

Essay about the Portrait of a Woman

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In mid-April, I opened a complete catalogue of Ryohei Koiso's works at the library and found myself at a loss.

My solo exhibition at Eunoia had been decided, and I thought that, if I was going to do it, I might as well develop a subject connected to Kobe. For me, a native of Himeji, Kobe had always been a city that was both near and far—a great city within reach, yet somehow distant. Even now, living far away, it remains a place I look up to with a sense of longing. Ryohei Koiso, who was born in Kobe, is also someone I have long admired. In museums throughout Hyogo, I often encounter Koiso's paintings. During my long years of preparing for university entrance examinations, I looked up to those paintings, and to the beauty of the women depicted in them. I cannot count how many times they encouraged me.

In my practice, I have explored the relationship between painting and titles, as well as the structures of language such as names and word order, producing and exhibiting paintings, installations, and video works. In my series Cut-Up Text Painting, I adapt a method known as cut-up—cutting an original text into fragments and rearranging them to create new sentences—into painting. I thought I might try applying this method to the titles of Koiso's paintings as well.

However, as I began researching Koiso's titles, I found myself, as mentioned at the beginning, completely stumped. They were simply too simple. I began entering the works listed in *The Complete Works of Ryohei Koiso* (Kyuryudo) one by one into a spreadsheet. There are probably more efficient ways of doing this, but I happen to love this kind of work more than anything. At first, everything went smoothly: Pavilion by the Pond, Lin Ben Yuan Garden, Resting Dancer. But after about an hour, I began to feel irritated. There were simply too many titles beginning with the word Fujin—Fujin-zō (Portrait of a Woman), Fujin Shōzō (Portrait of a Woman), Fujin-zazō (Seated Woman). Three hours into the data entry, my stomach was beginning to churn. If there were Portraits of Women, then surely there should also be Portraits of Men or Portraits of Gentlemen. There are male portraits, although only a countable number of them. Yet almost all of them bear the names of their subjects as titles: Portrait of Issei Kobayashi, Portrait of Dr. Yasuhiko Asahina, and so on. This has to do with the attributes of the people being depicted. In a Portrait of a Woman, Koiso chose the woman because he wanted to paint her, hired a model, and painted her—or, when the subject was a family member, painted her without compensation. Male portraits, on the other hand, were generally commissioned: someone had asked him to paint their portrait, and in such cases, it was only natural that the person's name would become the title. There are a few portraits of women that likewise bear their subjects' names, such as Portrait of Kimiko Miyazaki, but the imbalance was unmistakable. I understand the structure. I do. And yet, somehow, I could not quite accept it. The Koiso I had admired so deeply began to feel strangely distant. I found myself wanting to know the real names of the women depicted in those Portraits of Women.

Generally, in a case like this, one might take the approach of researching the person's actual name. When I contacted the Kobe City Koiso Memorial Museum of Art to inquire about the names of the models, I was told that they could not disclose such information for reasons of privacy.

I began thinking about how I might uncover their real names, but then a doubt suddenly occurred to me. What would I actually come to know by learning a woman's name? Suppose I managed to discover that one of the women referred to simply as a "woman" was named Ai. Would that mean that I had come to know her? No matter how many facts about her I gathered, I would never be able to escape this problem. And yet, I do not want to give up on trying to approach her.

Rather than collecting fragments and assembling them into a form, I wanted to make her emerge through disassembly. I felt that I should bring to light something that contains every possible possibility, and present the world in which she exists as it is.

For this exhibition, I therefore considered every possible combination of two-, three-, and four-character hiragana names and printed 24,010,000 possible names. “aaa”, “aai”, “aaui” ... all of the possible strings of characters are arranged across 6,422 sheets of A3 paper. Somewhere within this enormous accumulation of paper, the women's real names must inevitably be included.

As I continued this experiment, which began with Koiso, my focus gradually shifted toward Portrait of a Woman as a form of representation. I wanted to grasp what it is that makes a Portrait of a Woman a Portrait of a Woman. At what point does something become a Portrait of a Woman, and at what point does it cease to be one? To determine this, it seems that it must be a painting. If a woman is depicted, could even a fragment of her arm constitute a Portrait of a Woman? And if the figure were rendered in white, would it still be a Portrait of a Woman? Conversely, if the title is Portrait of a Woman, could anything become a Portrait of a Woman, regardless of what is actually depicted? In other words, could there be a landscape painting titled Portrait of a Woman? It may sound like sophistry, but just as I did with the works made from letters, I want to explore every possible manifestation of the Portrait of a Woman.

Although this exhibition began as a critique of the Portraits of Women named by Koiso, as I have continued making the work, my admiration for Koiso has, if anything, grown stronger. Above all, I remain deeply captivated by the beauty of the women he painted. I sometimes even find myself wishing to become a woman like them. But, of course, I do not want to become a "woman" as such. I carry this kind of contradiction within me. I am angry at the Portrait of a Woman, while at the same time I am drawn to it.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Kobe City Koiso Memorial Museum of Art, to curator Yumie Kawahara of the museum, and to Noriko Sawamura of the Koiso Art Club for kindly responding to my inquiries.