

# ECLIPSE OF THE EARTH *Kazuo Katase*

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Kazuo Katase, *Mutter*, 1986, installation, Wewerka & Weiss Galerie, Berlin.

*Indeed the hidden and the manifest give birth to each other.* Lao Tzu

*And let me remind you once again that the work that transforms the latent dream into the manifest one is called dream-work. The work which proceeds in the contrary direction, which endeavors to arrive at the latent dream from the manifest one, is our work of interpretation.* Sigmund Freud

The viewer, stepping into Kazuo Katase's installation *Eclipse of the Earth*, enters a demarcated space of irrealty bathed in blue light, a dreamworld. A series of fluorescent light fixtures with blue filters, suspended from the ceiling, emit the light that renders the space and its contents an ethereal blue tone. Three "objects" inhabit this uncanny realm: an image of a blue sun in a light box; a large circular

black table; and a photographic negative of Jacques-Louis David's painting, *The Oath of the Horatii*. Katase's installation is comprised of components that initially seem disparate, but together effect a complex configuration that leaves an indelible imprint on one's mind.

Dramatic lighting and coloration techniques, combined with photographic images and sculptural objects, are key components in Katase's installations. The repetition of certain formal elements, such as lighting altered by colored filters and culturally loaded, symbolic objects, creates a structural continuity among his various installation works. Objects are saturated with metaphorical meanings, allowing for different interpretations. The installation space serves as a structured vessel for the content, recalling the configuration of metaphor and dream-work. Freud formulated a method for

interpreting dreams by uncovering the hidden meanings behind symbols that are produced through the process of dreaming. In dream-work as well as in metaphor, two or more signs are "condensed" into one. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan drew a correlation between Freud's conception of "condensation" that operates in dream-work and the creative structure of metaphor. Lacan recognized that metaphor, like dream-work, operates on a level of meaning where two or more terms are simultaneously present in one figure: *The creative spark of the metaphor does not spring from the presentation of two images, that is, of two signifiers equally actualized. It flashes between two signifiers...* One word for another: *that is the formula for the metaphor and if you are a poet you will produce for your own delight a continuous stream, a dazzling tissue of metaphors.*<sup>1</sup>

Katase, like the poet, "equally actualizes" or "condenses" multiple meanings within a given object. For example, his use of two anodized aluminum hemispheres may refer to tea cups, the Yin-and-Yang sign, and/or the mother's breast. Within the installation space, the structure and function of the allied mechanisms of creativity and dream-work are illuminated.

Katase's installations function as sites, where different layers of meaning can be contained within given objects, images, and other signs. At these sites, he combines various schools of Eastern and Western thought together into a multifarious, yet harmoniously orchestrated, composition. Katase is situated at the cusp between cultures, having spent the first twenty-seven years of his life in Japan before moving to Germany in 1975. Categorical oppositions between "Eastern" and "Western" cultures are circumvented, in his work, through a hybrid form. Katase reads one culture through another, and with the insights generated through this process, he invites us to reread again and again.

In *Eclipse of the Earth*, the image of a blue sun in a light box occupies one wall. The blue light is the constant factor in the installation: it comes into contact with all surfaces, and even where the coloration is not visible to the eye, the presence of the light is discernible through

its effects. This all-encompassing blue light temporarily transfigures and incorporates the viewer's body, thus further establishing her or his participation.

For a Zen Buddhist, the omnipresent light might suggest the infinite fusion between all things, achieved upon reaching a Zen state of mind. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, a Zen Buddhist scholar, described the effect of the boundlessness of Zen: "Your very existence has been delivered from all limitations; you have become open, light, and transparent. You gain an illuminating insight into the very nature of things."<sup>2</sup> The blue light suggests this capacity for Zen to illuminate by making the viewer look at things from a different perspective, literally, "in a different light."

In another reading, blue, connoting distance, solitude, and sadness, taps into a Romantic sensibility. Katase's evocation of a powerful Romantic symbol, the sea, introduces the dimension of distance or depth in his work. A closely related interpretation points to the vast and unknown realm of the imagination, which can be understood in terms of the notion of the sublime. From this viewpoint, those ideas which are obscure and vast have a greater productivity for the imagination because they are unbounded: *The ideas of eternity and infinity are among the most affecting we have...in nature, dark, confused, uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy to form the grander passions, than those have which are more clear and determinate.*<sup>3</sup>

The English philosopher Edmund Burke associated the notion of the sublime with the power to stir our imagination. The viewer's imagination is thus aroused in Katase's silent, but disquieting space with its curiously positioned symbolic objects and signs.

