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Air Spirits

Henry Plummer

Architect Tetsuro Toyoda excelled 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.

Glimmering metals are eaten into by air. Thin steel vaults lift above ground, opening like petals of some strange metallic flower with its delicate petals unfurled 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 inimical material. Even the lustrous rails seem pneumatic, as if borne on currents of air, treacries of light that glide and loop along stairs.

Ino’s eternal aims are especially convincing in the wonderfully flowing spaces of his just-completed Municipal Museum in Yatsushiro, on the Japanese island of Kyushu. The gossamer lights shaped here not only reinforces Ino’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 rosy mineral 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 ring 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 subduced. Gleaming aluminum is shot through with pinpoints of blackness. Membranous half-lights float like mist before smudged shadows in the naked structure. An exhilarating transparency is turned slightly misty, blurred by overlapping films and patchwork reflections.

Dusky tones ripple along curving metals. The monochromatic 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, Ino’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 fluidlike and 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.