

**One Cut One Bow interviews:
Miya Hiro**



Left: Miya Hiro, *Bad mood Bach* (2016), acrylic on paper, 170 x 70 cm
Right: Miya Hiro, *Bad mood Leibniz* (2016), acrylic on paper, 170 x 70 cm



Building a restaurant in Hokkaido

One Cut One Bow (Magdalen Chua and Ryotaro Hoshino) interviewed Miya Hiro on 4 May 2016. He is currently an artist-in-residence at Das Japanisch Haus, Leipzig. When we got to know Miya, he seemed to be involved in everything possible, from showing his manga at the Leipzig Book Fair 2016 to drawing on the glass windows of a kebab shop in the neighbourhood. At the time of publication, he had just completed art workshops with children in Japan and Germany, with upcoming ones in Lithuania and Spain. Originally from Chiba, Japan, Miya has been living in Leipzig since 2015. He spoke to us about his forays in carpentry, performance, art education, and painting, and his approach towards his practice, embracing social connections as he experiments with new techniques and collaborations.

One Cut One Bow (OCOB): If you don't mind, could you tell us a bit of your background?

Miya Hiro (MH): I was born in 1986 in Chiba, a fishing town in Japan. I started painting when I was in kindergarten. My grandmother likes art and she said that I could be an artist. I didn't believe it though. I also played *taiko* (Japanese drums) in large festivals. In 1997, I entered a business-oriented high school and did commerce.

Eventually, I had to think about my future plans. I could have chosen a field related to finance and business but I had enough by then. I told my teacher that if I were to do business at university, my soul would die. I wanted to do art.

I was in the judo club in junior high school, but quit after three months. I didn't like the violence and hierarchy. After that, I joined the art club. However, we only played around and drew *manga*. My art

teacher in high school invited me to apply to the university he went to.

When I entered university, I wanted to learn painting. When drawing a still life, my university professor said that when I look at the apple, I would have to be aware of the apple being on the table, the table being on earth, and to feel the universe. It was crazy. I couldn't think in that way. I thought that since I couldn't have that kind of sensibility, I couldn't be an artist.

I was involved in the university festival together with the community. In the university neighbourhood, I played *taiko* for a community group and we organised a festival. We made floats with bamboo, including a roof and lanterns on a truck, and had a parade around the neighbourhood. My friends in university were in contemporary theatre and dance, and I helped them with the stage design, photography, and did some performance.

I also went to Okinawa for a project about nature and energy. I was helping there for two weeks and made friends with someone who built a restaurant in Hokkaido. I went to Hokkaido twice, for two weeks each time. I made their website and did some carpentry. The construction of the straw bale house took a total of two years though they couldn't work over the winter months as it snows a lot in Hokkaido. I then went to India and it was a big surprise for me.

OCOB: Which part of India were you in?

MH: I was mainly in the west, in Mumbai, Jaisalmer, Agra, then went to the south, to Kanyakumari, Kerala, Goa, then back to Mumbai. I was very surprised by what I saw and it made me realise that I

was not interested in ninety percent of things in my life back in Japan. Many things are commercialized and going to India made me feel that Japan is filled with unnecessary things.

OCOB: What did you experience in India to make you feel that way?

MH: One morning, I saw two people sawing a metal pipe on a street. I walked around the city and returned to my hotel later. They were still sawing it! In Japan, that would be done in an instant. On the train, a child cleaning the floor gestured for some money to eat. I agreed and gave some money. Soon, more children came. I couldn't any more money! I saw people by the riverside covered with a white cloth. My friend told me that a few days before, someone had killed them. These were all new to me; situations that I would never see in Japan. When I returned to Japan, I started to do photography and my graduation work was actually with photographs.

After graduating from university, I joined a theatre project in university, and was able to stay in school accommodation for another month. After that, I went back home. We have a family business with a convenience store and business hotel. At that time, my grandfather said that the business hotel would have to close. I then started a business, changed the hotel name, and its image. With my little bit of carpentry experience, I worked on the design and construction, and did accounting.

I started in 2010 but after half a year, there was a big earthquake with a tsunami near my hotel. Although my family and people around me were safe, it made me realize that if something happened to my building, I would have no business. I then thought of picking up a skill.

