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ULALA IMAI, A PAINTER WHO LIVES IN A “WORLD WITHOUT SOUND,” ENCOUNTERS A TURNING POINT IN HER LIFE BEHIND A TELEGRAPH POLE.

Interview Part 1 by Bunshun Online editorial department

Loosely melted butter on top of crispy toast. Many of you may be familiar with this picture of toast. Ulala Imai, a painter who “can only paint in oil,” has continued to paint familiar indoor motifs such as dining tables, fruits, and stuffed animals. When she was a high school student, she clearly realized that she was going to become an artist because of a certain food. How could she draw such a “delicious looking picture”? We spoke with Ms. Imai at her home.

Why “I can’t draw if I don’t have something in front of me”

--Hello. I’m sorry to bother you. Is this your studio?

Imai: My studio is in the corner of my living room where I have a canvas. We have a family of five living here.

--Imai, there are a lot of things that you use as motifs in your paintings.

Imai: That’s right. I always put together a motif in front of me and draw it.

--When I asked for an interview, I received an email reply saying, “It is true that I was born with hearing loss and did not have the confidence to live in the community, so I set out to become a painter in order to find a job to live.

Imai: That’s right.

--How do you see and feel the world as you see it, and how do you project it into your work?

Imai: I haven’t been able to draw many images in my mind. That’s why I can’t draw unless I have something in front of me. For example, I can’t draw a cup when I’m told, “Please draw a cup with nothing in it. So I would only draw realistic ones. Butter is also oil, so it goes very well with oil paints.

--The piece of toast displayed over there also looks very tasty. Many of you may be familiar with Ms. Imai’s paintings from the cover art of “Kanawanai” (Kazuko Uemoto, Taba Books).

Imai: I’ve always been a painter who could only paint in oil, but after I was given the opportunity to do the cover painting for “Kanawanai”, even people who were not interested in art may have become aware of it. I guess the title and the usual ubiquitous toast pairing was interesting. People might think of me as a writer of buttered

toast. (laughs)

--Some of the works look like photographs when viewed from a distance. The texture of the butter when it's ready to eat is very real.

Imai: When you look closely at my paintings, they don't look like photographs at all, but I don't know why. Actually, butter is also oil, so it goes very well with oil paints.

--Oh, that's how it is, isn't it?

Imai: That's right. It feels like it's about to melt, but it doesn't. Then, when I was asked to draw soft yokan (red-bean paste dessert) called "Yururuka" by Toraya for an advertising job, I asked him, "How can I draw yokan in oil painting? I was puzzled. But the shape is square-like and the texture is buttery when I thought about it. I drew it with the intention of making it soft and buttery, and it turned out to be smooth. It looks so good when you match the speed of your brush.

--Why do Imai-san's pictures look so delicious?

Imai: I think it's because I drew the overall characteristics of the bread early, rather than looking at the details. I felt that if I took the time to draw it carefully, it would end up looking like it had been baked for a long time and not very tasty.

--It's called the essence of bread.

Imai: That's right. Draw without hesitation. It looks so good when you match the speed of the brush. For example, a pineapple core is like a fluorescent light.

--In the text of your first art book, GATHERING (Baci), which was published in August of this year, you wrote about "luminescence" and it was very impressive. "Once, in a dark room, a small canvas I had painted could be seen to glow. Ever since then, I've been interested in painting in such a way that it glows slightly from the canvas."

Imai: It was three years ago that I became interested in light. That's when I moved into this house. The countertops in the kitchen are now very clean and shiny stainless steel, aren't they? When I saw the look of the outside light coming in through the kitchen window and reflecting the shadows of the food on the stainless steel, I thought to myself, "Oh, the reflection is beautiful.

--For example, the wick of a pineapple is like a fluorescent light. Imagine letting the light shine from the inside out. He said, "You have to be quick, and you have to finish painting before the paint dries.

Imai: The house is surrounded by brown wood walls and is dark, so as I was painting it, I felt like it was glowing from within the painting. For example, when you come home after a hard day's work and it's pitch-black, if there's a picture hanging on the front door wall that looks like it's glowing from the inside, you'll feel the brightness and feel relieved. I thought it would be interesting if I could make a picture like that. I want to make the avocado look as ripe as possible.

--The avocado picture also looks like it's glowing, doesn't it? Is there a strong desire

in you to “draw something that looks delicious”?

Imai: That’s right. I want to make the avocado look as ripe as possible. My father took me to the Museum of Western Art overseas when I was a kid and I was impressed and attracted by classic covers of artbooks at the museum shop. So, I wanted to make an artbook that is like the ones sold in such a place. When I looked at the book that contains a selection of the advertisements directed by Mr. Kasai, his work seemed moderate, natural and gentle, which was close to the ideal image I had had. So I told Mr. Kasai the image I mentioned earlier and asked him to design my book. I really like the result, and I’m glad that I could work with him. I want to be a painter who is loved by a wide range of generations for a long time, rather being a focal figure during a short period. So, like the “MELODY” that I mentioned before, I draw each motif over and over again, changing it little by little. I hope such works will be recognized and appreciated for a long time.