

Aleksander Woźniak

A conversation with Seiichiro Miida.

At the turn of April and May of 2018, I conducted an interview with the Japanese printmaking artist and associate professor of the Print Department of the Tokyo University of the Arts, Mr. Seiichiro Miida¹. One of the most interesting aspects of Seiichiro Miida's creative work is his ability and methods of composing graphical and drawing series. Authorial alla prima

¹The first time I met Seiichiro Miida was in 2014, during *International Mokuhanga Conference*, where I had the chance to see part of the graphical performance *Klopfzeichen*, organized in collaboration with professor Michael Schneider. My true fascination with Miida's art, however, began later, when I first experienced the artist's graphical works. In 2016, during the artistic residency *MLab*, I visited the workroom in the Tokyo University of the Arts, where I had the opportunity to, among other things, also see his drawings and sketchbooks. Series, such as *Little Story*, and especially his later ones – unending prototype series of sketches – always came with a number of puzzling plastic solutions. His art, using traditional techniques, while at the same time being fresh and unusual, became a source of deliberation, as well as an inspiration in my own work. For a couple of years now, I have been observing Seiichiro Miida's craft on Facebook, simultaneously publishing my own drawings. In this social media environment, we developed a dialogue-like setting, where we would alternately publish drawing series. The publishing of those sketches, drawings, and other artistic activities online became somewhat of a non-verbal form of communication, which both brought bilateral satisfaction and became almost a game. However, Seiichiro Miida's work always brought up questions – which I had hoped to ask during my stay in Japan. The conversations unfolded at the Tokyo University of the Arts, as well as in the professor's workshop in Hamamatsu, in Shizuoka Prefecture. During one of the meetings, we had our own drawing session, where we made series of sketches, referred to in one of the segments of this interview. (author's note)

compositions used by the artist in combination with his excellent drawing abilities are phenomenal and have especially attracted my attention. The images from the Little Story series, as well as the pages of his seemingly unending sketchbooks, imposed a lot of questions relevant to my research project, to which the answers I had hoped to find during the mentioned interview. I am grateful to my interviewee for the exceptionally warm greeting and a very valuable talk. Due to the organizational nature of my visit, I have, of course, not asked everything I wanted to. I am convinced that the core of the problematics of creative composition can never be fully caught by its verbal expression, as, in this case, it is art itself that is the inspiration.

Place of meeting: Tokyo University of the Arts

- I would like to ask you about the way literature has influenced your work – are there any links between what you make and literature?

Literature is, of course, a very common source of inspiration for me. I have recently been reading Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – it is a very interesting gathering of myths. However, above all, I am enchanted by Ovid's capricious, scintillating style. He never ceases to surprise the reader – and he never looks back. Another book that had a great influence on my creative work is *Écrits et propos sur l'art* by Henri Matisse. In the publication, Matisse deduces that the most important topic for an artist should be to add new symbols to the history of painting. It is an interesting concept, and it has impacted by work significantly. Adding new symbols to the history of art is an intriguing, albeit extremely difficult task. Do you think it can be done?

- Do you have any remarks regarding my assumptions on drawing using the drawing stream method?

Well, I do not think that it is applicable to my work – I do not have any particular goal I aim for when drawing, apart from drawing itself. When I create, I try not to look back, I just draw with the belief that I am simply going with my flow.

- So, you never look back – what happens if you do?

I told you that I try to never look back, though that is very difficult. Sometimes I do look behind my shoulder, but I do try not to. When I draw, I try never to correct my drawings, never to spoil their original nature and composition.

- *What can you say about your last works?*

About 6 years ago, my creative work saw a great change. I drastically changed my style and the way I approach images. The result of this change came in the form of the *Little Story* series, which you had the chance to see in my book². My last drawings have mostly been small sketches, drawn in sketchbooks and notebooks, as well as woodcuts. One time, when I was traveling by train, I was observing as the landscapes through my window passed much too quickly to capture and draw them. I then started looking at the clouds. And I thought to myself – what if you could use the rhythm of passing clouds to draw other objects? The resulting drawn object would encompass two (or, more than one) qualities – this led me to the concept of the polyphony of lines and of drawings, ones containing a combination of multiple simultaneous elements. This idea is still present in my drawings, and especially in my recent sketches and notes.

4 V 2018 – place of meeting – Hamamatsu, Shizuoka

- *Miida san, please tell me something about variation in your images. Does it have to do with the “Ma”³ aesthetic?*

² *Little Story* – a series of graphical works, paintings and drawings, presented in the form of a gallery at the Print Department of the Tokyo University of the Arts. Seiichiro Miida published a rare catalog of all his works from this series, which, thanks to the author’s kindness, I had the chance to see.

³ "Ma" – is a Japanese word defining the negative space of reality, in a broad sense of the word. “The Japanese spatial concept is experienced progressively through intervals of spatial designation. In Japanese, *ma* the word for space suggests interval. It is best described as a consciousness of **place**, not in the sense of an enclosed three-

I think that “Ma” is only a replacement term – there is no goal to what I do, I simply want to draw!

- *Your drawings fall into series, sets, visual stories. Is that something you do intentionally, or is it simply coincidence?*

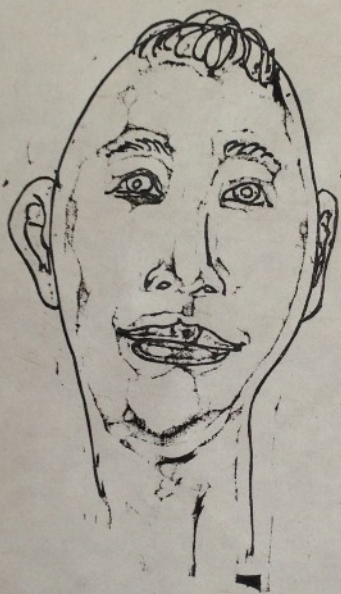
I know that you are interested in comics. You have asked about them. When I started to draw about 6 years ago, around when my son was born I started using the comic style. This is one of my woodblocks in which I put that style to use (ref. pg. 6). In the 70s, Japan had a lot of interesting comic artists, which had an impact on my drawing style. A very interesting experimental comic magazine was, for example, *Garo*⁴ - especially for the 1970s. I think that this is where I got my drawing style.

- *The comic is a very unique medium. It uses sequences of images, which are, however, made subordinate to a plot. In your series of images and sketches, there is no plot. Something else is propelling them. What is it?*

Yes, our images are closer to poetry. For me, a very important element of drawing is believing in what you are doing, as well as believing in what paper and ink can do. In truth, all of my

dimensional entity, but rather the simultaneous awareness of form and non-form deriving from an intensification of vision. *Ma* is not something that is created by compositional elements; it is the thing that takes place in the imagination of the human who experiences these elements. Therefore *ma* can be defined as **experiential place** understood with emphasis on **interval**.” Sourced from: *Ma – The Japanese Spatial Expression*. <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/ealac/V3613/ma/>. Accessed: 29.VII.2018.

⁴ *Garo* – a monthly manga-style comic book published in Japan between 1964 and 2002. It was founded by Katsuichi Nagai. *Garo* was focused on alternative and avantgarde comic styles.



2016

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Seiichiro Miida, woodblock on Japanese paper, 2016. (Photo, courtesy of the author)

creative work is based on this irrational belief. Look at my drawings – I cannot even seem to draw a straight line...

- I have seen your book, "Little Story". Michael Schneider told me that I should see it, that it will help me better my understanding of your work. What I noticed is that, to some degree, it is a set of images that are completely distant from each other. What made you arrange the "Little Story" gallery in this particular way?

I invited my friends to arrange the gallery, and I was not part of the process. You know Fernando Saiki – he was one of the ones who prepared the exposition. Images from the *Little Story* series reflect the turbulent times I was going through when they were made.

- An interesting aspect of "Little Story" is your approach to painting surfaces. The series includes many types of paper, as well as various standalone textiles, canvases, and drawings on textile surfaces. What made you use such unusual configurations of materials?

It is hard to say. I simply decided that I will be a painter. And I was more fond of painting on canvases that were not mounted on stretchers.

- Please, tell me about your work before the "Little Story" series.

