Time Windows, Part I: The Paintings of Shimon Minamikawa
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"The Waiting Grounds" is among the few of my stories set on an alien planet. The idea that we in this solar system may be late-comers to a universe whose life is virtually over has always intrigued me, though given a cyclical view of things it may be hard to decide whether we are the last guests at a party or the first to arrive at the next."
—J. G. Ballard (1977)

Seeking to uncover the painter's secret, I made multiple visits to his studio. But the canvases propped against the wall were always either already finished or as yet unpainted. Had the painter Shimon Minamikawa arrived too late, or too early? I had no idea; nor whether to ask such a question was itself already too late, or still too early. In the first place, I don't know how important being *in time* even is for a painter; on top of which, I still/no longer can/can't tell the difference between the two poles defining the condition of missing out—that is, between "being too late" and "being too early." In fact, they say we're currently in an ice age. I'm not talking about painting. It's established theory about this epoch, this ice age, which has supposedly continued for the last forty million years. It seems that what ended around ten thousand years ago was not the ice age itself but rather a relatively cold "glacial" period within the "ice age," which in fact has no definite temperature range. This means that what we know as the present is a relatively warm "interglacial" between the glacial that is said to have passed and the next to come. This theory makes me feel as though I'm struggling to survive, wriggling in the gaps between thick slabs of ice. I guess this means I was in time for one of those moments between recurring glacials in this ice age.

It was never my intent to approach things from the pretentious and lame question (lateness squared) of the artist's place in the history of painting, but when I tried committing to a direct explication of the themes in his practice, or carefully quoting his statements to elucidate the compositional elements in his works, or equivocating by playing at so-called formal analysis, or attempting to steal some kind of meaning/value from the work while refusing engagement with the composition by means of silly phrases like "painting as . . ."—well, the moment I decided to keep as far away as possible from that kind of writing, my thoughts on Minamikawa entered an extremely vague time zone. The kind where you feel there's something worth noting, but it's hard to describe what. The kind of twilight zone, neither day nor night, which in Japanese is given names that play upon notions of mistaken identity like *tasokare* (who is he?) and *kawatare* (he is who?)—a time neither here nor there for both those awaiting the night and those awaiting the day.

And perhaps, at a certain point, painting also got stuck in this time zone. Perhaps it's been that way for a long time already, and perhaps it will stay that way for a while longer yet. To my mind, the retention in this time zone that was produced by the art of painting, the extension of this time zone enabled by the genre of painting, begins at the latest with the emergence of minimalism and the almost complete disregard by the criticism and journalism of the time for the fact that the paintings of the 1960s that depicted the "minimal" fundamentally differ from the works constituting so-called minimal art. The depicted "minimal," and minimal art. Painting, and art that is not painting. I won't go into the reasons here for why this hardly difficult distinction was left unmade and confusion allowed to reign. In any case, this realization, which courts the ire of art historians and self-styled "minimalist" painters alike, was inspired by a conversation with Minamikawa about the genre of painting and its obsolescence in art. In fact, Minamikawa says the obsolescence of painting was one of his motives for wanting to become a painter.

Now I understand the time zones (time windows) Minamikawa depicts in his take on painting through analogy with the time windows J. G. Ballard works (fenestrates) into the narrative in his short story, "The Waiting Grounds" (1959): "I walked round the site, looking for some trace of the two geologists. A battered tin field-desk lay on its side, green paint blistered and scratched. I turned it over and pulled out its drawers, finding nothing except a charred notebook and a telephone, the receiver melted solidly into its cradle." The protagonist, Quaine, has found the geologists' camp by following the trail left a year earlier by his "predecessor," Tallis. It goes without saying that there, "Tallis had done his job too well." A secret remains when the "predecessor" hands his job over to the successor. The frustration the protagonist feels when he cannot find any clues about the mysterious pair of supposed geologists—the particular mentality awaiting the "late-comer"—permeates all of Ballard's descriptions of the camp. But it must be said that this scene, described in the middle of "The Waiting Grounds," is not the climax of the story. It is just one of the many intermediate scenes that are insistently drawn out until, at last, the "late-comer" suddenly assumes the identity of the one *waiting* for the next arrival (until the protagonist's mind becomes one with the "ground"). As with all the other intermediate scenes, this scene resembles the narrative structure of "The Waiting Grounds" as a whole, and this parallelism recalls the relationship that each of Minamikawa's pictures has with his overall practice.

Hajime Nariai has described Minamikawa's pictures as being characterized by "brushwork and lines that could be considered either free or lazy. Swathes of exposed canvas and a lack of color that confound distinctions between immediacy and incompleteness." Is Nariai saying that Minamikawa's works do not meet his expectations for balance and completeness in painting? Not so. He is well aware that the tendencies like "free" and "lazy," "immediacy" and "incompleteness" he identifies—all impressions that seem to be articulable—are kept undifferentiated in Minamikawa's works. Avoiding the trap of speculating about the artist's intent, Nariai's text is neither a personification of the picture nor a "picturing" of his own sensibility; instead, it is a performative response to the resistance of the works to such readings, and the way they escape articulation. So Nariai applies the analogy of "voice training" to Minamikawa's art. "[It is] the relaxation and pleasure that stop short of performance proper"—even if it rubs the painter the wrong way, Nariai's analogy is significant. The aim of "rehearsal" is improvement, but the degree of improvement is inevitably constrained by the time until "showtime"—it is on the basis of this common assumption that Nariai guides Minamikawa's viewers to a consideration of an art that defers the appointed "showtime," and a practice that misses a timely climax.

Minamikawa's pictures certainly foreground and magnify matters that normally (as has long been the understanding [which is how I'd like to leave it for the moment]) would be polished out of the veneer of "showtime." This is something viewers will surely recognize when they notice the traces of things that have been markedly wiped from Minamikawa's pictures.

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—Translated by Andrew Maerkle

Author's note: The quotations above are taken from J. G. Ballard, "The Waiting Grounds," in *New Worlds* (London) 30, no. 88 (November 1959). The epigraph comes from a comment by Ballard reproduced in *The Best Science Fiction of J. G. Ballard* (London: Futura Publications, 1977), p. 54. Hajime Nariai's commentary on Minamikawa was published in *Voices of 20 Contemporary Artists at Idem Paris: A Lithography Studio in Montparnasse*, exh. cat. (Tokyo: Tokyo Station Gallery, 2015). After reading what I had written so far, Minamikawa told me, "This is a mooncake-like essay." Setting aside that this tribute was clearly meant as the highest praise, I suddenly realized that Minamikawa has never depicted a mooncake in his works to date.