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Beyond objects in Twombly's lyrical photos

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Private collection. Cy Twombly's "Zucchini" (1997)

The exhibition “Cy Twombly Photographs: Lyrical Variations” now underway at the Kawamura Memorial DIC Museum of Art in Sakura, Chiba Prefecture, brings to Japan for the first time a side of the widely respected American-born painter and sculptor Cy Twombly (1928-2011) that was little known and rarely seen until quite late in his long career.

Beautifully hung in the special exhibition galleries of the Kawamura museum, this show presents a choice selection of 100 photographs, along with some 30 Twombly paintings, drawings, prints and sculpture pieces to show the context of the photographs in the artist's oeuvre.

As we would expect from an artist of Twombly's renown, the works from his mature period — when he first began to show his photographs publicly from 1993 — are far from ordinary photographs. Consistently soft in focus and often showing only portions of objects in cropped spaces, it is often difficult to discern what the original subject matter was. And yet, the quality of the colors, the unpretentious but somehow compelling compositions and the dreamlike atmospherics make each one a small but precious work of art.

In her message for the exhibition's catalog, Yumiko Saito of the Cy Twombly Foundation describes the unique appeal of the artist's work in this way: “Cy Twombly's work has always been perceived and enjoyed as literary and poetic experiences. This art can also be described as possessed of an aesthetic that is detached from the visual reality of the objects we see before us and goes beyond being depictions of physical objects. ... Rather, they touch the viewers like thoughts from fragmented poems, and appear as mysterious memories.”

As we see in the first gallery of the exhibition, Twombly actually began taking photographs while still an art student, using a pinhole camera to do black and white shots of different arrangements of bottles, suggestive of the paintings of Giorgio Morandi. He also took pictures of ancient temple ruins when he traveled at the age of 23 to North Africa and Italy, the latter being the country he would fall in love with and end up living much of his life in.

It was after this trip that Twombly began experimenting with a technique of drawing in the dark that freed his lines from the control of the eye and his compositions from concern for the overall picture plane. These drawings would be Twombly's point of departure as an artist.

"Twombly brought the idea of drawing into painting — he drew in paintings, instead of painting, he painted in drawings, and he painted in sculpture. So he was, in effect, playing with the nature of media," Kawamura curator Kiyoko Maeda told *The Japan News*. She also explained that because Twombly made little distinction between the media, his works are now labeled drawings if they are on paper — like the beautiful series titled "Scenes from an Ideal Marriage," which would normally be considered paintings — while those done on canvas are listed as paintings.

It was well after Twombly became internationally successful as a painter and sculptor — and had moved to Italy as he had always hoped — that he began to work seriously in photography around the year 1980. He used a Polaroid camera and photographed in color for the first time. His subjects were the things that caught his painter's eye in daily life — flowers like tulips and peonies; food like cabbages, onions, zucchini, bread and cheese; details of Roman sculptures; and nondescript interior spaces in his large 16th-century villa north of Rome, or later his hilltop villa in Gaeta to the south.

"Particularly interesting about Twombly's photographic works of this time is that the subjects are photographed in close-up and with extreme haziness, or soft focus in their outlines in many cases. ... Indeed, when you line them up and look at them together you find, strangely, that the tulips take on the appearance of Roman sculpture, and Roman sculptures take on the appearance of peonies," Maeda writes in the catalog.

Another thing viewers will notice is the beauty of the colors and texture of these photographs. Almost all of the color photographs in this show are either "Fresson prints" enlarged to 2.5 times the size of the original Polaroid photos and printed on paper by the advanced photocopying equipment of the Fresson studio in Savigny-sur-Orge, France, from 1990 to 1994, or what Twombly called "color dry prints," made in much the same way at a print studio the artist set up in Munich around 2007. This printing process enabled Twombly to experiment freely and achieve what Maeda describes as finely nuanced colors and a grainy textured effect like a pointillist style painting that creates a unique mistlike finish.

Saito notes that in addition to the poetic quality of Twombly's work there are also elements that can be seen to contain Eastern aesthetics. And indeed, rather than being likened to sonnets, Twombly's small photographs, with their subject matter stripped down to only the most essential elements and the nearly complete absence of any explanatory details to hinder lyrical expansion in the imagination of the viewer, might most aptly be compared to haiku.

"Cy Twombly Photographs: Lyrical Variations" will continue until Aug. 28.