Before *Little Story*, I created abstract art for many years.

- So, in your case, you have taken the path from abstraction to figuration. What is abstraction to you? Is it how Francis Bacon described it, too shallow to ever express anything meaningful?

My abstract work was not minimalistic in the strict sense of the word. Of course, I had an awareness of minimalism, but it was not fully integrated into my world. I felt that abstraction will allow me to better see the shape of the soul. If I had used figurative, realistic art at that time, it would feel wrong to me. That is simply how I felt. I accept and see some potential in abstract work, though. If we consistently keep developing abstract art, we will need to also develop new creative grammar. When it comes to minimalism, I think that I would have more than enough of it after a week. It should always be remembered that minimalism is only one of the aspects of the mentioned grammar.

- You are talking about creative grammar – this topic is also brought up in the “Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden”, correct?

Yes – The „Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden” is a textbook, a book about the grammar of Chinese painting. Artists, such as Paul Klee, Matisse, and Kandinsky were also known for developing new creative grammars. If you think about it, this is already the third generation to use the language created by these artists in their works.

- How do you see the creative grammar in your work?

I think about tools as different rhythms that I can use. I also think that if a given grammar has already been used, it can still be utilized. These days, modern artists use something known as “context”, which requires active input from critics and institutions. I am convinced, that this is a different grammar. We still have the option to draw and paint with only a small dose of so-called context. Of course, we also need context for

our own work, but that is not an element that conditions it. I would very much like artists such as Hokusai and Durer to write commentaries and descriptions for their drawings. That would be fascinating. Perhaps we have already lost the need to understand the meaning of grammar in drawings. And drawings are one of the languages of art - we can attempt to describe something using the language of drawing or painting. Matisse once said that, if you decide to become a painter, you should cut your tongue off – this implies that Matisse also saw painting as a language. (...)

In the case of Japanese artists, I must mention that I know two similar examples of graphical artists – the first of whom is the printmaker Hiroshige Ando. He signed up to learn woodworking at the workshop of master Utagawa Toyokuni. In response, he was told that he is late and that he will never be able to become a good woodworker. He was forced to leave. The other example is Kawase Hasui, who, at the age of 20, wanted to begin practicing the art of woodworking with master Kaburagi Kiyokata. The master did not accept the young man, stating that it was now too late for him. And I keep wondering, why “too late”? Perhaps their hands were already too old. Perhaps if they had come to their masters at the age of 10 or 15, they might have been able to learn their craft? I do not know...

- The history of the art of painting has had cases where the artists only began their creative work very late in life...

That is true, and Hokusai was one of those cases. Before he became an artist, he was well known as a qualified craftsman, carving woodcut plates. He had fantastic technical abilities, which he later used when designing woodblocks. Some artists, such as Durer, Hokusai, and Rembrandt, were capable of

making drawings that were good enough to place on engraving plates without making any prior corrections.

7 V 2018 – place of meeting - Tokyo University of Arts

- What can you tell us about rhythm in your works? Where does it come from? I remember when we were drawing the ocean using multiple seemingly different rhythms. Do those rhythms come from listening or from thinking?

I found your ocean drawings very interesting when I saw them on Facebook. I do not know how to draw the ocean. Last summer, I tried to copy some very old Asian drawings, especially ones from Japan and China. I was trying to find the rhythm of the ocean.

- I, in turn, copied some of Hokusai's drawings during the "Hokusai Water Wonderland" ⁵ exposition.

Well, Hokusai is probably not the best example to follow. I think that Hokusai's ornaments are overly emotional.

- So, you think that, in his waves, Hokusai tunneled emotions that were too strong? Was he too hysterical?

Yes.

- That is very interesting. Perhaps I should take a look at the other artists you mentioned.

Indeed, in the 15th century, Japanese Buddhist artists developed

⁵ Special Exhibition *Phantasmagoric! Hokusai's Water Wonderland*, Sumida Hokusai Museum, Tokio 24 IV 2018 - 10 VI 2018

stylistically fantastic recreations of the ocean, as well as rivers, characterized by a beautiful, flat, and smooth rhythm. There are also very interesting depictions of this type on Chinese porcelain from the Ming era. It is those rhythms I was trying to capture during my drawing workshops.

- Is that something you can see in Tokyo?

No, not really. It is mostly found in books.

- I do not live by the ocean myself, but I sometimes do travel to the Polish Baltic Sea, both to relax and admire the phenomenon of the sea wave.

I wonder, is it even possible to truly find the form and shape of a wave based on a real ocean, river or other natural water reservoir?

- What do you think?

Sometimes I see certain details, touches, but what you create is simply just an image. The artists I mentioned developed certain ornaments and patterns. And these patterns might be real.

- More real than nature?

Yes.

- Can you explain to me in what sense plastic works are connected to composing patterns?

Composition can be very important. We can, of course, use patterns, similarly to how a patterned material does. However, when creating an image, we also need a second, a third

element, for it to be complete. We need fact. Yes. A wave, sand, a cloud – a figurative image. You, my son, etc.... we need one.

- Do you think that entirely imaginative painting is possible?

No, I think it is not. I have so many real images, as well as rhythms in my memory.

- So, it is a matter of memory?

If I started drawing from imagination, imagining images, I would naturally start inserting and using what I have in my memory. Look: (add drawing).

Is saw the ocean, but I could not draw it. (ref. I) But combining it with you helped me draw it a little (ref. II). Then, I started drawing my son, with wind and waves as the background. At this point, the image contained already three or four facts (ref. III, IV, V). I would probably not be able to create using only one topic, one pattern. It is a very difficult thing. Old Japanese designers have likely created all possible patterns, and they are very hard to develop further.

- I do not see your drawings as patterns. I rather see the way you go about drawing them. I see the gesture, the hand movement, a dance unfolding on the canvas.

You are right. I do give up. I fail to develop further. You can also see that not all of the lines I place are part of a figure. They are only waves, only directions.

- When I look at this drawing (ref. V), I hear the hum of the ocean. The form is somehow united with the nature. So, first there is the ocean, then there is a figure, and then they start to

harmonize?

Yes. But we cannot fully separate the human figure and the ocean. And that is the problem!

- And that does fit in with your previous thesis that it is very difficult to extrapolate an image directly from nature. However, I do believe that it is possible.

Well. I want to draw precisely, with an elegant touch, but that is not possible! Sometimes I just do not have enough time. And sometimes I know that if I continue working on this drawing, I will damage the final result. Here I saw a real place (ref. XV), and this is from memory. Hajime⁶ was not looking at me, but I did draw him doing so – from memory (ref. XIX). The form of a tree. This is bad, and this is good. I do not know, bad – this is bad, is that true or not?

- Is that the last one?

Fantasy (ref. XX). This is my feeling. I did not plan this – I usually do not have an exact plan.

- Was this drawing created as a deliberate and conscious end to an ongoing series of drawings?

Yes.

- I think that your drawings are proof that you are, in fact, able to draw, despite what was said before.

Drawing is very difficult. It is also very difficult to start painting to begin with. But, despite all this, I would still love to begin drawing.

⁶ Hajime is Mr. Seiichiro Miida's son.

- But it is also difficult to stop drawing. Is it not?

I do not think that is the difficult part. The way of life, the lack of time, can stop me with ease. Let's go!; Breakfast!; Dinner!; etc. Those are all things that make me stop.

- I would like to ask you once more about the abstract period in your works. You told me that you wanted to touch the soul. Perhaps your art still revolves around that concept?

Probably, yes.

- Is the current state of your art some form of continuation of your abstract period?

I am aware that my abstract works are less complex. They cannot be seen as a standalone creative grammar. They are closer to singular poetic words. The images from my abstract period are like very simple words.

- Please, tell me about the blank spaces in your images. You often use linear drawing of varied density. The drawings you mentioned are very light, very bright, but still do not seem to reflect boredom or monotony.

