BOOK REVIEWS

Akiko Ōtake 大竹昭子. *Floor Plan and Imagination* 『間取りと妄想』(Madori to Mōsō）. Tokyo: Aki Shobō, 2017. 203pp. ISBN:9784750515076

In Japan, people who are crazy about seeing "madorizu," floor plans, are called "Madori Maniacs." When they pass by real estate offices, they cannot stop staring at the sheets of floor plans stuck on the window glass and imagining themselves living in the space. In other words, floor plans are the source of their happy imagination. Including sheets of floor plans of the characters' houses or rooms, this unique book entitled Floor Plan and Imagination (Madori to Mōsō) gives 13 gem-like short stories describing how ordinary people live in their houses or rooms and what the private spaces give them. Of course, the author is a madori maniac. She made up the floor plans first; then, she imagined how people live there. Finally, her imagination took shape as the unique stories.

The author's profile is quite interesting. As a photography critic, Akiko Ōtake (1950-) has been reviewing numerous photographs. When she lived in New York in the early 80s, she was fascinated by taking the urban landscape with her camera. For her, taking a photo meant being freed from meaning. However, instead of living as a professional photographer, she wrote after returning to Japan. She could delve into the differences between taking photos and writing by writing. In fact, Ōtake's writing covers not only photography; her curiosity and eye on art take various forms of writing: literary reviews, non-fiction, museum guide books, interviews, and fiction.

Of all her writings, fiction is especially significant and unique for its specific narrative voice and the quiet, private ambiance dominating the stories, all of which lead the reader to "listen to" and "see" what is told. In her first collection of stories, *Picture Book Boy* (『図鑑少年』*Zukan Shōnen*, 1999), which includes monochrome photos taken by Ōtake herself, every story suggests how strangers' lives are subtly entwined and how they interact. Each other shows insignificant but unexpected coincidences or troubles such as a wrong telephone number from a foreigner, the death of a neighbor, an unplanned bus trip, and other inconveniences. All stories are told from the first-person point of view, and all the neutral narrators seem to be Ōtake herself. Since none of the stories have any dramatic plot, the reader might read them like personal essays. However, still, they are fiction because nostalgic or poignant feelings are distilled into their essences. The stories show the people's fragile, temporal, yet indispensable relationship in urban life; they are strangers to each other, but one day they relate in some way, then go away from each other, returning to strangers again. Ōtake's narrative style undeniably catches and shows this process which is usually made invisible and inaudible in the noisy urban city.

Floor Plan and Imagination is her third collection of stories. Although many narrators are given their names this time, it inherits the specific narrative voice from the earlier collections. Ōtake also adopts a third-person point of view for some stories. Most notably, however, Ōtake's idea of relating floor plans to the resident's subconscious is incredible; in the private space, the character's hidden desires or inexpressible emotions are revealed. In other words, the spaces make them do so. For example, "Like Standing on the Prow" (「船の舳先にいるよう

な」, “Fune no Hesaki ni Iruyouna”) is a story about a nameless, neutral narrator who edits a housing magazine spending his (her) weekends in a triangular house by the river. The story starts with describing the unique house which (s)he built. Like Ōtake’s past stories, the reader would find it quite comfortable to “listen to” the narrator’s voice, as ambient music played in a quiet café or whispers in someone’s room. Moreover, the narrator’s description of the detail of the house and his (her) memory excludes any emotion, which is also specific in Ōtake’s narrative style. The reader can “see” the house like a camera eye and “listen to” the narrator’s voice without being exhausted or exceedingly enchanted by the story. The narrator tells how (s)he loved to see “madorizu” in childhood and how (s)he gave up being an architect. Befriended by a humorous older man called Mujina-san (Mr. Badger) in the countryside, the narrator was given his triangular land with pole-like space attached, which looked like a flag. Drawing “madorizu,” the narrator built the triangular house attached with the narrow pathway leading there. The narrator also describes how a stream running under the pathway meets the river in front of the triangular house and how the sun-lit, triangular room with a wide glass window overlooking the river accepts her (him) warmly. The narrator is spiritually satisfied with the room and the friendship with Mujina-san. However, at the end of the story, the narrator reveals how the river running in the rain leads to her (his) reveal suppressed desire for life. Being naked and howling like an animal, the narrator confesses:

> I was no longer I, being one with the running river. The body sensed it, being there protected by a single pane of glass. Without the glass, the body would no longer exist. Excited by the sense of being on the verge of being and not being, and penetrated by the joy of the whole life, I howled wildly again (21).

The narrator’s revelation of the desire is outstanding in the quietude of the story. It is clear that the triangular house, the private space of the narrator, contributes to the revelation.

Another story, “Counter is Great” (「カウンターは偉大」, “Kauntā wa Idai”) zeroes in on the sexuality of the young woman protagonist named Mitsuko. Mitsuko, who once worked as a mathematical teacher in a high school, moves to a house that has a spacious dining room with a wide counter. She plans to have private mathematical lessons for students in the dining room to make them feel at home; she instructs them from the far side of the counter like a hostess. However, another reason to be inside the counter is to prevent herself from touching young boys. In fact, she really loves teenage boys because “no matter how coolly they behave, they hide inexhaustible sexual appetite inside them, and they are depressed by an unspeakable gloomy feeling which disturbs their sense of identity” (86). She wants to help young boys vent their suppressed sexual energy and make them feel relieved. She recollects that she made love with a local teenage boy during her trip in Mexico and remembers how they were like little children exchanging their lives without any hesitation or fear. In Japan, Mitsuko found young Japanese boys lifeless and solid, but she thought she could “strike water inside of them” and help the water flow again (88). This poetic and precise expression ensures the story’s literary quality because the water inside of the boys is a source of life that Mitsuko admires. Knowing that she cannot help touching

boys if they come to her lesson, Mitsuko decides to protect herself with the counter like a shield. The counter humorously and bitterly symbolizes the restraint or the suppression of her own sexuality. Although Mitsuko's revelation might sound shocking, the reader could sympathize with her because anyone must have some inner "water" waiting to be struck.

The collection includes many other unique stories: indistinguishable twin boys living in symmetrical rooms and their growing adolescent brilliance and unique personality brought out by their girlfriends ("Twin's House"「ふたごの家, "Futago no Ie") ; a quiet young woman secretly writing cruel stories in her windowless bedroom ("Preparation Room" 「仕込み部屋」, "Shikomi-beya"); an old man talking about his mysterious experience in a writer's labyrinth-like house ("Town in the House"「家の中に町がある」, "Ie no Naka ni Machi ga aru"), and so on. The reader will want to read them over and over again.

As the coronavirus pandemic has totally upended our daily lives, we have come to spend more time in our own houses or rooms. Many people claim "no more stay-home." However, it is humorous and creative to think that our houses or rooms have their own identity, which impacts our identity; they are like our friends or partners who see and listen to everything we do or say. In her collection of critical essays on Japanese photographers, *On Their Sincerity to Choose Photography: 50 Years of Japanese Photography* (『彼らが写真を手にした切実さを：日本写真の 50 年』, *Karera ga Shashin wo Tenishita Setsujitsusa wo: Nihon Shashin no Gojū Nen*, 2011), Ōtake emphasizes how the camera eye differs from our human eyes, saying that a camera does not select anything; it takes in everything that our eyes fail to see. Moreover, explaining how everything in the world is ever-shifting, she points out that we cannot see the same photograph the way we saw it before, for our cells are fluctuating moment by moment, too. If we want to read *Floor Plan and Imagination* many times, it is because the stories are photographs taken by the eyes of the houses or rooms. Indeed, the floor plans become something powerfully important to the author.

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