





Collector Takeo Obayashi – The Many Paths to Art Patronage



Mr. Obayashi in front of Ryan Gander's *The world is no longer revolves around you*. Courtesy of Hong Kong Arts Centre



Olaf Breuning, MR. HAND, MRS. ASS, MRS. KNEE, MR. FOOT. Courtesy of the artist Kodama Gallery

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TEXT / Yidi Tsao
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Olaf Breuning, MR. HAND, MRS. ASS, MRS. KNEE, MR. FOOT. Courtesy of the artist and Kodama Gallery





Yidi Tsao

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VIEW PROFILE

Mr. Takeo Obayashi is the chairman of Obayashi Corporation, a construction conglomerate, whose corporate art collection is amongst the best and largest in Japan today. Listed by ARTnews as one of the world's top 200 collectors, he is known in the art world for commissioning the Yu-un Guesthouse, which was designed by Tadao Ando in Tokyo, where he is showing his contemporary art collection.

The famous Obayashi corporate collection, or the "headquarter project", started when the company was about to move from a small, old office into a new building. Mr. Obayashi had a discussion with his father, who was the then chairman, about whether they would have artworks or not. The company didn't have any artworks in the old office in Tokyo at the time, but did in Osaka. The discussion was inspired by Mr. Obayashi's experience of joining the MoMA International Council as a member when there was budding interest in contemporary art. He and his father finally decided that it was no longer enough to hang the artworks, but they should also commission some site-specific projects. As a result, they met a few curators in order to select the artists and it was Fumio Nanjo who won their trust. This started a long-term friendship that eventually led to the current exhibition.

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Hiraki Sawa, Single-channel video (black + white) © Hiraki Sawa. Courtesy of Ora Fine Arts

They formed a committee to discuss what Fumio had proposed, as they had to carefully choose artists that not only had sufficient knowledge to create site-specific works, but could also deliver them on time. The result proved to be more than satisfying and Mr. Obayashi paid tribute to a great curator. He regretted, however, that Ed Ruscha, who had been on the list, could not be selected due to a limited budget. "We should have had him," said Mr. Obayashi, laughing it off. "Anyway, that's why I really enjoyed commissioning projects. I really have to thank Nanjo because every time the artists visited the site, he introduced them to me, so I had the chance to talk to them and visit the galleries. They then invited me to see other exhibitions. Thus, the relationship expanded." His experience of building up a corporate collection also facilitated a shift in Obayashi's personal collection from architectural drawings to contemporary art.

The reason why Mr. Obayashi is so obsessed with collecting living artists' works is because he can talk and have a drink with them, and also provide support for them by buying their artworks. Mr. Obayashi is well known for supporting young artists, despite the fact he is interested in a wide range of established, international artists. He attends as many gallery shows as his schedule allows, including graduate student shows, in order to discover real talent amongst so many young artists.



Hiraki Sawa, Spotter

"Two weeks ago, I went to Kyoto to visit one of their graduation exhibition and acquired three works from an artist. I try to chat with art students and encourage them by buying their works." Another way he's been supporting Japanese emerging artists is to feature them on his Christmas cards. "I invite one young Japanese emerging artist each year, mostly painters, to design my Christmas cards. I deliver those cards, with the artists' biography, to many art friends, museum people and art collectors, and then ask for their comments."

Mr. Obayashi has an extensive network in the international art scene, as he is a member of Tate and MoMA's international council and leads a group called the Japanese Friends of Centre Pompidou. He also recently raised funds for SFMOMA to create the Japanese Friends Room. "This is because the position of Japan is relatively going down and down in America. Most of the directors of Asian research museums and universities are either Korean or Chinese because more Korean and Chinese companies and governmental bodies donate money to American institutions, museums, think tanks and universities. This is not only because the Japanese government hasn't made much of an effort, but also because many Japanese companies haven't provided enough funding recently. We used to support a lot for those institutions in America, but not any more. So as Japan's position is going down, we want to do some cultural activities. At the same time, SFMOMA asked me to donate something. We could have used the private or corporate name as a naming gift, but that's not interesting, so we decided to have a "Japanese Friends Room" as a naming gift at SFMOMA after raising \$1 million."



Work of Kazuna Taguchi

Mr. Obayashi's corporate collection has stopped expanding because it has been difficult to convince the company's shareholders to keep purchasing artworks, but he has come up with a way of supporting the artists beyond a personal level. For example, the design of the company's commercial building has to be practical overall, but he has persuaded the tenant who opened a restaurant behind it to collaborate with the artist Hiroshi Sugimoto. Sugimoto has been designed to design everything in the space, including the floor, corridor, hanging sculptures, stone facade, tile table and chairs – in fact, everything except the dishes – to create a totally unique artistic eating/drinking space. "So this is another idea. We don't have many projects ourselves, but we can encourage our clients to do this, one by one. It's not easy, but some day we could have artists planning the whole city," said Mr. Obayashi, who strongly believes that art should be enjoyed by more people.

Interestingly, despite being a guy who hopes the whole city will eventually be planned by artists, he doesn't display any artworks in his own house. "I want to separate the living space, viewing space and office. I just don't want to have artworks in my house — I used to, but not any more. Maybe because of minimalism," he laughed. "Some people want to put everything in their home and private space, but I want to separate them. I care about the design of my guesthouse. Right now, I'm buying antique furniture. I think it goes well with Ando's building, so I'm very much looking forward to seeing the antique furniture there. It definitely doesn't fit in with my modern apartment though."



Exhibition view. Photo courtesy of Hong Kong Arts Centre

The Obayashi Collection at Yu-un — Tokyo, Japan:



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Yidi Tsao

TSAO Yidi is a Hong Kong based curator and art writer. She is currently involved with the International Symposium on Electronic Arts 2016 as Chair of Artist Residency Programme. At the same time, she is also working on a master's program in Curating Art and Media at City University of Hong Kong. She regularly contributes to regional art publications, including but not limited to, *The Art Newspaper*, *Leap*, *radian-online*, etc.

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