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“WHEN I WAS A CHILD, I WAS SAVED BY THE VERTICAL LINES OF ANIME.”

Interview Part 2 by Bunshun Online editorial department

Ulala Imai is a painter known for her oil paintings of buttered toast. Her father Shingo Imai, a Western-style painter, wrote in his book “Homework Picture Diary Book” (Little More) that Ulala was born with hearing loss, and that she is now married, a mother of three, and has grown up to be a budding painter. Ulala Imai follows in his footsteps to become a painter who can only paint in oil.

--How did you spend your childhood?

Imai: I have two sisters and three older sisters. When I was a child, my older sister was very fond of fairy tales and fantasies such as “Never Ending Story” and “Momo”. I, on the other hand, couldn’t get into that world at all. When I was in college, “Harry Potter” was all the rage, and my friends told me to read it because it was interesting, but I couldn’t imagine it at all. I only read real things, like history books, for example.

--surprisingly so.

Imai: Maybe it’s just me, but I guess because I have bad hearing, I can only accept what’s real in front of me. I don’t have much of an imagination. While looking at paintings in European museums, I became fascinated by the world of kings, princesses, and patrons of Western paintings, and I was really hooked. When I was in the fourth grade of elementary school, an acquaintance of my mother’s gave me a comic book called “The Rose of Versailles” and I was hooked (laughs).

--Yes, it’s a cartoon, but it’s also based on historical facts.

Imai: From that point on, I got hooked on the history of the French Revolution and other gorgeous historical scenes, and I read a lot of books about that kind of history. For example, when you visit a museum, you may ask yourself, “What kind of drama is hidden in this crown? I’d like to know more about it. When I was at university, I was hooked on the Medici family and Botticelli in Kunio Tsuji’s “The Crown of Spring”. But I wasn’t very good at studying. That’s why I think most of my study of painting was done by actually looking at the pictures. The book I borrowed most often from the library was a history of Western art. How to paint on canvas. I would look at the picture and imitate the technique..... I was saved by the anime’s vertical lines.

--Did you have an affinity for TV and anime?

Imai: I usually try to understand what the person is saying by reading the sound through the hearing aid and the movement of the mouth, but in the case of anime,

the movement of the mouth and the words don't correspond, so I can hear the sound, but I can't understand what the person is saying. My sister loves anime, "Versailles no Bara" and "Ace wo Nerae! I was looking forward to watching "The Moomins" ("The Fun Moomin Family"), etc., but I had no idea what they were saying in the story. But even if I didn't understand what they were saying, I was still watching "The Rose of Versailles" quite actively.

--How can that be?

Imai: You get these vertical lines on your face, like "bang" (laughs).

--(laughs)

Imai: Vertical lines, white eyes, etc. I'm not sure what you're saying, but I do understand that "Marie Antoinette is overcome with grief". I also used to watch "Chibimaruko-chan" for the same reason. The vertical lines and white eyes somehow give you a sense of the story, and the purple background and the thunder that falls on the house let you know, "Oh, your mother is angry. The vertical lines saved me quite a bit (laughs).

--Thanks to the vertical lines.

Imai: Yes, and most of all, my sister beside me was annotating everything. Now, when I watch TV, I have subtitles on, but when I was a kid, there were no subtitles. Maybe my father felt sorry for me because I couldn't enjoy cartoons, so he dubbed many Western movies with subtitles to VHS, and I watched Truffaut's movies with subtitles from early on. I learned from the composition of the film, and I liked Visconti's films and so on. I also watched a Chinese drama called "Xi Yuugi" over and over until the tape was worn out. My family was a big talker, so I didn't have to be shy to talk about it.

--What about those posters over there?

Imai: That was also Truffaut's film, Truffaut's Adolescence. There was a store on the way to my prep school that sold these movie goods, so I bought them there. I liked the movie posters and postcards anyway, so I often stopped by them. I also saw a Chaplin movie. Anyway, the fact that it was subtitled was huge. But I didn't have any friends who watched that kind of thing at the time, so we didn't really talk about it at school. Fortunately, I didn't get bullied, made friends, and had a school day where I looked forward to recess.

