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Contemplating Cloth – The Weaving of Jun Tomita

The village of Koshihata, set on the mountain slopes of north-western Kyoto is the home and workplace of Japanese textile artist and weaver, Jun Tomita. This rural setting of neatly ordered vegetable plots and rice fields, hills and woods, with its endlessly changing views, and semi-self-sufficient lifestyle, has made the perfect locale for the contemplation and creation of now much celebrated and collected textile works.

Tomita was born in Toyama in 1951, and following conventional schooling felt a deep desire to work with his hands. He explored a number of options including carpentry, gardening and cooking, and had the opportunity to try weaving. The craft spoke to him immediately and he committed to special evening and weekend training outside of his day-job, quickly building significant expertise and understanding of traditional *kasuri* (ikat weaving) techniques.

Some unease with the established world of kimono culture and an interest in wool led him to look further afield in his studies and he spent the first of a number of extended periods abroad. Working at the Jam Factory in Adelaide, Australia (1976-78), he was able to engage in developing his own textile practice. He also managed to complete and publish the seminal co-authored English-language title *Japanese Ikat Weaving* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).

This was followed by a period as a student-come-teacher at West Surrey College of Art & Design, Farnham, England (now UCA), where in two years he both earned a BA (specialising in wool dyeing, and the weaving and finishing of rugs), and taught the art and craft of *kasuri*. He then enjoyed a stint as a studio assistant to Peter Collingwood, with whom he shared a special working relationship and philosophy.

Returning to Japan in 1983, Tomita needed to establish himself in a market to which he'd never really felt aligned. The opportunity to settle in the mountains, allowed a natural fit to evolve, particularly in terms of his design identity, which needed to speak of who he was as a weaver and maker, incorporating something of his own culture as well as all that he had seen and absorbed abroad.

With training in the traditions of carefully controlled ikat weaving, the quiet magic of wool weaving and finishing, and technical ideas of what might be, he developed models of weaving using double cloths and dyeing techniques to create art rugs and mats for the floor.

Later, moving to develop single cloths, but retaining a focus on specific materiality and substance, his techniques developed to meet his visual aspirations. He began to explore ikat as a graphic tool over the 'canvas' of his surfaces with context becoming increasingly important as he explored the possible applications of his ideas. Traditional patterning was abstracted in

scale and placement. Functional cloths like *noren* (split curtains) appeared alongside 'panel' work of wall-mounted painting-like units.

Through a desire to better capture a painterly aesthetic, he began to apply dyes directly to stretched-out warps, freely colouring and texturing them. Vaguely impressionistic in quality these surfaces call on deeply understood values and practices of ikat dying, carefully and strategically married with the languages of warp and weft - the effect of interlacing yarns delivering the final texture, colour and feeling to the surface. The approach then is gentle adaptation of established traditions, practice and thinking, and employs the vocabularies of both weaving and painting in almost poetic symbiosis.

While the nature of this later work is particularly free and characterful, nothing is accidental, everything a result of extended consideration and refined and repeated practice. The dyed surfaces take organised but gentle planning and lengthy processes of consummate craftsmanship to execute. They are also of intangible time, values and accrued understanding and intuition.

Tomita is much inspired by the rhythm of the world around him, and the accidental marks (or memories) of balance and friction between man and the natural world observed in travels both near and far. His works capture energy, light and rich tonal palettes in confident, grounded plains of textured colour and delicious juxtaposition. Line, marks, colour and quiet geometry are delivered in harmony. There is at once peace and solitude, joyful play and natural order.

Colour is of particular importance to Tomita and he is something of an expert. He famously produced a sample book of 1000 dye samples during his time at Farnham and has done much more since. Colour in his work has been likened to the psychologically charged works of Mark Rothko and Helen Frankenthaler, and in close and distant viewing, one might even see Gerhard Richter. Tomita acknowledges these comparisons for their familiar aesthetic philosophies and pure emotional power.

Recently opportune connection with discerning buyers, has seen his aesthetic make an intriguing and welcome return to 'clothing', with his ideas applied to the making of *obi* (the broad sashes wrapped at the waist of kimono). The modern, yet traditionally informed voice of his work allows his aesthetic to play well in this very particular sartorial language.

Professionally, relationships outside the established and traditional kimono trading system, have ensured almost direct contact with his clients, whilst pragmatically embracing of collaborative opportunity, means he has been able to efficiently produce lengths of obi cloth that embody his unique, one-off style, bringing welcome security to a diverse practice.

As with many Japanese artists and makers, Tomita is a most generous individual, both in the open sharing of his practice, and in the broader effort to connect and enliven traditional crafts and contemporary practices. He is an

inherently practical and resourceful man. Both his home and studio have been carefully tuned to his ways of living and working.

Objects of life and work in both the old farmhouse and the converted greenhouse that is his studio, reveal numerous ingenious solutions or adaptations to innovations in practice. There is much evidence of hand-made and modified tools and quietly sophisticated DIY. At the same time, nothing is contrived, and the feeling is of natural order and well-being. He is also a most excellent cook, working effortlessly with home grown, locally or carefully sourced (or exchanged) ingredients to prepare delicious and naturally beautiful food.

Youthful energy, personal style and broad connectivity belie a career of 40 years in which Tomita has (quite organically) invented himself and his practice. His voice is consistent but equally as gently evolving or as textured as that which inspires him.

In his own words there is in the work “a mixture of Japanese tradition, the influence of modern art and nature, which invokes strength and sensitivity, shape and colour, surface and lines and the world of ying and yang.” These textiles of rare and irregular beauty certainly represent great balance. They are also a window on the spirit of a weaver and maker truly in touch with his craft, and his art, and the world from which they emerge.