Katase also engages with the Western art historical tradition in *Eclipse of the Earth*. On a wall adjacent to the "blue sun," David's painting, *The Oath of the Horatii*, is presented as a negative image printed on three wood plates and tinted red. The blue light, absorbed into the positive tinted areas of the image, disrupts its legibility. Only after one's eyes adjust to the light can

the image be distinguished by closely examining the surface of the panels. This viewing is further frustrated by three planes of glass propped against the image. The wood panels and glass plates underscore the formal, tripartite divisions in David's *Oath*, and the way in which the painting creates tension between its planar surface and the illusion of perspectival space. The viewer within the installation space is also reflected in the surface of the glass. This obstruction to viewing questions the Western art historical reliance on perspective, and the philosophical implications that situate "Man" as a unitary subject at the apex of reason.

Katase's repetition of the formal divisions of David's painting reiterates its narrative divisions. The *Oath* depicts a scene of renunciation and sacrifice of natural, ancestral ties for the benefit of the state. The Horatii are shown taking an oath of loyalty to the state, as Horatius, the father, invests them with weaponry, the embodiment of a symbolic power. The bequeathing of political and social weapons/tools from the father to the sons occupies the central and left portion of the painting, and represents the patriarchal chain of culture. Huddled in the lower right corner, two female figures overcome with emotion are excluded from this lineage of culture and power. The *Oath* serves as an art historical marker for the Age of Reason, where enlightened Man dominates and represses the "irrational": Woman, Emotion, Nature. Such an eclipse of "Nature" finds expression through subtle but compelling channels in *Eclipse of the Earth*.

Occupying a central position in the installation is a circular, black table more than a dozen feet in diameter, set beneath the light fixtures. A red powder pigment absorbs the blue light, concentrating it on the surface of the table, which causes it to appear as a very dark blank space. Even upon close examination, the viewer may not be able to comprehend the effect of the blue light on the scarcely visible red pigment. Circling the emptiness that the table seems to suggest, one is drawn into this orbit by the seeming lack of a substantive surface. The table provides a visual paradox between presence and absence. For Katase, Existentialism, a predominant model of twentieth-century, Western philosophical thought, frames the question of

absence and presence. Jean-Paul Sartre formulated the notion of "being" as something that is intrinsically related to an absence: "If nothingness can be given, it is neither before nor after being, nor in a general way outside being. Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being—like a worm."<sup>4</sup> This question of "being and nothingness" is reframed and critiqued by Suzuki in the essay, "Existentialism, Pragmatism and Zen": *Zen does not find anything frightening in infinite possibilities, unlimited freedom, never-ending responsibilities. Zen moves along with infinite possibilities; Zen enjoys unlimited freedom because Zen is freedom itself.*<sup>5</sup>

Katase's position vis-à-vis "Eastern" and "Western" cultures results in multivalent approaches for merging meanings into symbolic objects and images.

The surface of the table can also be read in terms of a symbol of social relations, a site across which power and desire are played out—the boardroom, the kitchen, the Museum. A column in the gallery is encircled by the table, alluding to the often concealed ideology of the cultural institution. The strange irradiation emanating from the surface of both the table and the David image form a visual and psychological connection that can be linked to the power that each simultaneously embodies and disperses. These objects or symbols are no longer predisposed to a singular meaning, but rather are disrupted by a multiplicity of interpretations and visual strategies.

By eclipsing or obscuring, Katase examines the validity of a single meaning, challenging us to take different perspectives. By putting into play fragments from Existentialism, Romanticism, and Zen Buddhism, among others, Katase prompts us to contemplate and question our own positions in relation to various systems of thought. We are left within the space of imagination, metaphor, and dreams, in order to produce our own set of readings.

Lydia Yee, *Curatorial Intern*

1. Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), p. 157.

2. D.T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1964), p. 59.

3. Edmund Burke, *On the Sublime and Beautiful* (New York: P.F. Collier & Son Company, 1909), p. 55-56.

4. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Essays in Existentialism* (Secaucus, NJ: The Citadel Press), p. 107.

5. Daisetz Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1956), p. 265.