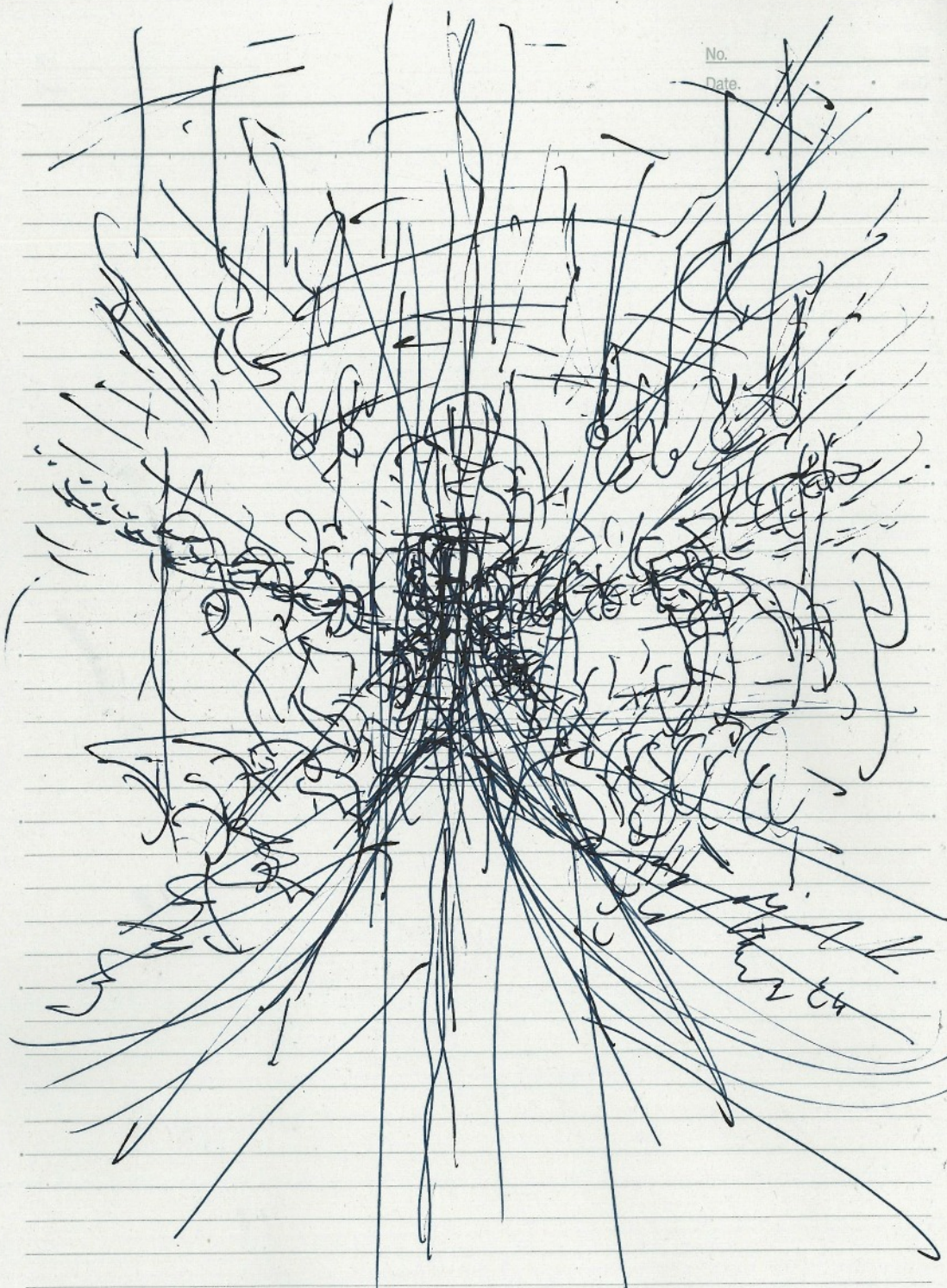
I imagine this is a matter of my drawing style. Perhaps it is rooted in my fascination with the art of Henri Matisse. Matisse utilized a compositional formula, comparable to a net with very large mesh size. Many artists later used this style when composing their own images.

- Your works often include the heavenly realm. One led to by nature, flowers, plants...

My world is very closed. When I started painting and drawing some 30 years ago, I was deliberating about the images of Botticelli. He used so many unknown types of plants. I did not know the species at all, but he probably did, likely very well. Oriental painters from the Nihonga movement were similar in their knowledge of plants and tree species. The names are quite helpful during the construction of a conceptual apparatus for use in drawing or painting. The names help you remember things, such as the shape of a shamrock flower. Perhaps it even is something of a lead in regard to what we said about imagination and memory.

- Yesterday evening, as I was drawing in the metro, I started noticing things through a mirror of repeating patterns. Perhaps it was due to the tiredness I felt after an entire day of drawing. I started putting everything in the same category into drawers – heads, legs, etc. I was not looking at reality anymore at that point, I did not feel the need to. Suddenly, I had some more freedom in terms of composition. Perspective lines became the canvas, and I placed those elements: heads, legs, as segregated by class, onto it (ref. pg. 16). The whole situation reminded me of Giacometti, because the drawing I came up with is quite similar to some of his works. This was, of course, not planned. Do you think that Giacometti saw reality as categories of patterns?

A very famous episode in Giacometti's creative work was when he went to the cinema. He was watching a movie. He was, however, completely unable to decode its meaning – he only saw moving shapes. He was completely shocked – but also intrigued by the impact of a screen. He saw film as abstract patterns, as color. Back then, film was, of course, black and white – what he really saw was blacks, greys and whites.



Aleksander Woźniak, Omotesando, drawing from Tokyo Sketchbook. 2016

- It is said that Giacometti was fascinated with observing a model, that he worked purely with nature, even though his drawings deviate from realistic scenes. Why did Giacometti need a model?

I believe that Giacometti kept focusing on the model because he needed some concept of measurement, of direction, of distance. In short, a point of reference.

- Perhaps he was observing reality in a way different from what we are bound to? Did Giacometti focus on some very specific aspects of reality?

Let us assume that this is his canvas. Your face is around this big. It is simple, you just notice how big things are. If you, however, move, say, 5 meters away from me, your face will be much smaller. It is a very simple concept.

- But if the concept was too simple, Giacometti would not have been able to constantly face it and develop it. He would not have been able to create.

I think that he likely could not create. Which is why he kept attempting to perfect his own works.

- Do you know anyone who draws and can be considered a role model for newer generations?

I think that O Jun⁷ is a good example. He is a very good drawer and a painter. He also uses the patterns we talked about. Apart from him, I also greatly value the creative works of classical artists, such as Michelangelo. In his works, he used rhythms.

⁷ O Jun's profile on the Artsy.net platform: <https://www.artsy.net/artist/o-jun>. Accessed: 13.VIII.2018

Rhythms were also used by Leonardo in his works, however I think that, in his case, the most interesting paintings are images of water and plants.

- I would once more like to ask you about the materials you use in your works.

Well. The materials you use are a very important motivation to create. For me, the paper, the textile, the ink are often great reasons to start painting. The specificities of artistic materials are also a way to connect to a certain tradition, to many other painters, also to ancient masters. Whenever I pick up a European pen, my imagination drifts towards European masters. If I, however, pick up an Oriental brush, a Japanese one, for example, I start to imagine Japanese paintings and drawings, as well as Sumi-e paintings.

- What do you think about Japanese paper?

Following the request of the dean, I opened a workshop for hand-making Japanese paper in Toride. Now, the department allows the students to make Japanese paper by themselves. Hand-making paper is a very beautiful, though very difficult, process. Sometimes the best way to get professional Japanese paper is to simply buy it. I think that the biggest problem with Japanese paper is simply that it is becoming insanely expensive.

- What are your thoughts on publishing drawings in social media?

In the case of my works, which are often very personal, publishing on Facebook⁸ has an embarrassing, awkward aspect

⁸ Seiichiro Miida's Facebook profile:
<https://www.facebook.com/seiichiro.miida>. Accessed: 13.VIII.2018

to it. But Facebook is also very exciting, as it greatly extends our ways of reaching the receiver. 20 years ago, the network of social media was not nearly as advanced. The only thing we could do back then was organize expositions. This is a very difficult and often very ineffective task. I try to use social media to present my works just as much as I try to publish them the traditional way.

