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Air Spirits

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Architect Toyo Ito excels in silver light. His is a volatile brightness, made to lighten and hollow out solid things, to massage static forms, to dispel the last sign of earthbound weight.

Glistening metals are eaten into by air. Thin steel vaults loft above ground, opening like petals of some strange metallic flower with its delicate petals unfolded to gather sun and breeze. Solid beams are punched with openings, walls are dissolved into gauze-like tissues, each piece slightly offset to relax and breathe and draw light into imperious material. Even the lustrous rails seem pneumatic, as if borne on currents of air, tracteries of light that glide and loop along stairs.

Ito's ethereal aims are especially convincing in the wonderfully flowing spaces of his just-completed Municipal Museum in Yatsushiro, on the Japanese island of Kyushu. The evanescent light shaped here not only reinforces Ito's general intention to induce architecture to open

and float, but also is perhaps the building's primary expression.

Devoid of any assertive hue, this deceptively minimal structure is able to enjoy vast mutations of fluid color and reflection. Its pale tones take on a little of every color outside: now an overcast dove gray, now a hint of yellow-green, or watery purple, or softly fading pink. Reflections in the folded glasswork and aluminum screens insert flickering images into a zone of quiet

gray. The result is a vaguely drifting and even nomadic light, yet one strangely calm and still, a luminosity quivering in response to a visiting people and sky, shifting with every viewer and moment in time while holding its uniform satiny gray.

The superimposed light effects run into each other like transparent vapors, for the many thin membranes transmit and mirror light at once, trapping the layered brightness in a crystal lattice, where it clings, devoid of matter, and melts into the air. Yet, even as the light is magically suspended, it is immediately folded back into shadow and subdued. Gleaming aluminum is shot through with pinpoints of blackness. Membranous half-lights float like mists before smudged shadows in the roofen structure. An exhilarating transparency is turned slightly misty, blurred by overlapping films and patchwork reflections.

Dusky tones ripple along curving metals. The monochrome light is thus strangely full yet dim, clear yet mysterious, and pushed up into recesses one might expect to find in heavy darkness, uniting the light with various ranges of shadow and suspending it all around in a faintly glowing grayish air.

By these contrapuntal values, especially a dual austerity and elegance, Ito's light offers a startling recreation of the gray sensibility and tea-inspired aesthetic of traditional Japan. While colorless and empty, lonely in its wintry hues, its air of silence, the restrained palette gives rise to the most flamboyant of optical phenomena — voluptuous surfaces, a delirium of glitter and sparkle, infinitely multiplied images that seem to encircle and accompany us, a fairy-tale world like some hollowed out diamond or chandelier.

Spare yet abundant, calming yet awakening, this cool, silvery light refreshes the eye, even as it hovers between reality and dream. In the fragile interval between outside and inside, where we are opened again to the poetic imagination and to the wonders of simple perception banished from practical life, we can hear the breathing of someone alert to the pleasures and adventures of purposeless seeing. What a splendid way to enter a museum! ●



Yatsushiro Municipal Museum.

Photos by Henry Plummer.