--As I listened to the conversation today, I thought that Mr. Imai is a person who likes to talk.

Imai: I think a big part of it was that the family was talkative. My father was a painter, and he wasn't a salaried man who was gone from morning to evening, like his father. So it was a role where they listened to me in the house. When I was a child, I remember talking to my father all the time. I'm sure there must have been a lot of very boring stories, but my dad listened and he wasn't the "I'm busy right now, can you shut up?" type of person. It's as if he's not listening half the time, and he's hooking up with me as if he's listening. My sister was also a very talkative person, and when a commercial was played, she would sing the commercial song by heart. My

family was very upbeat. I think it's because of this that I am able to speak like this. I think he's like Mr. Idekawa.

--I heard that your sister sometimes corrected your pronunciation and intonation.

Imai: For example, there are words that are difficult to use intonation, such as oysters for fruits and oysters for raw oysters, and I don't know how to pronounce the "sa" line out loud, so I'm not good at it, but basically I just go off without thinking (laughs). I don't care. I don't have the ability to take a breath and have a conversation, so I'm talking anyway. I think I'm like that TV personality, Tetsuro Idekawa. It's easy to know what you're trying to convey when you're over-reacting like that.

--(laughs) You are the one with the machine gun talk.

Imai: I am sure that Mr. Idekawa is saying what he thinks without thinking too much about it. I really understand how Mr. Idekawa feels. The words already come out before I even think about them (laughs). I think it's a little unusual to see words come out so smoothly. It was nice that my family and I were upbeat to the core. My father drew his homework diary every day.

--The book, "Homework Picture Diary Book," written by your father, Shingo, was an assignment from the school for the deaf when Rei was attending a school for the deaf and dumb (a method of communication in which words are read from the shape of the mouth and words are uttered by imitating the shape of the mouth), and Shingo made sketches of what happened that day.

Imai: Through the editing of this book, I had the opportunity to talk to a teacher at a school for the deaf and hard of hearing, and he told me that instead of asking the children various questions like, "What did you do at home yesterday? So the picture diary book was homework for the parents that was given out as an aid to the teacher and the child to practice conversation. I would have been able to acquire the words and speak, albeit slowly, little by little.

--On your website you can see works from the last 10 years, starting in 2008, and many of them consistently depict familiar motifs.

Imai: In that sense, I think that the fact that you can only draw what is in front of you and you can't believe in it is definitely related to that. Sometimes I wonder if I would listen to music and draw pictures with images of that music if my ears were good. I don't have any of that at all. Rather, when I turn off my hearing aid and draw a picture in the middle of nowhere, I can really concentrate.

--Even in everyday life, with your hearing aids on and off.

Imai: Yes. I take a bath with my kids, and I can't hear the shower or the sound of water being splashed at all. So when you're spoken to, you have to look at your mouth and read it. I once had a hairdresser shampoo me with a waterproof cap to keep water out of my ears while I was wearing my hearing aids. The sound of the shower is very noisy, isn't it? I was surprised, "It's so loud" (laughs). When I go to the beach with my family, I take off my hearing aid so that it doesn't get wet and break, and it feels really good. It's scary to go into the ocean with no sound, though. It's so

so beautiful, really.

--Many people in the city wear earphones as if to shut out the sounds of the outside world.

Imai: Yeah, but I also like to listen to music. I put on music and draw pictures.

--What does it sound like?

Imai: I don't understand music with complex melodies like classical music at all, but oldies and songs from the old days resonate comfortably with me and I like to play them. I don't know the melody, but I do know the highs and lows of the notes. In my case, it's very difficult to explain it in words because I was born and raised to hear this way. You can turn off your hearing aids and enter a 'soundless world'

--Mr. Imai also wrote a piece called "The World Without Sound" in his book "Homework Picture Diary Book". The description of the beauty of the cherry blossoms was very impressive.

Imai: The world of soundlessness is beautiful. For example, during the cherry blossom season, there is a banquet at Ueno Park, and it's noisy. But I can turn off my hearing aids and enter a world without sound. Then, it looks like the cherry blossom petals are falling in slow motion.