Seiichiro Miida / Aleksander Woźniak

SKETCHBOOKS

5.V.2018

Images:

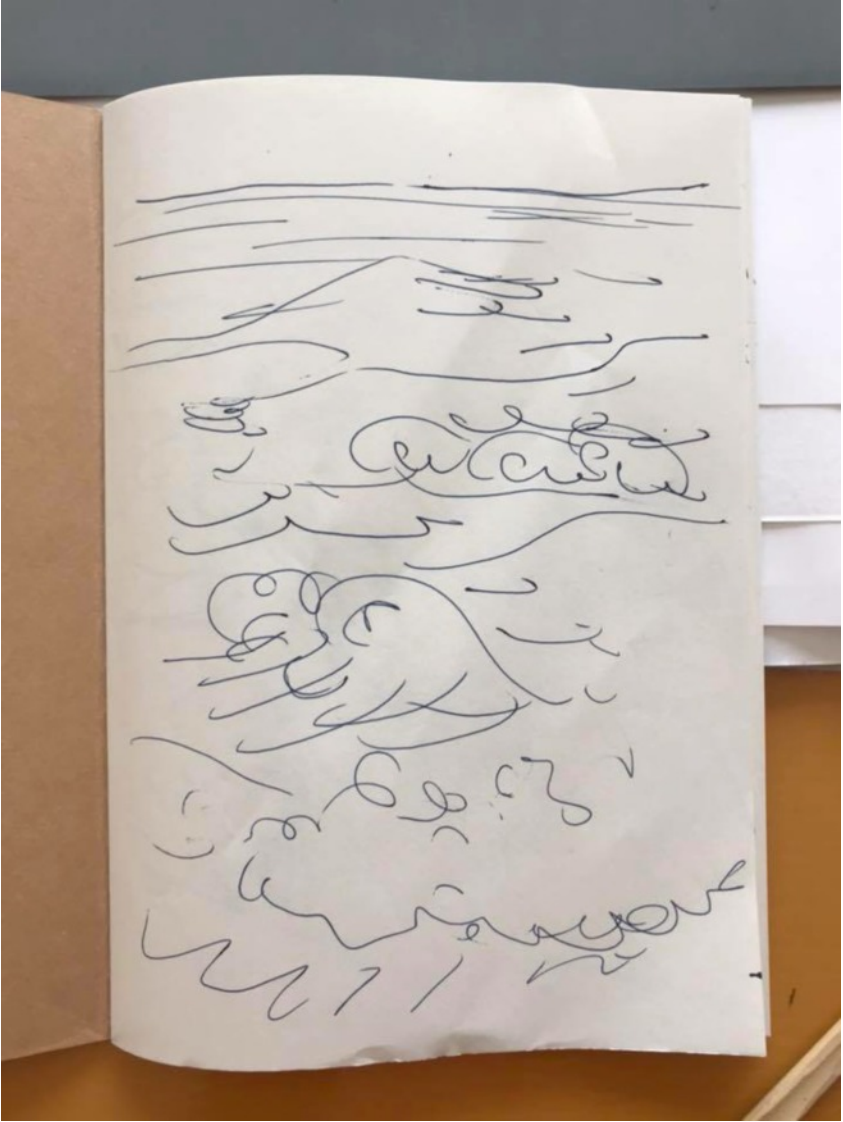
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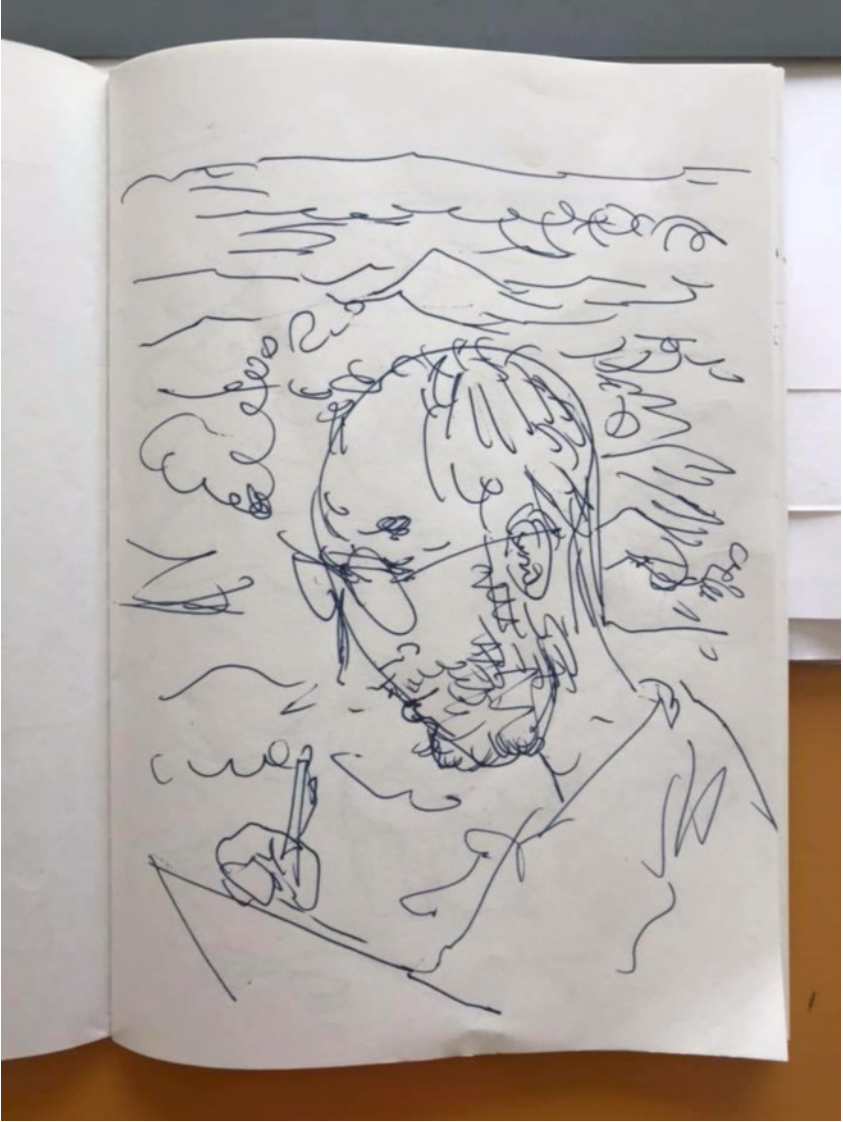
Seiichiro Miida

五月五日 (5.V.2018)

