

TOPICA PICTUS

Kenjirō Okazaki
TOPICA PICTUS /
La Cienega

July 17 – August 14, 2021
Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

岡崎乾二郎
TOPICA PICTUS
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Corn and Summer Wheat /
急き立てられた土地所有

In painting terminology, *local color* originally refers to the natural color of an object, which is to say its “specific color.” The Impressionists more or less demolished the notion that objects have specific colors, but as long as we hold that objects are themselves specific, then the problem remains of how to represent that in color (i.e., light).

A long time ago (in the late Meiji era / early twentieth century), *local color* was once rendered in Japanese as *chihōshoku*, or *local[e] color*. This is an obvious mistranslation, but it was one that generated productive discussion in its own right.

Yamawaki Shintoku’s *Morning at the Station* (1909) is what started it all. To sketch out the details of the debate, someone voiced the naïve opinion that if you were to use the latest Western technique—say, Impressionism—to depict a Japanese scene—say, Shimbashi Station in the rain—then that painting could only ever feel forced, unnatural, no matter how technically proficient it might be. In due course the debate reached the height of intricacy or, perhaps, confusion, leading to the argument that rather than being defined by geographic, natural conditions, *local[e] color* has more to do with the surrounding cultural traditions. Essentially, unforced (natural) images, images that are genuinely of the place, are defined by how they have traditionally been depicted there—by which it follows that they are in any event artificially produced, in which case the artist should be free to paint as they like, unconstrained by that tradition. We are all familiar with Kōtarō Takamura’s declaration that there is nothing wrong with painting a green sun.

But in fact a similar argument had already unfolded a decade prior to *Morning at the Station*, and here the problem was described as being as incongruous as using chopsticks to eat *bifuteki* (from the French *bifteck*). If *bifuteki* stands in here for Western food, then the comparison seems to be saying that the use of Impressionist techniques by Japanese painters is as unnatural as it would be for a Japanese person who only knows how to use chopsticks to eat their *bifuteki* with chopsticks. But since the dish to be eaten, that is, the scene to be depicted—Shimbashi Station, say—is of *Japan*, the logic doesn’t hold up. And since the materials and techniques of oil painting—pointillism and what not—were themselves imports, the chopsticks metaphor also seems to be turned on its head.

Yet there was an even more warped situation behind the arguments in this debate that anticipated the *local[e] color* controversy. The topic is not raw food but cuisine—food that has already been cooked. Cuisine is not a natural condition as such but culture, and culture has its historical formations, its own specific context or background. The use of the word *bifuteki*, and not the English *beefsteak*, is significant here. It means that while it may have looked like Western cuisine, *bifuteki* had already become Japanese cuisine, as with *sukiyaki* before it. In other words, what this metaphor is really asking is whether it is really okay, after their having gone to the

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Thomas Hart Benton

Corn and Winter Wheat

1948

Oil on canvas

20 1/2 x 29 1/2 inches

Gift (Partial and Promised) of

Helen Lee Henderson in memory of

Helen Ruth Henderson, Founder,

HRH Foundation

National Gallery of Art,

Washington D.C. 2001.122.1



Kenjiro Okazaki

岡崎乾二郎

Corn and Summer Wheat /

急き立てられた土地所有

2020

Acrylic on canvas

6 1/4 x 8 x 1 1/2 inches



trouble of importing beefsteak and studying it until they could somehow make it their own, for Japanese people to eat their *bifuteki* with chopsticks.

Although the nuances and tastes of cultures do vary by *locale* or region, each culture is ascribed to the specificity of its own historical process, and not the natural environment as such. Even when it comes to cooking the same thing, that process will have its inclinations, which then express the character of tradition. Sashimi, sukiyaki, *bifuteki*, curry rice—all are in that sense already Japanese tradition. Pushing this thought further, Shimbashi Station

might have been built with the latest modern technology, but it is still different from the Gare Saint-Lazare, just as in the case of *bifuteki*. It exudes a mood and forlornness, even, that could only come from its having been adapted to the Japanese climate. Put another way, by the time this debate took place, Japan had already entered an age where one could feel a special sentiment and nostalgia not in Western cuisine as such but in all the Japanese-style Western dishes—from *hayashi raisu* (hashed beef rice) to *bifuteki* and *katsuretsu* (cutlet, modeled on the Wiener schnitzel)—that had been forged from the modernization process.

While the translation of *local color* to *local[e] color* may have been a mistake in art-historical terms, thinking about it in light of the debates described above suggests that it is in fact an accurate rendering of the issues identified by the American literary style known as (indeed) *local color* (the most famous exponent of which is probably Mark Twain), which emerged in the United States after the Civil War (that is, *local[e] color* is an appropriate translation in this context). Here local color called for giving expression to the different intonations, dialects, and customs of the region—deviations and distortions that communicate a powerful specificity and reality unattainable in standardized writing. It claimed that universal writing does not lead to internationality, as the value of literature is found precisely in a locality or particularity that cannot be reduced to such a standard. As a matter of course this was tied to the historical particularity of a United States that had been divided by the Civil War, as well as a nationalism that sublimated negative distortions into a source of pride. Needless to say, since it was advanced by white immigrants from Europe, this literature had its prototype in Europe, but the cultural specificity of the United States is evidenced precisely in how that prototype was brought to the new continent and adapted there amid the many struggles and challenges of daily labor. The powerful drive to depict American particularity (locality) as specificity after the Civil War would only grow in strength in the 1930s following the Great Depression. A mentality that seeks to overcome social crises and divisions leads to the rediscovery of locality, leads to nationalism. In the art world, this was called *Regionalism*—the prime examples of which were Grant Wood or Thomas Hart Benton. In literature, the counterpart at that point in the lineage of local color would be William Faulkner. And Benton and Faulkner were born into essentially the same generation.

“Now I know what I want to paint, it’s these people who don’t brag, who don’t pretend to know more than they know. And what they know is useful. They know how to plow a field. They know where the fish are. But they don’t know anything about aesthetics or museums or art.”

There is a particular hue to Regionalist painting, one that evokes a nostalgia of a sort. It is the color of folk art, as in a painting of a weathervane on signboard that you might see in the countryside somewhere; it is the color of house paint, with its admixture of white for stronger coating.

If he was making such paintings in the American South and West, then a good number of those working people Benton calls “they” must have been Black. Just as in Faulkner’s novels—only Benton could not paint the way Faulkner could write. If you want to depict American history in all its specificity, then there’s no avoiding the deep fissures with which it is riven. And since the specificity of American history lies precisely in its tragedy, Benton ended up depicting those fissures as though they were already resolved/reconciled, no matter how he tried to paint them. Nationalism absolves real conflicts as if they are already reconciled—sometimes even adapts them into objects of nostalgia. The murals that Benton painted at schools and elsewhere are still a source of controversy today.

And yet, coated though it may be in the thin and almost tacky-looking hues of local color, this drama has its depths too. It calls forth the strange nostalgia that accompanies fear and anger and sadness. And incidents always occur when summer gives way to autumn harvest.

That’s right. Jackson Pollock’s career as a painter begins from his studying under Benton.

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