

I saw it at the Fukuoka City Museum of Art collection exhibition in mid-February before its closure due to the coronavirus. Along with this work, there were another seven black paintings lined up in the corner that emitted a different energy from its surroundings.

Mokuma Kikuhata's funeral march no.2, is made by attaching innumerable red pottery like haniwa on to the black asphalt. Jutaro Yamauchi's "Algerian man" is composed by a humanoid figure attached to a blue-green copper plate surrounded by plaster reminding us of a desert.

Shigeharu Obana acclaimed work "Self-portrait " uses only the unevenness of the asphalt piled up on the board to express his eyes, nose and hair. The black lustered face looks like a coal mine worker.

"Each painting is different, but because they are dark you can identify them right away," said curator Yozo Yamaguchi. Asphalt is an early Kyushu-Ha trademark. At the exhibition hall in the late 1950, one of the members, Mitsuko Tabe, recalls that "it was noticeable. I immediately recognised it".

Around 60 years ago, there were still many uneven roads in Fukuoka city, and paving work was being done, an asphalt pitch was "100 yen per lump, it was cheap," said Tabe. Oil paints were expensive for poor young painters.

Thickly melt the asphalt in an iron pan on a portable clay stove, while the black smoke rises, ladle it and pour it onto the plywood, large areas can be covered at once. Furthermore, "the surface tension that appears is interesting and a thick uneven surface is created by chance. It's informal (unconventional)" said Tabe. Hot asphalt "also serves as an excellent adhesive" said Tabe. Fragments, pottery, cardboard, plastics, ropes, tubes, cloth... anything can stick to it. Tabe cut the bamboo broom pattern into slices and stuck them firmly.

Osamu Ochi was the first one to use asphalt. Ochi, who worked for a printing company in Fukuoka, found out in the work process that the glass plate coated with the photosensitizer is washed in an asphalt tub containing silver nitrate. He was fascinated by the beauty of the waste liquid.

Sakurai and Ochi met in 1956 and were at the core of the formation of Kyushu-Ha, during that time everyone started drawing with asphalt. A variety of daily necessities and junk items were added, "to present their raw life in paintings" says avant-garde

researcher Raiji Kuroda. "Ochi thought that asphalt was a material that was expressively strong. Sakurai thought that it could be sold as a material and an ideology."

The eldest son of Sakurai and painter Tomokazu Sakurai remembers his father's words. "Kyushu-Ha is not a 'group' but a 'material', it is not an 'ideology' but a 'thing'." The idea that everything can be material holds true to the contemporary avant-garde art movement of Neo-Dada in New York.

The production site was unexpected. In the intense odor of the high-temperature asphalt "I worked hard wearing only pants. It was like a festival, spectators would gather." Kikuhata recalls. "That was our commune," "It's no longer post-war," wrote the Economic White Paper in 1956. The latter half of the 1950s was an era of rapid economic growth in Japan. However, Fukuoka, which is located in the corner of Kyushu far from Tokyo, was a slightly different world.

Consumers rampaging during the postwar transition period

With the energy shift from coal to oil, a wave of rationalization was pushed to the coal mines in Chikuho and Omuta and labor disputes intensified. It peaked in the 1959 Miike dispute, which was said to be capital versus labor. Strikes and lockouts occurred frequently at railways, department stores, and newspaper companies. In 1956, pollution problems spread from Kyushu and the Minamata disease was officially confirmed.

There was an uproar. The 1960 political conflict against the Japan-US security treaty also existed in Tokyo, but Fukuoka was still in the midst of a post-war transition that was deeply rooted in the economic structure. The painters who gathered at KyushuHa were ordinary people working in this town.

Sakurai and Mamoru Matano worked at the Nishi-Nippon newspaper, Yasuyuki Ishibashi worked at Nishi-Nippon Railroad Co, Tabe and Yutaka Yagara at Iwataya department store. Kikuhata drew portraits on plates at the Raku ware corner of Iwataya. Most of the other members also received monthly salaries as school teachers and such.

"No one sponged off their parents" (Kikuhata "Anti-Art talks").

Sakurai holds a red pencil in the editorial department while taking care of a carrier pigeon used by the newspaper company to communicate with the branch, the rooftop of the pigeon house became a hangout for the members.

There are no art colleges in the area and few have received a specialised art education. Since there are no museums or galleries, the only way to become a painter is to study under a public organisation and be selected at public exhibitions. Not hindered by such a convoluted situation, they started rampaging to make a new move that was Kyushu Ha.

The origin is "genius", said Ochi. After graduating from high school in Saga in 1955, Ochi became a printer and read the overseas magazine "Vogue" at work. There he saw a Jackson Pollock's painting and thought, "I can draw this too." The two paintings he drew on that style were selected for the Nika Exhibition (Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Art) in autumn of the same year. Furthermore, they were exhibited in Room 9 where avant-garde works selected by Taro Okamoto were exhibited. Sakurai was shocked to see this painting. He didn't know that Ochi lived in Fukuoka. The following summer, 1956, Sakurai and Ochi met for the first time and formed a group. Sakurai, a labor union fighter for the Nishi-Nippon newspaper, demonstrating his ability as an "organizer" increased his circle.

Kikuhata, who won the first prize in the independent exhibition in 1956, was also invited to participate. Remove the painting from the canvas, roll it up and take the Nishitetsu train to Sakurai's house in Futsukaichi. He showed his paintings to Sakurai, Ochi, and Ishibashi. Kikuhata wrote in the 1986 "Anti-Art Talks" that everyone laughed and criticized, but when they met in March it was different. "When I showed it, I wasn't ridiculed when the voices started." "We evaluated each other as good or bad. There was no hierarchical relationship, at that time that was unheard of, it was natural for a young man like me to get caught up. "

Kikuhata was 3 years old when he lost his father and 6 when he lost his mother becoming an orphan. He stayed at the house of Masakane Yonedura, a classmate who later became an actor, while working he painted by himself. That's possibly Kikuhata's true motive. Kyushu-Ha was founded in August 1957. At the outdoor exhibition held in November, members wore a gunny sack with a "Q" written on it, hit an oil can, and paraded through town. Looking at the photo from this time, a wounded veteran wearing

white clothes stands with a donation box on top of the bridge in Nakasu. It was such an era.

“I was stunned that a proper member of society often did such stupid things without any concerns. Performing Chindon'y and having sumo tournaments in the middle of the street, while quietly going to work the following day. This was truly ridiculous. I'm sure this isn't just Kyushu-Ha fault. Society was Kyushu Ha.” (Anti-Art Talks)

Koga Shigeki