

## "A Great Vision, and..."

I first met Satoshi Saito last year, at the end of the cherry blossom season. Kiichi Iino of the Contemporary Sculpture Center had said to me earlier, "I want you to meet a sculptor from Canada. You really must." Iino had kindly introduced me to a number of outstanding sculptors and overseas curators, so that one evening, recalling his "must," I paid a visit to his house.

Over the phone, Iino had said, "Saito is an old friend. He lives on a farm in Canada and makes sculptures." I imagined a stocky, bearded man with arms like logs. However, the real Saito was quite the opposite, quiet, gentle, and rather like a university professor. I was relieved and immediately felt we had something in common.

I paused to pay my respects at the shrine of Iino's mother, recalling the late-night conversations on the phone in which she had helped me with my English translations. And I reflected on how often people meet by accident and how their memories are revived in equally unanticipated ways. So too a friend's album of memories may reveal rather different pictures than those in one's own album. Listening to Saito and Iino reminiscing on the past, I couldn't help but smile as each produced slightly different versions. For both men went to Keio University in the 1960's, had common friends among their classmates, and recalled the turbulent demonstrations against the US-Japan Security Treaty that took place on the campus at that time — friends who, thirty years later, like Iino and Saito themselves, now lead different lives, each becoming successful in his field.

There are many crossroads and choices to be made in life. Saito majored in econometrics and left Japan in 1961 on a scholarship to continue his studies at McGill University in Montreal. He must have been an excellent student, and I assume he could have chosen an academic career. How in the world, I wondered, did his experience in Montreal lead him to become a sculptor?

He must, I suppose, have followed the dictates of his own mind. Quite possibly, I think, he was influenced by the counter-culture of the 1960's and its echoes in Montreal during the time he was at McGill. But more profoundly he must have been seduced by "a great vision."

However grandiose it may sound, I think he came under the spell of "creation," or what in the West one calls the Muse, or the genius of poetry. I felt I could understand how he might stand before a lake in Canada in the spirit of the poet, Junzabro Nishiwaki. What, I thought, would be more natural than that Saito should see himself as a reflection of his great predecessor, who had also majored in economics before becoming a poet.

After his marriage to the Montrealer, Louise Doucet, someone with whom he could share his solitude and his vision, he moved briefly to the resort town of North Hatley before settling finally in the village of Ways Mills, about 100 miles south-east of Montreal.

From the catalogue of the Doucet-Saito Retrospective Exhibition at the Sherbrooke Museum of Art I learned that it was while playfully exploring the clay in his companion's workshop that he arrived at a fatal turning point, giving his life a whole new direction. He became deeply involved with ceramics, and this kind of involvement has become the hallmark of his career — a profound and meticulous research in the service of his "great vision."

Saito had made a new discovery, "clay," and his understanding of this medium was greatly enriched when he and his wife, Louise, came to work in Japan for a year and nine months. "The art of Satoshi and Louise Doucet Saito," says a director of the Sherbrooke Museum, "springs from their sense of adventure and their willingness to explore the limits of their art." In 1979, one of their works was included in the "Shigaraki" Exhibit at the Isetan Museum in Tokyo. And they had a solo exhibition, "Concepts in Clay," at the Koffler Gallery in Toronto in 1985. Theirs has always been an intimate collaboration, not only in raising a family and looking after 135 acres of farmland, but in the widening development of their art.

Saito's mentors and friends in Japan include Tatsuzo Shimaoka, Seimei Tsuji and Kyo Tsuji, and the late Shoji Kamoda. He who is not afraid to ask has the courage to meet those from whom he may learn. A man can only learn the significance of the world beyond himself when he values the encounter with others.

So too, I have seldom been so excited as when I saw the photograph of his granite sculpture, "Untitled," made in 1983. I felt the shape was not simply original but refreshing, reflecting the spirit of the artist who cares for people and can share with them the sense of a new land, balancing his perceptions and feelings in a consummate form.

Since I first expressed these observations in my article "The Great Vision of Satoshi Saito," which appeared in the *Mitahyoron* in July of 1991, I have wondered how Saito was doing. The other day I received the announcement of his one-man show accompanied by photographs of his work, a series of granite sculptures that appeared to be fresh in their form, dynamic in their structure, and suggestive of a poetry in harmony with the Canadian landscape.

At last I would really get to see Saito's work. I found it difficult to control my excitement. It was like going to see a friend after many years' absence. I knew I should confront the work without preconceptions, but my strangely passionate expectations made this difficult.

At the *vernissage*, Saito was fully occupied greeting old friends and acquaintances. Thus, after looking at his work, I had only a brief time to extend my congratulations before leaving the gallery.

My account of this event may be characterized as sentimental, but how can one express a feeling shared by a whole group of people? The feeling of shared excitement is itself a key aspect of one's encounter with a work, which in turn moves people beyond their everyday sympathy. Quite simply, I thought the work excellent — though that too might be seen as a way of avoiding criticism. The works, however, indicate clearly that the artist himself has no intention of merely catering to popular taste.

Among the ten recent works in stone included in the exhibit, I found "Au bord du printemps" the most interesting. Three stones were piled one on top of the other in a rather humorous way. Each time I looked at it from a different angle it took on a whole new appearance. I wondered how three stones could have been placed so as to create this remarkable effect: that of stability within an apparently unstable form. Each stone seemed to tell me I should turn it around in my gaze. Then an idea hit me. The artist must have stopped chiselling at that very point for fear that another blow of the chisel would break the stone into pieces. So it stirred my imagination — and further, I felt some distant memory was carved into the stone. I imagined Saito turning the potter's wheel, as it were, in his mind.

I hazard the guess that just as his discovery of clay marked one of the turning points in his life, so the discovery of stone marks another, placing him anew under the spell of poetic "creation."

I was told that the Saitos visited Kyushu and Shikoku during their stay in Japan, and that they paid a visit to Isamu Noguchi's workshop in Mure (in Takamatsu, Shikoku). On hearing this I thought to myself, Saito will go back to Canada and, in the context of that vast landscape, he will keep on asking the ultimate question posed by such distinguished predecessors: "What is Sculpture?"

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