Sketchbook

Shizuoka Prefecture



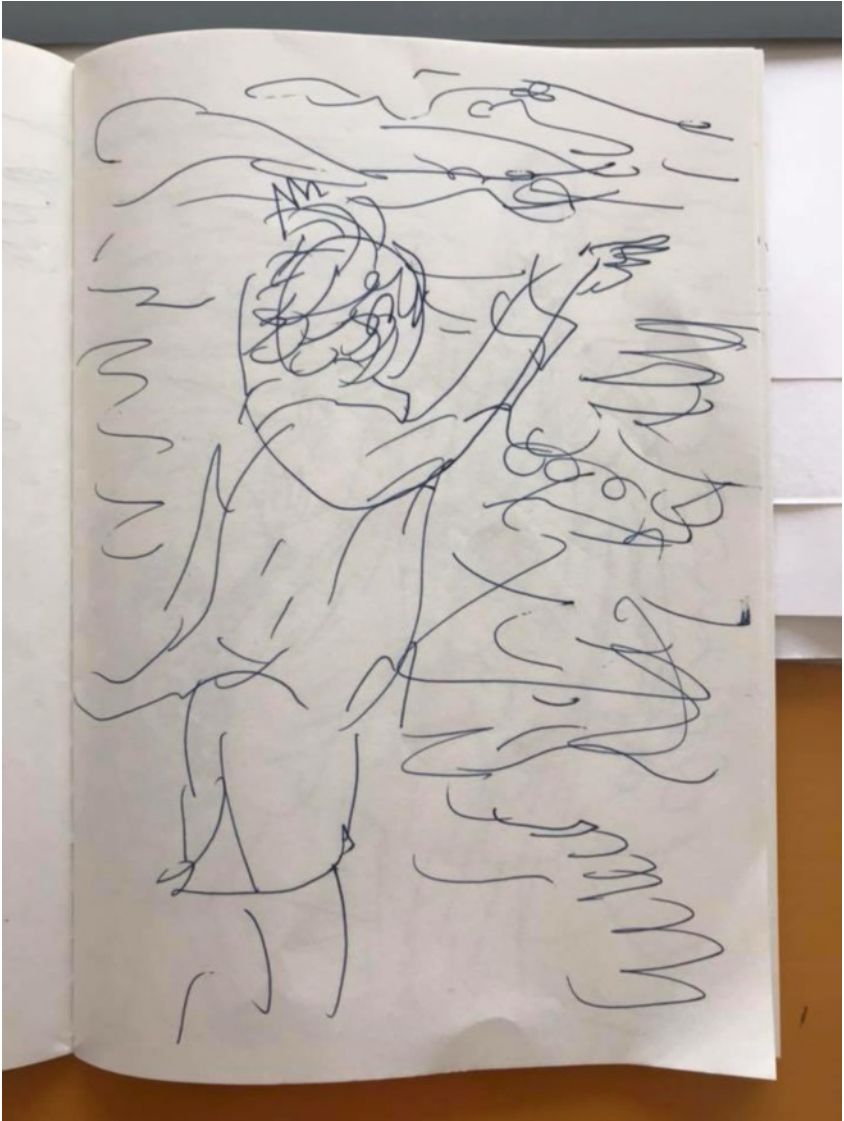


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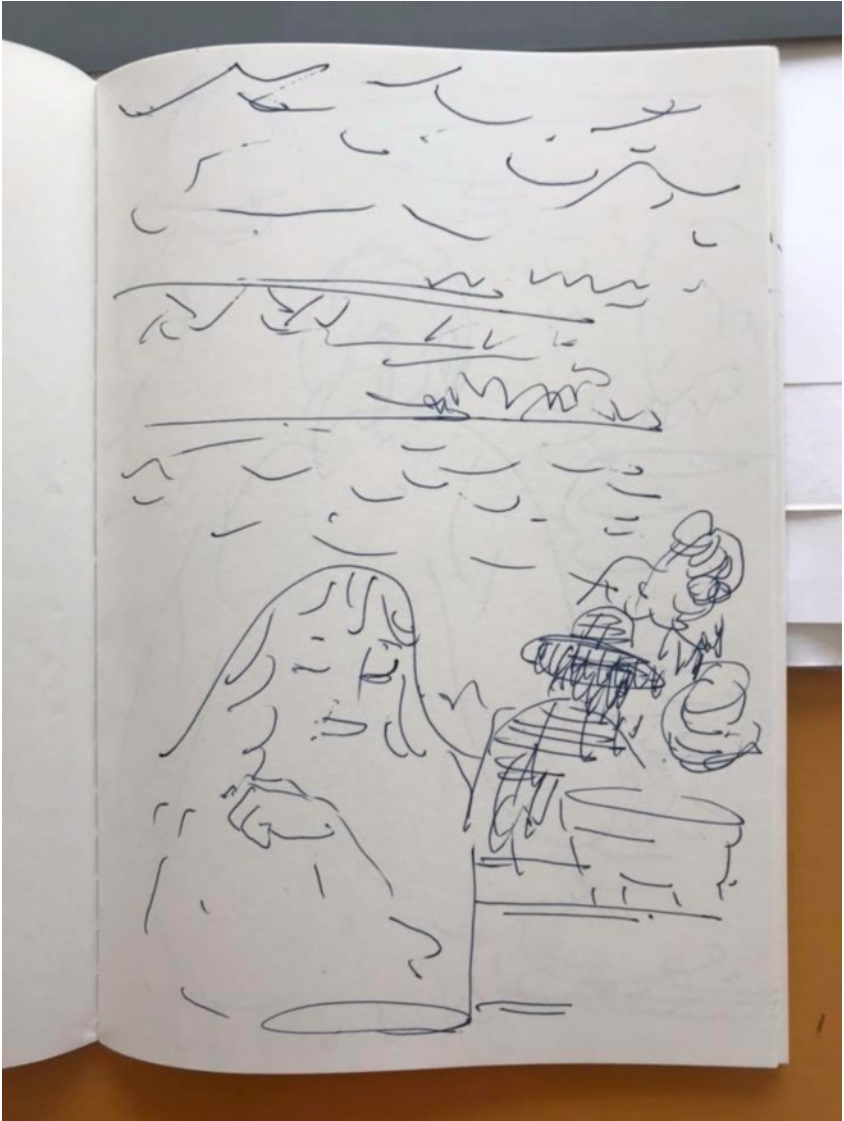
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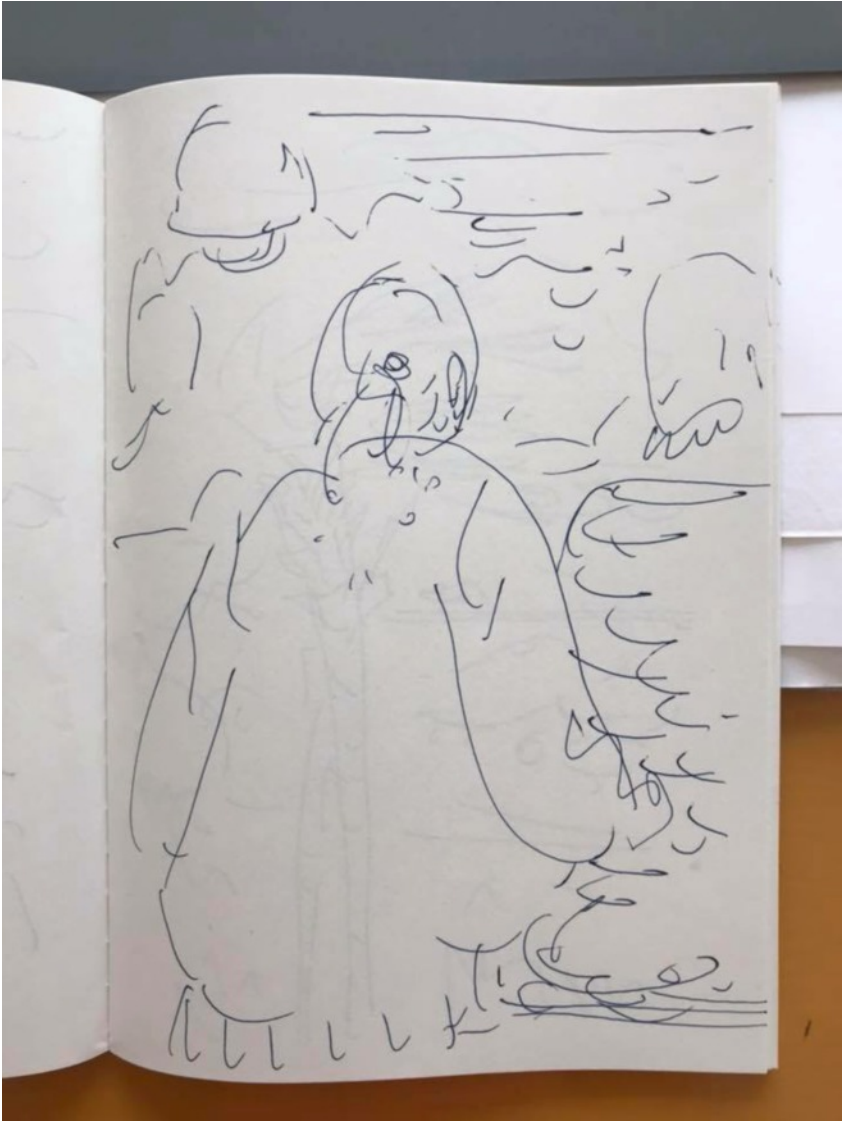
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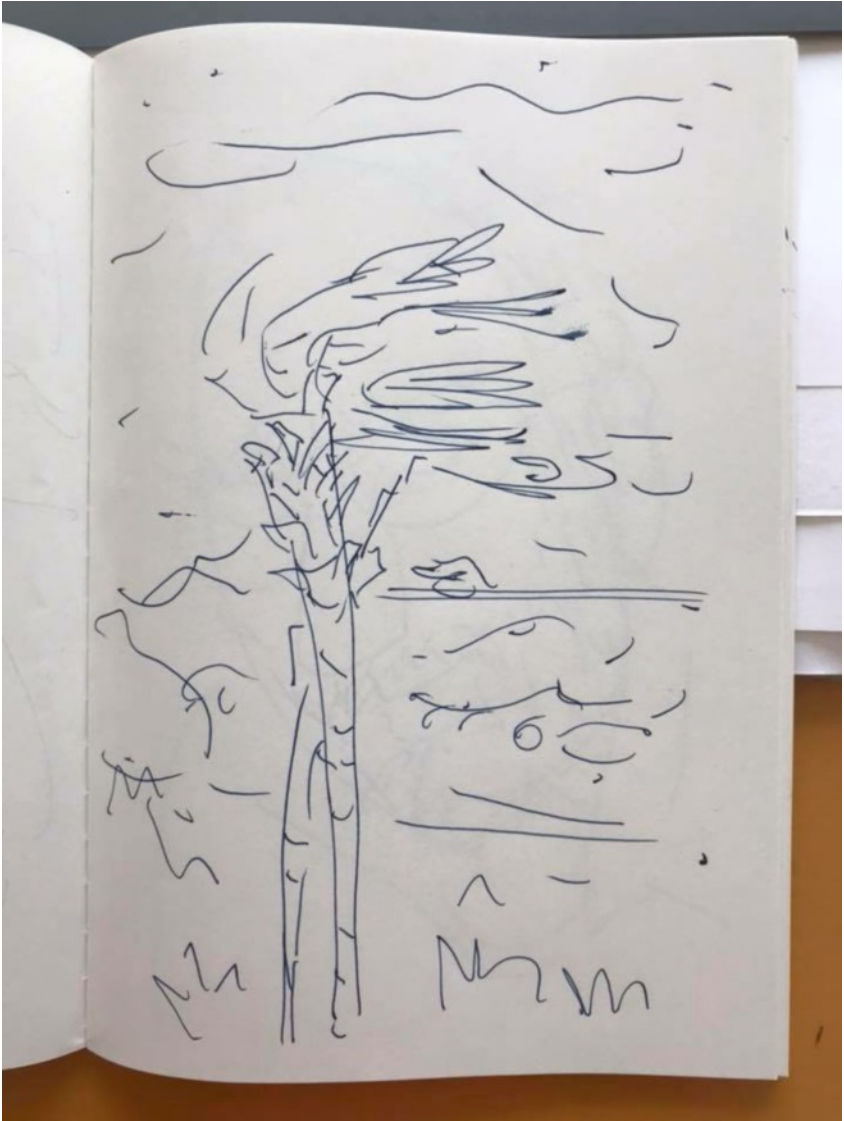
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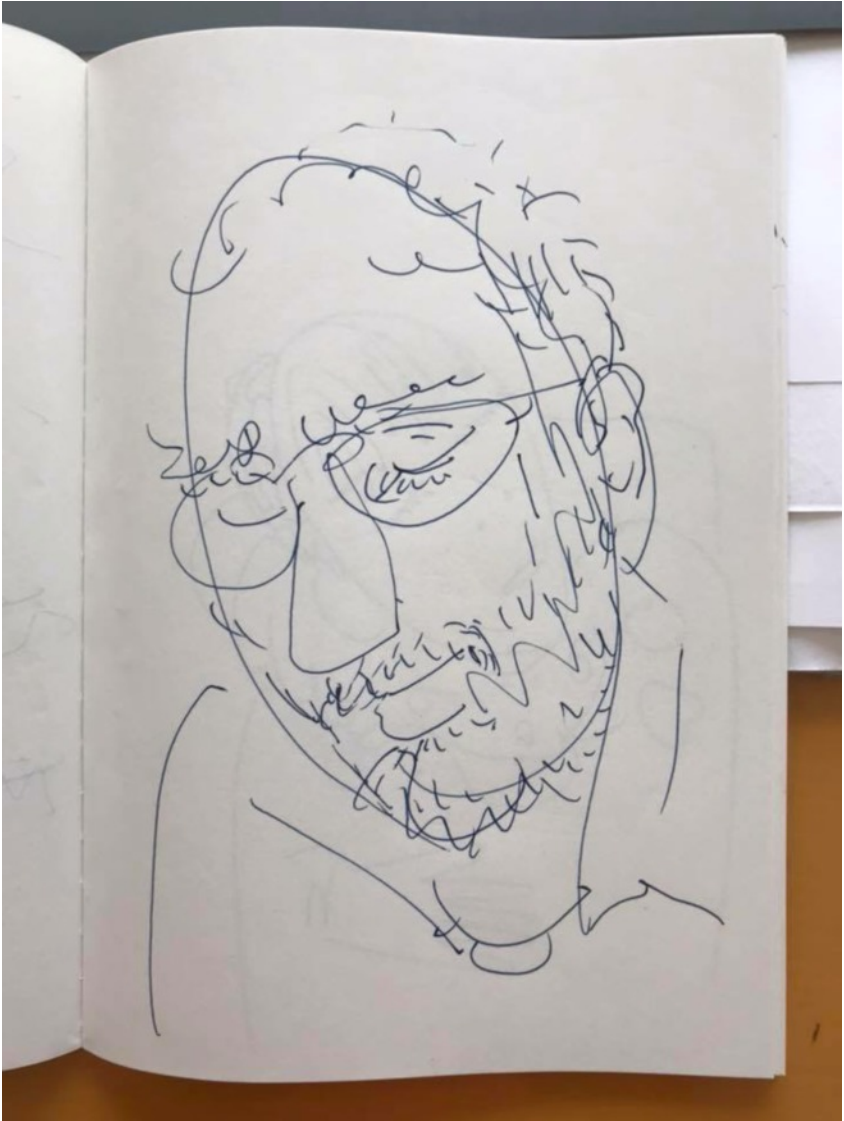


