

Beautiful anomalous blooms hiding desire and unease: an interview with Takao Inoue

Inoue's exhibition "La petite voix" is currently underway at the node hotel in Kyoto (Text: Ai Kiyabu)

Have you ever heard of "broken tulips" ? The term refers to individual tulips with complex patterns on their petals and leaves, where there would normally be no such variation. In 17th-century Holland a mania for broken tulips saw bulbs being traded for astronomical prices, especially those of the red and white streaked "Semper Augustus" ("ever exalted"), said to have cost the equivalent of a house. But at some point, the price of broken tulips abruptly plummeted, plunging the trade into chaos. And this is how the "tulip bubble," humanity's first-ever inflated financial frenzy, came to pass.

All of which is a roundabout way of introducing artist Takao Inoue, who collects these broken blooms, seals them in acrylic, and turns them into works of art.

"Despite the fact that up to then, economies had been all about trading goods," he notes, "when it came to tulips, people dabbled in a money game whose purpose was not acquisition of the object itself, but investment in a quest for further profit. What I hope to capture is that moment when greedy human desire crossed a line previously deemed not to be crossed."

These days we know that the almost garishly beautiful mottling that appeared on these tidily pretty flowers is actually caused by a virus, and now any such blooms that emerge are usually burned. Yet despite efforts to stamp them out, broken tulips still pop up all over the world with healthy frequency.

"I visited several growers (to make the works) but they all insisted they had 'no tulips like that here.' When you actually go out to their fields, you do spot a few broken tulips, but I suppose they don't want to acknowledge the presence of 'diseased flowers' in their business. It seemed a kind of taboo among growers."

So flowers that once induced a kind of madness in people, have morphed into a source of shame to be covered up at all costs. Amid all this, it was a grower in Niigata who understood what Inoue was trying to do, and allowed him to gather broken tulips. Each year when harvest time comes around in mid-April, Inoue sets out to collect his flowers.

"The sight of a random broken tulip emerging in a sea of blooms is wondrous thing. It's not hard to see why people back then were so enthralled by them."

Once harvested, the tulips are transported immediately to a factory for sealing in acrylic. Sealing fresh flowers in acrylic is technically challenging. The flower is held in place in the desired form, acrylic poured in, then the surface polished, or given a matte finish. The processing technique used here is one developed by Inoue over years of battling with flowers and solvents in experiments at home.

Inoue has built a career shooting films and commercials since his twenties. So why did he choose acrylic for his production method, and not photography? In large part, it comes down to the existence of designer Shiro Kuramata.

"I had this urge, quite separately from my job, to capture artworks on film, and in the search for interesting subjects arrived at Shiro Kuramata. Kuramata's pieces are not only lovely to behold; they possess an underlying message or philosophy. I was especially impressed by *Miss Blanche*. It was made at the height of Japan's own financial bubble, and in it I could detect the designer's doubts about the state of society back then, and its delusory nature."

One of Kuramata's best-known works, *Miss Blanche* is a chair with artificial roses embedded in clear acrylic resin. Inoue says that while he was doing research on Kuramata, he met the acrylic craftsman who fabricated the *Miss*

Blanche chairs. Inoue decided to enlist his help to make an acrylic work of his own, and says his first piece contained a dandelion seed head.

At the time it was hard to seal fresh flowers, and it took from his first effort in 2004, to 2009 before Inoue succeeded. Shooting two-dimensional images as a film cameraman, he was discomfited by what he felt the camera failed to convey, and gradually began to concentrate almost obsessively on making acrylic objects. At some point, it became his springtime custom each year to gather dandelion seed heads near his Tokyo home.

But in 2013, a mutation appeared in dandelions growing in the capital. Inoue started to find specimens with conjoined spherical seedheads sprouting from a single stem.

“It felt like I’ d caught sight of something I wasn’ t supposed to see. I took that dandelion home and gazed at it for a while, before deciding to seal it for my own records.”

Inoue began finding these double-headed dandelions in 2013, and says they were present in greatest numbers in 2017.

“Having spent my time making cute, lovely ‘things,’ as I kept encountering, every year, these dandelions that at first I’ d tried not to see, I found I couldn’ t get them out of my head, and they insinuated themselves into my heart. It was as if their ‘voices’ gradually began to accumulate, until I too was seized by a desire to speak.”

Inoue’ s first solo exhibition in Japan is currently underway at the node hotel in Kyoto. Twenty-nine works are on display: fifteen broken tulips, and fourteen featuring dandelion seedheads. Each piece is unique, and the exhibition includes the mutant dandelions mentioned here.

The exhibition title “La petite voix” is apparently based on the “voice (voix) of the heart” emitted by an actor, rather than spoken out loud, in a film directed by Leos Carax. This is an exhibition that seems to symbolize the way that, in a social climate rife with uncertainty, people harbor thoughts and ideas they cannot readily vocalize.