Life in Tottori

I joined a carpentry school for a year and was taught traditional skills, for example, fixing wood together without nails. I liked it and wanted to learn more. I found a *miyadaiku* (a carpenter who handles traditional Japanese structures) in Tottori and asked to join them. I had to get up early at 6 am, cook for everyone, and after work ended, cook for people again. It was hierarchical with the boss as king and I found it hard to fit in. The work was also tough and I had backaches.

One Sunday, I went to a restaurant and began talking to the owner there about my situation. She told me to go to Shikano, a town about 30 minutes away by car. I decided to go there and chatted to people I met along the way. Bit by bit, I began to make friends.

The town has an NPO that connects people to each other. There was this guy who lived near Shikano. One day, several elderly people from Shikano came and asked him to open a pizza restaurant as Shikano had many empty houses. The NPO also persuaded some of the house owners to use their empty houses for a theatre festival. I helped out at the festival as well as my friend's restaurant. They made tacos but since they were amateurs, the tacos didn't taste good. But they kept trying and it got better little by little.

Many children came to the festival in Shikano, and one or two children were painting with crayons. I

started to paint together with them and I don't know why but I had a lot of energy that I wanted to pursue. I went back to Chiba and started painting a lot. My friend in Shikano would sometimes ask me to help out at his restaurant and invited me to do an exhibition. At the exhibition, someone bought my works and the neighbours were very kind to me.

After a year, in 2014, an empty school had a room for an artist without rent. My friend's restaurant had a backyard with a small shed. I had a studio, lived in the shed, and I could eat for free as I helped my friend's restaurant by washing dishes and doing the accounts. I would walk 10 minutes to a public bath and my friend would give me a ticket for it.

I had a big exhibition at the theatre festival with a live painting performance. Eventually, I went back to my hometown and left for Europe. It was too comfortable at Tottori and back home, such that I couldn't grow. I decided to travel to have a change of perspective.



Art workshops in Shikano, Tottori



Miya Hiro with Ana Magallanes and Coral Castillo Mar (2016), acrylic on canvas, 200 x 350 cm

Departure to Europe and Leipzig

I went to Portugal and Paris. There were not many artists in Portugal and Paris was just too expensive. While in Paris, I checked out Berlin on the internet. But it was also expensive with too many people. I then decided to do a search for "Germany" and "empty house" in Japanese....and found Das Japanisch Haus in Leipzig.

I came to Leipzig, did an exhibition, made friends and got to learn about the culture here. I recently went back to Tottori with the organiser of Das Japanisch Haus and an artist who had lived in Leipzig and Munich. We did a *Küche für Alle* (communal cooking event) and a presentation, and I held an exhibition, *Eisenbahnstrasse* (named after the street Das Japanisch Haus is on).

My recent project is *Together Painting*, a series of collaborative paintings. It was held here in Das Japanisch Haus during a film festival about "no nukes". I collaborated with two artists from Spain. We couldn't speak, but we could paint together. This was my first time painting with them. It was very interesting working with Ana. When I started with yellow, she started with blue. There were then many colours used, and after a while, I wanted to use black and realized that she had the black paint. When I wanted to use white, she had the white paint.

OCOB: The works seem very cohesive. Did the collaborative process feel natural?

MH: I was surprised. It turned out to be very good. At our first collaboration, we painted a 2 m by 3.5 m piece in a day, working in a studio at the Spinnerei (an old cotton mill converted into art spaces).

OCOB: It's surprising to see 24 K gold in a painting.

MH: If I live in Paris, I wouldn't be able to use it. I can

do so here in Leipzig, as the living costs are low. I'm thinking of using a Japanese hand plane next.

OCOB: How does it work?

MH: It's a traditional Japanese tool used for shaving wood. When you use it well, you get very long, thin, and transparent shavings. I'm hoping to use the wood shavings for paper.



Miya Hiro, Ana Magallanes and Coral Castillo Mar (2016), acrylic and 24k gold on Japanese paper, 90 x 60 cm



Miya Hiro, *King eats dragon* (2014), oil on canvas, 80 × 65 cm

Planting art seeds

MH: Shikano has a small mascot called Umamonado, created by someone with a handicap, called Umada. Monado refers to a theory from Leibniz and coincidentally, there is a bronze statue of him in Leipzig University. We would paint Umamonado during the art workshops. After I left Tottori, a boy came up with his own story of Umamonado. When the city of Shikano asked me to make a children's book about Umamonado, the boy's story became the inspiration for the children's book.