--Is there a big difference between speaking and writing?

Imai: I'm a cheerful person, so when I talk to people, I speak cheerfully, but when it comes to writing, I tend to take myself too seriously. I can't write to Frank. When I put it into a sentence, the darker parts of myself come out. I wrote about my dark troubles that I don't usually tell people about. It was a painful experience, but I did my best.

--Have there been any turning points in your career as a producer?

Imai: That's probably "Sonezaki Shinju" (Mitsuyo Tsunoda, Little More), isn't it? I was commissioned by Suzuki Seiichi, a bookbinder, to draw Tokubei and Ohatsu.

--You were commissioned as a job, apart from your usual work.

Imai: Yes. Up until then, I thought I couldn't communicate well with people, so I always thought I'd get a job and start drawing. But after "Sonezaki Shinju", someone asked me to do this kind of work, and I started to paint. The communication has already started, right? I was very happy to realize that there were people who needed my paintings because I couldn't communicate with them, even though I thought I was going to live by my paintings. I was grateful.

--What did Tokubei and Ohatsu model themselves after?

Imai: I had always done oil paintings in Western-style painting, so I was confused at first. I didn't have any photos to model, and I didn't have any experience as an illustrator, so I was stuck. When I read the book, I thought the image of Tokubei was

that of Ebizo Ichikawa.

--You've found your own image of a concrete model.

Imai: I thought it was similar to the amorous Sukeroku played by Ebizo in Kabuki. Ohachi did the same, picturing a model of an actress. At this time, Tokubei got the first OK, but Ohatsu was not so lucky. I finally got the OK to draw Oshatsu, and I drank a beer in the living room, leaving the freshly finished picture on the easel. I rarely drink beer, but when I did, I was happy. Then the air was so quiet that I had a bad feeling about it. When I came back to the painting, my oldest child, who was about one year old at the time, was painting a painting that had just been completed in my studio with a brush.

--Oh, no.....

Imai: It's like hell (laughs). From there, I added two more drawings, and I don't even know how many more I've drawn. In the end, I had about six pieces rejected, so I held an exhibition called "Sonezaki Shinju" at a hair salon in Daikanyama (laughs). In many ways, it was a memorable job.

--Is there a difference between making your own work and painting for a commission?

Imai: It's completely different. When the order comes in, I wonder how far I can claim it as my own work, and I sometimes wondered if I'd become an illustrator before I knew it. I had some conflicts at first, but I'm happy to be able to relate to people. When the work starts, it's a lot of fun. There was an art director, a designer, and an editor on site. There are people in the job in a variety of roles. By getting involved, you can expand your relationships and work possibilities. What I thought was "I can only do from here to here" sometimes expands a bit, and new motifs can be found. However, I believe that if you have the courage to get involved with people, you will be able to expand your work in many ways. I believe that there are more good things to come.

--You're currently raising three children while continuing your work.

Imai: Balancing work and childcare is tough. I have three children, so it's not surprising. When I'm so focused on the production, I often forget to run errands for the kids... I am a totally unreliable parent. But I managed to get through it (laughs). The kids will be big soon, and I'm looking forward to interacting with them now that they're working adults. My wish is that I don't want them to become a painter.

--Oh, really?

Imai: My husband is a painter, and my father is also a painter, and my husband's father is also a painter. All of my relatives are from art universities, so we're already an art university family. I'd like to break up this strange tradition (laughs). I would like them to go down a different path.

--Do you have any tips for balancing the two?

Imai: I'm a quick switcher, so I paint while the kids are in daycare and elementary

school. When I get home, I clean up the pictures and don't paint them.

--What do you want to do in the future, Mr. Imai?

Imai: Now you're thinking about where you're going to exhibit your work. I think we've reached a point where we need to think about the way we present our work. I would like to exhibit in museums and other public spaces, and I would like to work hard as a painter through my work.

Urala Imai was born in 1982 in Kanagawa Prefecture. She left Tama Art University in 2009 and won the Kunio Honoe Jury Encouragement Prize at the Shell Art Prize in 2012. Her work has been used in advertisements and bookbinding for Toraya.