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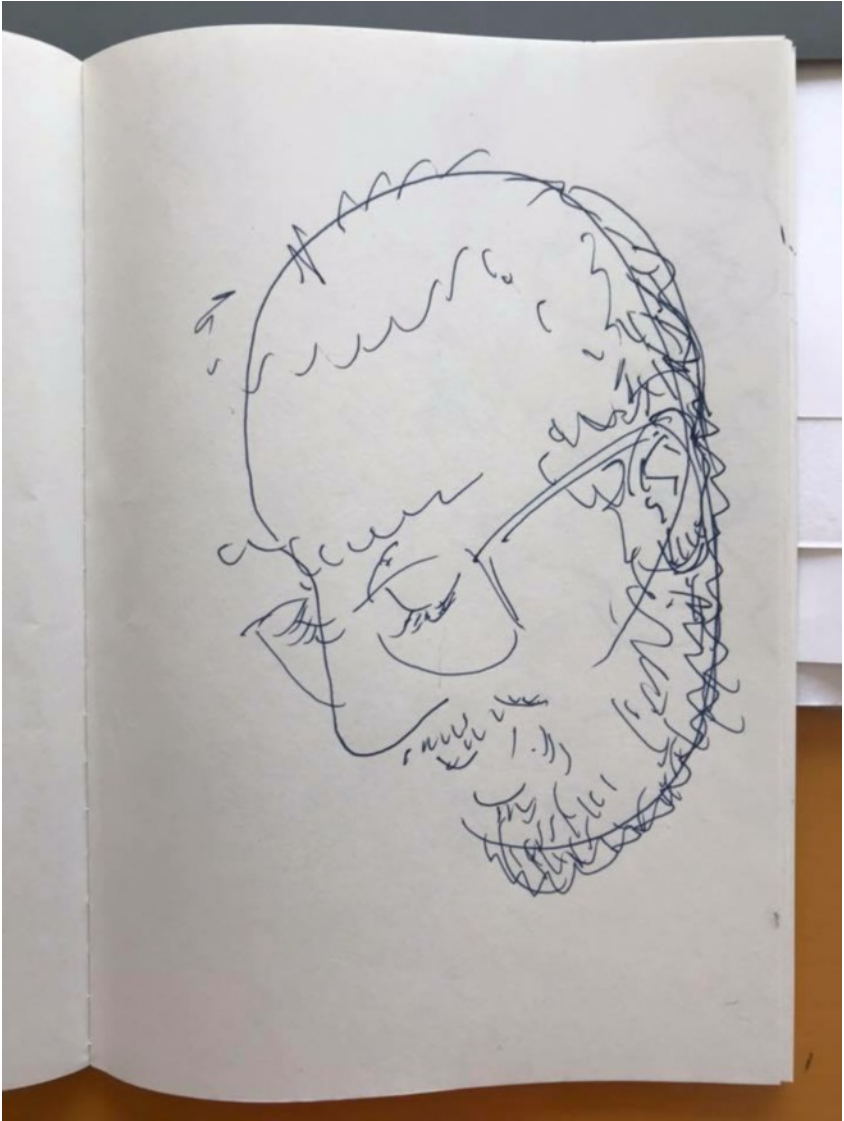