The story goes through Umamonado's life, from the time he plants a seed, till the moment he falls in love, has a baby, and is finally alone. He doesn't have any facial expressions and so readers are not able to see how he feels. The story ends with Umamonado, now alone, planting another seed.

Recently, I got know about the artist Joseph Beuys. He said that all people are artists. That is also what I think. My friend who runs the restaurant said to me that a plant on the street is just a plant. However, when we take it, we make it precious, and when we put it on a dish, it becomes food. I think that these ideas are connected to art. I might find a stone in the street, but when I put it in the gallery, it becomes art.

I am looking for such art seeds in my life, for example, the Umamonado project and coming to Das Japanisch Haus in Leipzig.

OCOB: Your paintings are very energetic and I couldn't help smiling when I looked at your works and read the titles. For example, *Bad mood Bach* (2016)

and *Bad mood Leibniz* (2016). There are also a number of dragons in your works, such as *King eats dragon* (2014).

MH: When I was a child, I liked *Dragonball* a lot and painted many *Dragonball* characters but found dragons too decorative when I got older. I once saw a painting of a dragon in a gallery and thought that the artist was trying too hard to make it cool. However, I one day found myself painting dragons back in 2014! Maybe something within me changed. I liked gold when I was a child, but soon found it too showy. I didn't like how it is a symbol of money. But now, I'm able to think that gold is equal to other materials.



Miya Hiro and Maiko Date, *Sawyer Umamonado Picture Book* (2015), 16 pages



Taiko performance in Australia

OCOB: It sounds like you have more freedom now.

MH: Yes, bit by bit, I have gained more freedom. Last year, an artist who painted portraits came here for a month. It made me want to try it and I could! I wasn't able to before and being here opened my mind. Many people come to Das Japanisch Haus and play music. The combination of live performances and art is something that is very interesting for me.

OCOB: Do you play music now?

MH: I sometimes play *taiko*. I begged my mum to send them here. They're cheap, and I just play them for fun.

One of my friends, a professional *taiko* drummer, was thinking for a long time about his future and about whether to continue *taiko* or switch to a more conventional career. He then decided to do a working holiday in Australia in 2013. When I saw his drum performance on Facebook, I went to Australia and performed on the street with him. We played the core of Japanese songs from Tokyo, Saitama, the north, and east, which are very energetic. Traditional songs have changed over the years but the core of these tunes is still perceptible. I think this experience is connected to my paintings.

OCOB: Do you feel that there is a core in your paintings?

MH: My paintings are not usually the same and are always changing. But, there is a core that I am finding a little bit of.

OCOB: How would you describe what you have found so far?

MH: Maybe it's this thing about everyone being an artist.

OCOB: Is it something like the appearance of your works or is it something more spiritual?

MH: Spiritual. I also learn "qi". It's about believing that I can do something. If I cannot believe it, I cannot do it. I wonder a lot about things around me. I know only a little bit. There are many, many things that I do not know. When I'm in a different place, I have a different way of making. However, I don't change. It's like an onion. I don't know what the core eventually is. But I enjoy peeling off the layers. My feelings change all the time and I experience ups and downs. Till now, I have been doing painting, business, *taiko*, carpentry, etc. and I feel that I haven't pursued each field well enough. But I believe that many things connect to each other.

OCOB: And you also make the connections. You do a lot of different things but you often come back to painting. I'm curious about that.

MH: Painting doesn't need skill. If I lose one arm, I can use the other. I tell the participants of my art workshop, "You have enough skills. When you want to be more skilful, you just have to practice. But skilfulness and being good are two different things." When I was a university student, my favourite painting was of the dream restaurant by my friend who runs a restaurant in Hokkaido. I could feel his energy, dream, and focus.

When I make a sculpture, I have to consider many things. The process and time spent changes how I feel. Painting allows you to be instinctive and to express how you feel immediately. Sometimes, when I paint, the painting says, "No!" and when I want to do something, it says, "Do this, do that." I want to make works that are original and come from my heart, and the process of painting offers me that.