, 140 × 25 × 25 cm. Photo by Kei Okano. Courtesy the artist and Perrotin, Hong Kong.

Born in a coastal area of Southwestern Japan in 1969, Izumi Kato creates surreal, haunting figures, which he renders in paint with his hands and sculpts out of wood, stone and vinyl. He first gained international attention when his works were included in Takashi Murakami's curated exhibition "Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture" at New York's Japan Society in 2005 and at the 52nd Venice Biennale's central exhibition "Think with the Senses – Feel with the Mind: Art in the Present Tense," curated by Robert Storr in 2007.

Since then, Kato has continued to experiment with ways of representing the human body, while drawing upon the mythologies of his hometown and a fascination with outsider and primitive art, as well as his own vivid imagination. *ArtAsiaPacific* spoke to the artist about the influences and the process of evolution that has led to the fragmented renderings of ghostly characters and totem-like sculptures included in his recent solo show at Perrotin, Hong Kong.

When you first started making work in the early 1990s, was it similar to what you make now?

No, it was totally different. It was figurative, but the figures were mostly faceless. In Japanese art school you have to make drawings and paintings that are realistic, but I doubted the system and made work the way that I wanted. I was more interested in outsider and primitive art, although mainly for the forms rather than the content.

Was your content motivated by any popular culture influences?

Not really, I went back to my childhood drawings to make very simple kinds of figures with circles, lines and dots.

The flat depictions of wide-eyed, child-like figures also recall anime characters. Were you influenced by manga and anime?

Of course, these things influenced everyone in my generation.

A common trope in the widely consumed comic books and animated films of post-war Japan are the spiritual realms that the characters inhabit, like a ghostly or futuristic realm. Were any of those thoughts on your mind when making work?

Yes, those themes were influential to me. I was born in the Shimane Prefecture, far from Tokyo and near the Sea of Japan, where people believe in the Shinto gods and ghosts. I'm not particularly religious, but my hometown is a very spiritual place. People believe that the spirits live in trees and mountains, and other parts of nature. The snake is considered an important creature. There's an old shrine and a lot of mythology and folklore related to the place, which also informed my work.

Are you more interested in the good spirits or bad spirits?

My work includes both good and bad characters.

Going back to your early days, how did you survive when you first got out of school?

I did construction work for half the year and made artwork in the six months that I was off duty.

Were you able to exhibit your work?

Yes, I showed in the rental galleries every year. I made sales, but I set the price so low that it wasn't enough income to support myself.

Who was the audience for the shows at rental galleries?

Since there wasn't much of a commercial gallery scene in Japan in the early 1990s, curators and collectors would come to the rental galleries to see what artists were doing. And, of course, other artists came.

When did you start making work in your current style, which is more surreal?

It was around 1999 or 2000.



IZUMI KATO, *Untitled*, 2017, wood, soft vinyl, acrylic and pedestal, 189 x 44 x 50 cm. Photo by Kei Okano. Courtesy the artist and Perrotin, Hong Kong.



Installation view of **IZUMI KATO**'s solo exhibition at Perrotin, Hong Kong, 2018. Photo by Ringo Cheung. Courtesy the artist and Perrotin.

In 2005, your paintings and sculpture were shown in the exhibition "Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture," which commented on post-war Japanese society, particularly its infantilization and youth-oriented consumerism. In the show's catalogue, your zombie-like characters are equated with the impotence of society during that period. Was that on your mind?

As a young artist I wasn't happy with Japanese society in the 1990s. I was angry about the situation, but my paintings were not about the anger that I felt. What's written in the catalogue is just an interpretation of the work to fit the times.



IZUMI KATO, *Untitled*, 2017, fabric, pastel and embroidery on paper with vintage frame, 31.5 × 25.7 cm. Photo by Kei Okano. Courtesy the artist and Perrotin, Hong Kong.

Are you painting zombies?

If you see them as zombies, that's fine. My paintings are open to interpretation. There's not a specific meaning or message.

The eyes in your figures are almost animalistic. Are these hybrid figures, part human and part animal?

My first intention when making work is to make something interesting. I use large, popping eyes to make the figures more evocative. I want them to be surprising or somewhat weird and funny. My painting style also has a relationship to my sculptural forms.

The nose tends to blend into the mouth in your figures. Is that something that you carried over from your sculptures to the paintings?

That's become a style for my work, but again the intention is to make an eerie or uncanny kind of piece. People tell me that they immediately recognize my work by the way the faces are rendered.

Maybe that's what makes people think of the characters as zombies, as they almost look like skulls.

That's not my intention, but my favorite artworks always have a duality of opposite elements, such as life and death.

You paint with your hands and a spatula, right? Do you use your whole hand or just fingers?

It depends on the area and the effect. Since I paint with oils I wear latex gloves when applying the paint and apply it quite freely. I like to use different textures, depending on the parts of the painting.

Is the background painted with a spatula?

Yes, the flat parts are painted with a spatula, including the background and opaque areas.

You seem to like splitting the body of the figures in your recent paintings into different parts across multiple canvases, like a Surrealist exquisite corpse drawing. Why did you decide to depict the figure in this way?

I started the multi-panel series in 2015. The idea derives from my sculptural creations, especially the soft vinyl series. My soft vinyl sculptures are compositions of separate components, which are joined together in the end, with inevitably visible seams between the parts. So later, I thought I could also apply the same presentation to my canvas paintings. I thought it would be interesting to depict the body of the figure as not only divided by contours and palettes but also by the painting's ground. Making sculptures always gives me new insight into my two-dimensional works, and they sometimes interact. I



IZUMI KATO, *Untitled*, 2017, oil on canvas with wood frame, 184 × 62.5 cm, Photo by Ringo Cheung. Courtesy the artist and Perrotin, Hong Kong.

usually start a painting and a sculpture at the same time in the studio, and switch back and forth until the works are finished.

When you carve your wooden figures what kind of wood do you use?

I use camphor tree wood. It's a very traditional material for wooden sculpture in Japan. It's very soft and has a very strong smell, which repels bugs. Most of the Buddhist sculptures are made with camphor wood.

What kind of tools do you use?

I start with a chain saw to make a rough shape and then use chisels on the smaller parts, and I sometimes add joints. Then, I paint them with acrylics and brushes.

Since 2016, you have been incorporating new materials such as stone into your works, as seen in the figurative sculptures of the "Untitled" series (2017). What motivated you to start doing this?

I add a medium when I think it can be integrated into my work. I don't intentionally look for specific materials; it's rather coincidental. With the stones, for instance, I was fishing at the seawall near my studio in Hong Kong and noticed these granite stones at foot. I don't shape the stones like I do the wood or soft vinyl, but choose the natural ones, which nudge images into my mind. It's like nature gives me a subject and a challenge. Stones contain a lot of geographical information—ones from different regions have different characteristics, for example, Hong Kong's are pointier, while the Japanese ones are rounder and smoother, so I prefer to leave certain parts of the stone plain. I used Japanese stones in my new sculptures in the show.

Do you identify your characters as male and female or are they meant to be androgynous?

I create them as male and female.

Are any of your works portraits?

No, because there's no model for them. They're just human beings.

Paul Laster is a New York desk editor of ArtAsiaPacific.

Izumi Kato's solo exhibition is on view at Perrotin, Hong Kong, until March 6, 2018.

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