

Artist Interview: Shoji Asami

—This exhibition presents the results of your overseas study in Georgia. Please tell us about your reasons for choosing Georgia as your study destination.

I went to Georgia on a grant from the Gotoh Memorial Cultural Award's New Artist Award, a program run by the Tokyu Foundation that supports young artists. When I was writing my proposal, I thought it would make sense to choose a country people don't really know much about, rather than one of the big art centers. Studying for a year in France or Germany didn't feel necessary to me. What I wanted was to see how people live and how they think in a truly different place—to be on the ground in Georgia, and to experience firsthand how people lead their lives while carrying down traditions through the generations. Georgia has a complex history, and just a few days before my program started, Russia invaded Ukraine.¹ Georgia itself has also experienced invasions by Russia in the past. It's a tiny country, but people there take such pride in their identity and culture, and I chose it because I wanted to see how they manage to hold on to these things while living their lives.

—You stayed in Georgia for a year starting in 2022. Through the local culture, the Georgian people, and your interactions with them, I imagine you had many opportunities to experience different aspects of life there. Were there any experiences that left a big impression on you?

Georgia was so completely different from Japan in every way that for the first three months, I focused just on adjusting. For example, when I went to find art supplies, I looked for the turpentine that I usually use for oil painting. Even when I went to what they said was the largest art supply store in town, they didn't have it. I thought if they didn't have it there,

it probably didn't exist anywhere. But when I asked around, people told me to try this store or that store, and I finally found it in what was basically a stationery shop at the end of an underground passage, where for some reason there was a lot of it stacked on the edge of a shelf. There's no such thing as "you're sure to find this product in that kind of store." Everyone has their own import routes, and the only way to find what you need is to ask around and gather information directly. Things like searching online and considering logically where things ought to be didn't work at all. From that, I learned how important it is to actually ask people. Of course, this wasn't just in order to find information I needed. When I talked with people, whether friends or strangers I happened to meet, they would always tell me about their lives. Because of the country's difficult history, everyone had struggled in various ways. Listening to those stories made my being in Georgia feel meaningful. As I kept thinking back on what I heard, their narratives became part of my own life.

—The title of this exhibition, *From Tbilisi with Love*, connects to your serialized articles in the art journal *Bijutsu techo*—could you tell us more about that?

Starting in 2022, I wrote a monthly column for the online edition of *Bijutsu techo*,² where I shared my experiences and impressions of life in Georgia. Sending those emails from Georgia to Japan really felt like writing letters. I would send my writings "from Tbilisi with love," and the editors would reply with their thoughts. Once the articles were published, readers would send me their reactions too. That kind of back-and-forth felt like an exchange of letters, which is why I gave it the title *From Tbilisi with Love*.

—You spent a year writing about your experiences in Georgia, and in this exhibition you'll be presenting this material in a spatial form. At this point, what kind of

¹ On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, claiming it was implementing a "special military operation" to disarm Ukraine for the protection of residents of the "Donetsk People's Republic" and "Luhansk People's Republic."

(Japanese Ministry of Defense, Defense of Japan 2022:

<https://www.mod.go.jp/j/press/wp/wp2022/html/n120003000.html>)

² Online series, *Shoji Asami: From Tbilisi with Love* (<https://bijutsutecho.com/magazine/series/s50>)

concept do you have in mind for how the venue will be put together?

When I plan an exhibition, I usually start by looking at the space. When I first stepped into this venue, what struck me was how spacious it felt. Thinking about how to convey what I experienced during my year in Georgia, I felt there needed to be some way for people to encounter the works with that sense of spaciousness, while also moving through the flow of time. So in the center of the exhibition I'm building a room in the style of Georgian architecture, recreating the kind of space I lived in there. Visitors will walk around it, as if moving through a corridor, and eventually they'll step inside. I arrived in Tbilisi in winter, and I've planned the experience in that surrounding corridor-like space to unfold like the time I spent in Georgia. It will move gradually from winter into spring, summer, and autumn, even if the seasonal changes aren't sharply defined.

—Next, about the works being shown—new large paintings on canvas will also be included. Could you tell us about those?