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Images:

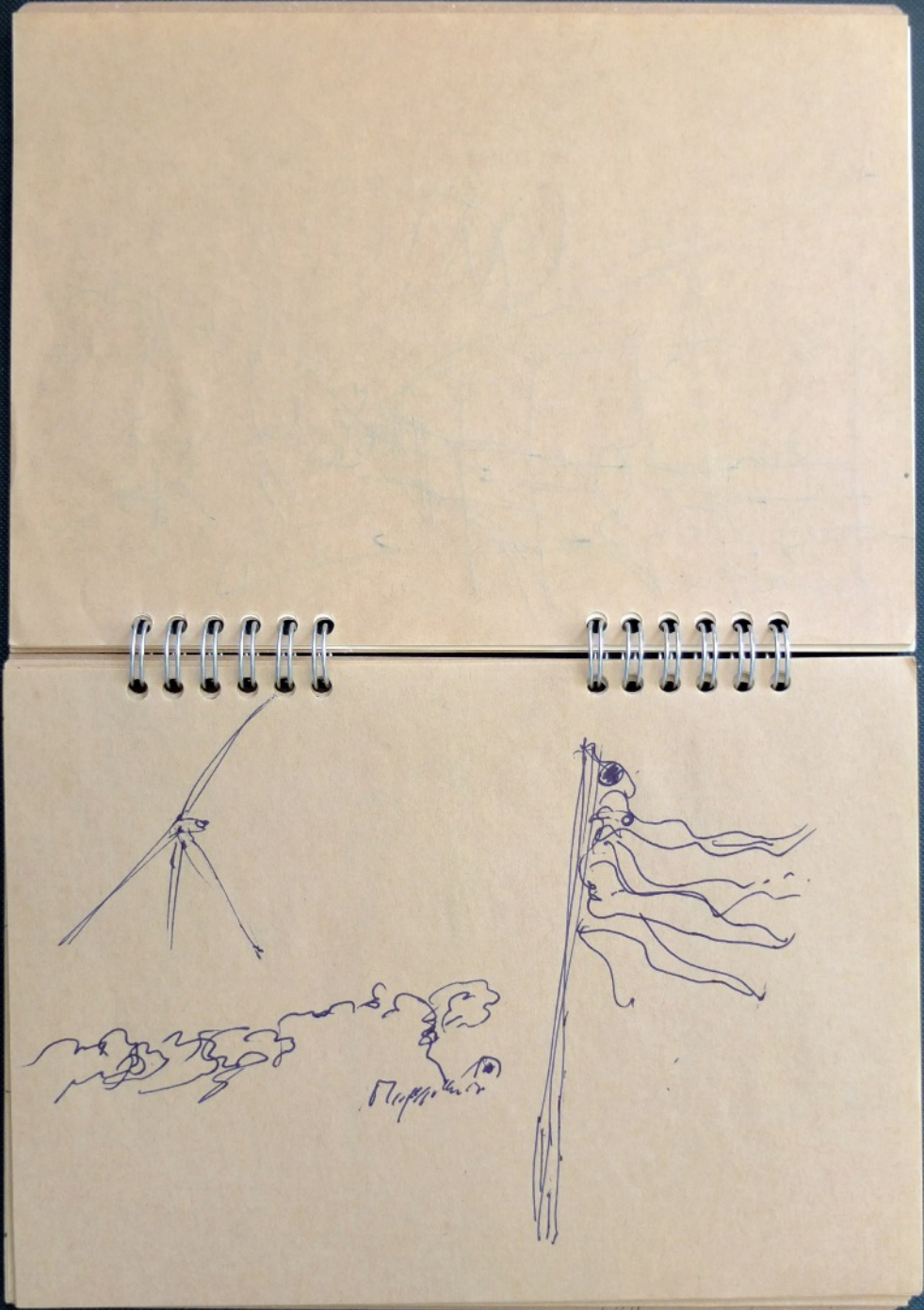
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Aleksander Woźniak

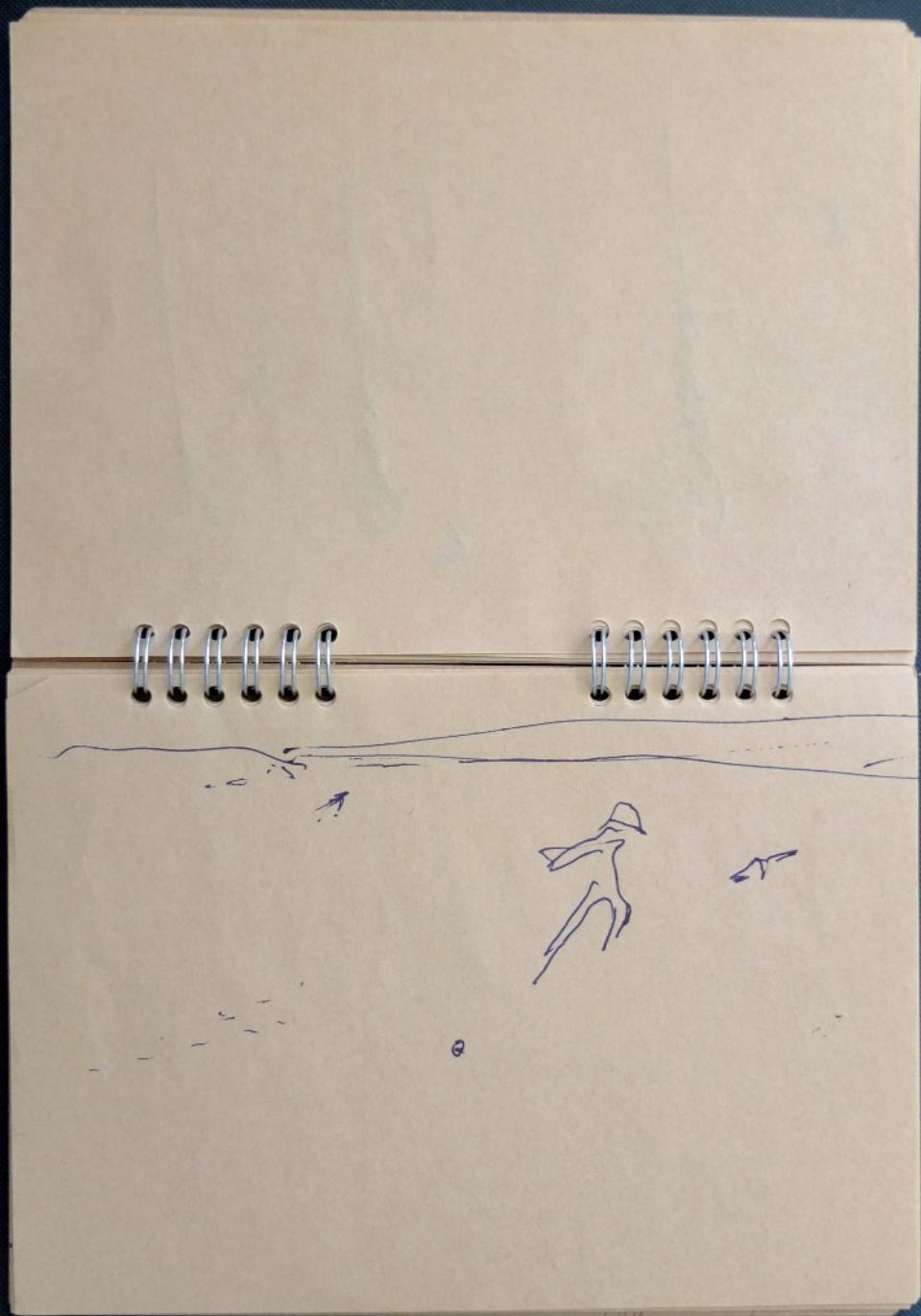
Saturday (5.V.2018)