I started painting on canvas after I came back from Georgia. Up until then I had been working on transparent acrylic panels. The shift happened when I joined an overseas gallery, and they suggested I try canvas since it's a more reliable material. At the same time, I was also beginning to feel limited by acrylic panels, and it seemed like the right moment to switch materials so I could explore different forms of expression. At first I wasn't sure what to do with very large canvases, but after about two years I gradually got used to them and was able to paint larger. At that scale, images like panoramic mountain scenes started to appear, and the change in size brought about a change in subjects. I think that came from my time in Georgia, constantly seeing the Caucasus Mountains and also climbing them, so their forms became physically imprinted on me. For this exhibition, I wanted to paint mountains. Smaller works couldn't really express their scale or presence, so even though I first thought about making small things, I came to feel that large canvases

were necessary.

—Besides works on canvas, you're also exhibiting photographs and prints. How would you describe those?

The photographs and prints are actually a single set of works. For the *Bijutsu techo* series, whenever I wrote a text, I would draw on the window of whatever place I was in so that the drawing was superimposed on the view, and then I photographed it. Those photos became the lead images for each article. As for the prints, I felt it was a shame to just erase the drawings on the windows, so I pressed paper against them and rubbed by hand, transferring the drawings directly onto paper. I sometimes sent those prints as letters from Georgia to Japan, and for this exhibition I wanted to show them together with the photographs as a set.

—You'll also be including installation elements, with actual letters you wrote from Tbilisi, as well as three-dimensional works and videos. What can you tell us about those?

For the exhibition as a whole, what I experienced in Georgia was...how can I put it—it was like time became extraordinarily dense. I was only there for a year, but it felt more like ten. The things I worked on during that time had real meaning, and I feel that unless I present them properly, it's as if that time won't have been fully processed. Since this show is also meant as a kind of report on the results of my stay, I want to show everything. One of the videos I'm including came from a project I was invited to join while in Georgia, where each artist contributed a 50-second video and we showed them together in a film festival-style program. Mine showed 50 pomegranate seeds lined up and crushed one by one while I counted in Georgian. But the pronunciation is difficult, and I couldn't actually reach 50 in 50 seconds—I only got to about 30. I think I could probably do it now, but that video really conveys the physical sense I had at that time in Georgia. I felt it was an important work for this exhibition, so I decided to include it.

3 Shoji Asami, *50 Grains of Pomegranate*, 2022, video, 50 seconds.

—This is a question we ask all the exhibiting artists, but can you tell us about your first encounter with art?

In my case, there wasn't really a moment of encountering art. I just found myself drawing before I even realized it. I was given art materials when I was very young, before I was fully aware of things, and when I drew, the adults around me were happy. Through drawing, I started to discover who I was. I think that sense has just stayed with me, and that's probably why I'm still making art today.

—At university, you studied printmaking in both your undergraduate and graduate programs, focusing especially on copperplate prints. How do you feel that background in printmaking has influenced your work today?

I chose copperplate printmaking from the beginning because I was fascinated by the beauty of the line, the physical presence of a single line on the plate. I wasn't the best student at university, but I stuck with printmaking for six years, and I think I learned a lot from it. There's the reversal of images, the way an image changes as it goes through all those different steps, or how ideas seem to slip out of your grasp. I think it taught me not to cling too tightly to those things. Now I paint in oils, but with that medium too, images have a way of disappearing and reappearing of their own accord. I think that fluid way of working and dynamic mindset grew out of what I experienced with transformative processes in printmaking.

—So you see the different stages of printmaking as part of a process of transformation?

Yes, but because there are so many steps, even though I could accept images being in flux or unexpected things happening, I couldn't deal with it when the image itself escaped me in the process. I could accept that as an experience, but I still didn't want to lose the images. I think that's why I moved to canvas, because I didn't want to keep letting images disappear during all those stages. The experience I gained from printmaking is still very much with me, though.

—Earlier you explained your reasons for switching to canvas, but was your initial choice to work with acrylic panels connected to your background in printmaking?

Yes, well, for me, images always come out of direct interaction with materials. With printmaking there were so many stages, and it was frustrating not to be able to get an image straight onto paper the moment it came to me. I was also making drawings, but just pencil or acrylic paint on paper didn't have enough impact, and the images I wanted couldn't fully take shape. I was looking for a stronger material to make the images more powerful, but canvas seemed to go too far in the other direction. Because it's woven fabric, with depth and a solid material presence, I felt almost a kind of violence in having to push images through that resistance. So I started looking for something in between paper and canvas, a support that would let images emerge more naturally, and that's when I happened to come across acrylic panels. I realized I could paint on them, and once I tried oils on the surface, it immediately felt like a material I could work with easily at that time.

—You use black in many of your acrylic panel works. Do you think that comes from the influence of copperplate printmaking?

I'm not sure if it comes directly from printmaking, but for me black isn't just a color. It's more like darkness, or space itself. When I paint from the reverse side of an acrylic panel, the texture of the paint disappears. All the materiality is gone, and what you see in the smooth acrylic is just pure color, without any physical presence. At that point it doesn't even feel like color anymore. When someone stands in front of it, they see their own reflection. I was using black as something beyond color, something that acts like space or a mirror, as a color that has an effect on the viewer.

—You mentioned that printmaking gave you a sense of working with reversal. When you paint on acrylic panels, what becomes the front of the picture is actually the opposite side from where the paint is applied. Do you paint with that in mind, imagining how

layers will appear from the front?

No, I'm not skillful enough to do that. I usually lay the acrylic panel flat and work with low-viscosity oil paint, going through this process of painting and wiping, painting and wiping, until the image gradually emerges. So it doesn't really build up in layers, and I almost never paint in a calculated way. If it ends up looking layered, that's just by chance (laughs). But it's true that the first marks I make end up in the front, so there's this interesting reversal of time that happens.

—For this exhibition, you're also planning to paint on acrylic panels modeled after windows. Now that you've worked with canvas, has the way you paint on acrylic panels changed from when you first started using them?

Yes, it has. I've started to think about doing things on acrylic panels that I can't do on canvas. What is it that only an acrylic surface can do? I don't overthink it while I'm painting, but because acrylic panels are transparent, it makes the images appear to float, and I feel it naturally leaves behind traces of my body and my movements. With canvas, those traces never quite transcend the material—if you just make strokes with paint, they stay there as paint. But on acrylic, a single stroke of the hand seems to remain as a gesture. The paint is there as a material, but it also seems to contain the presence of the body that painted it, left behind on the other side. So when I work on acrylic panels, I feel I can leave more of my physical being on the surface than I can with canvas.

—Finally, who or what has influenced you? It could be artists influencing you now or in the past, or influences outside of visual art, like literature, music, theater, or film.

That's a tough question, because I've always been more focused on making things than on looking at art or absorbing something from it. For me, expressing myself has always mattered more, so it's hard to name particular artists as influences. Still, I've loved reading since I was a child. My parents were both avid

readers too, so our house was like a library, and I was always surrounded by books. When I started reading on my own, I explored literature from all over—Latin America, Russia, France, and also classical Japanese literature. Reading gave me the sense that I could live other lives, taking on different roles in different worlds. It felt like inside books, I had parallel lives unfolding alongside my own. I think that sense of possibility—of what might have been—inspired me, and I put it into my work, or my work reflects it.

(Recorded July 4, 2025, at Yokohama Civic Art Gallery Azamino.)

Interviewer and editor: Sato Naoko

Translator[Japanese to English]: Christopher Stephens

Azamino Contemporary vol.16

Shoji Asami: From Tbilisi with Love

Dates: October 11[Sat]-November 3[Mon], 2024

Venue: Exhibition Gallery 1, Yokohama Civic Art Gallery Azamino

Organized by Yokohama Civic Art Gallery Azamino (Yokohama Arts Foundation), The Tokyu Foundation

Grant from Japan Arts Fund

©Yokohama Civic Art Gallery Azamino

1-17-3, Azamino-Minami, Aoba-ku, Yokohama
225-0012, Japan

<https://www.artazamino.jp/>



Yokohama
Civic Art Gallery Azamino