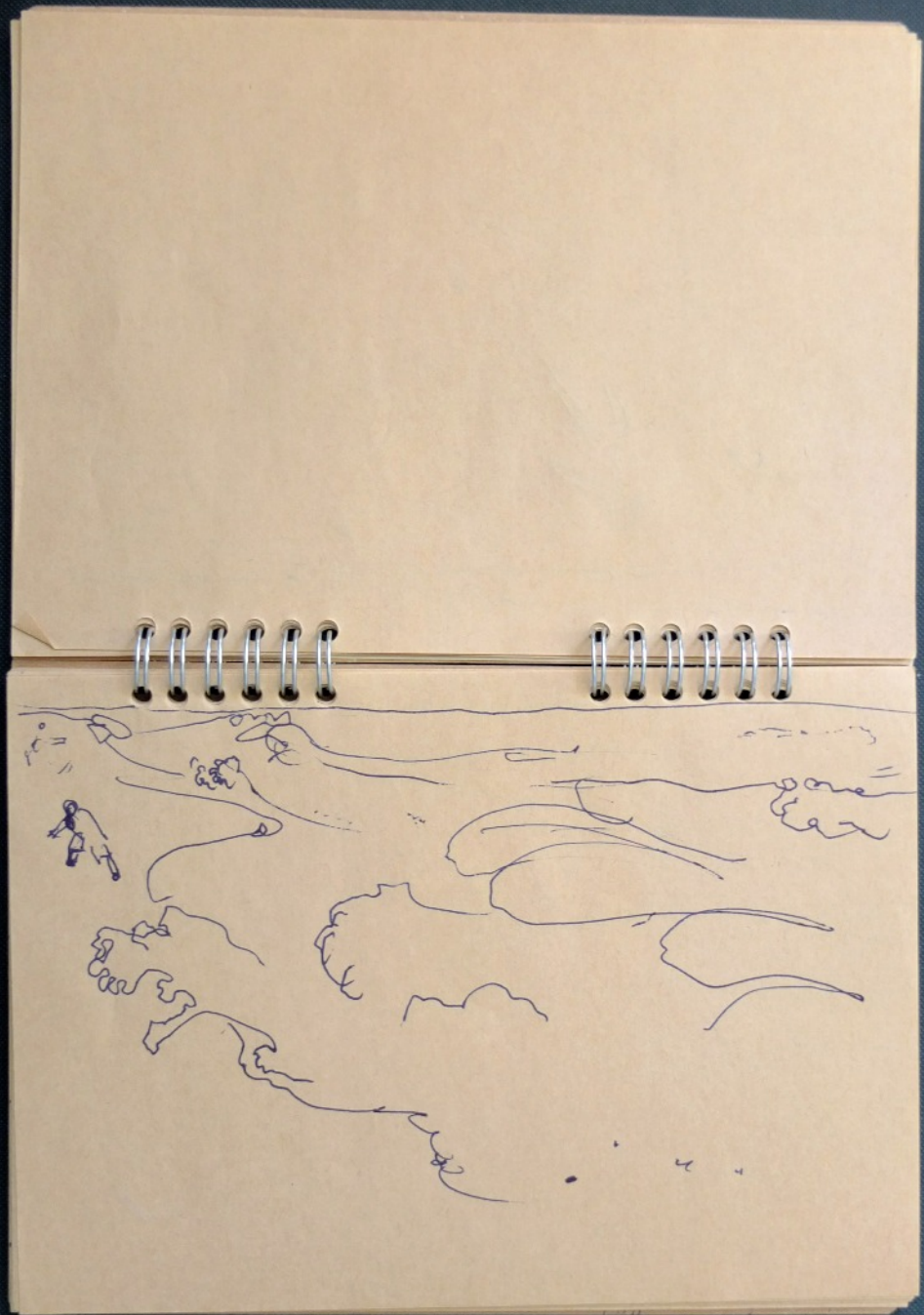
Sketchbook

Shizuoka Prefecture → Tokyo















- XXVII -

Aleksander Woźniak, sketchbook, ballpoint pen on paper. 2018





- XXIX -

Aleksander Woźniak, sketchbook, ballpoint pen on paper. 2018

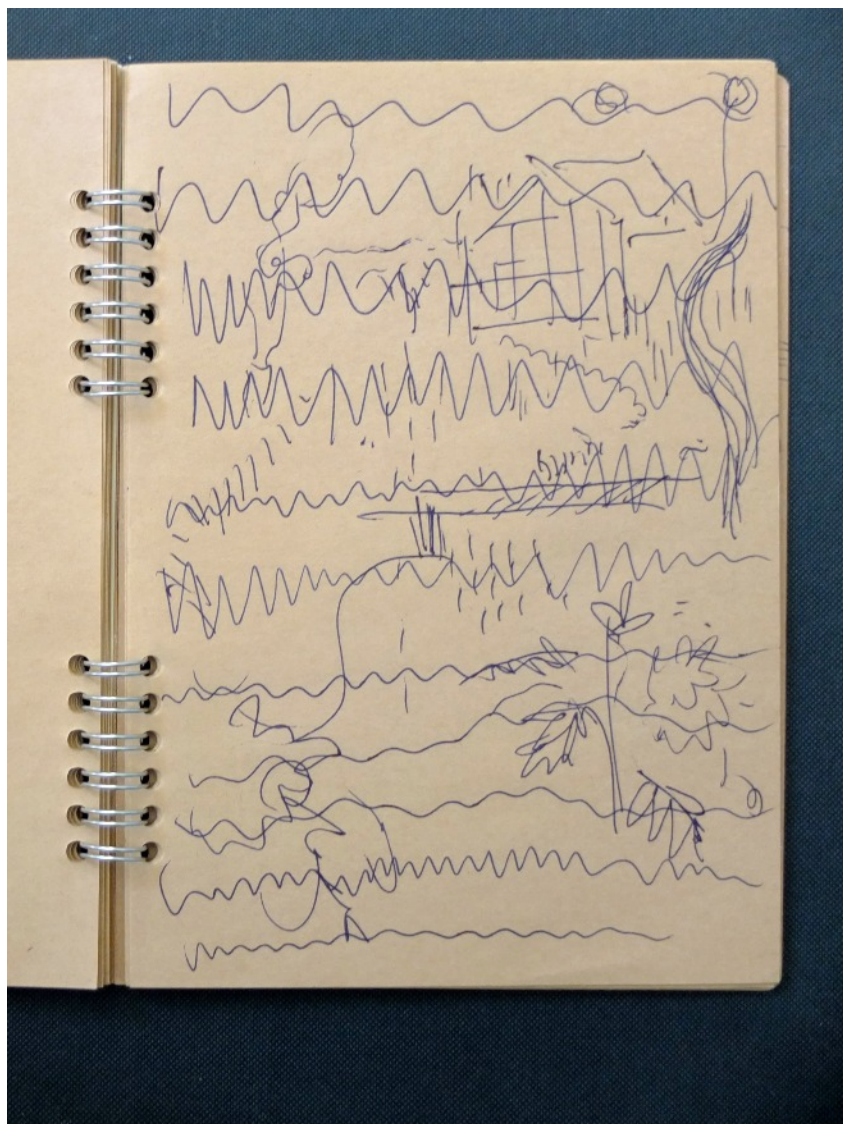






- XXXII -

Aleksander Woźniak, sketchbook, ballpoint pen on paper. 2018



- XXXIII -

Aleksander Woźniak, sketchbook, ballpoint pen on paper. 2018



- XXXIV -

Aleksander Woźniak, sketchbook, ballpoint pen on paper. 2018



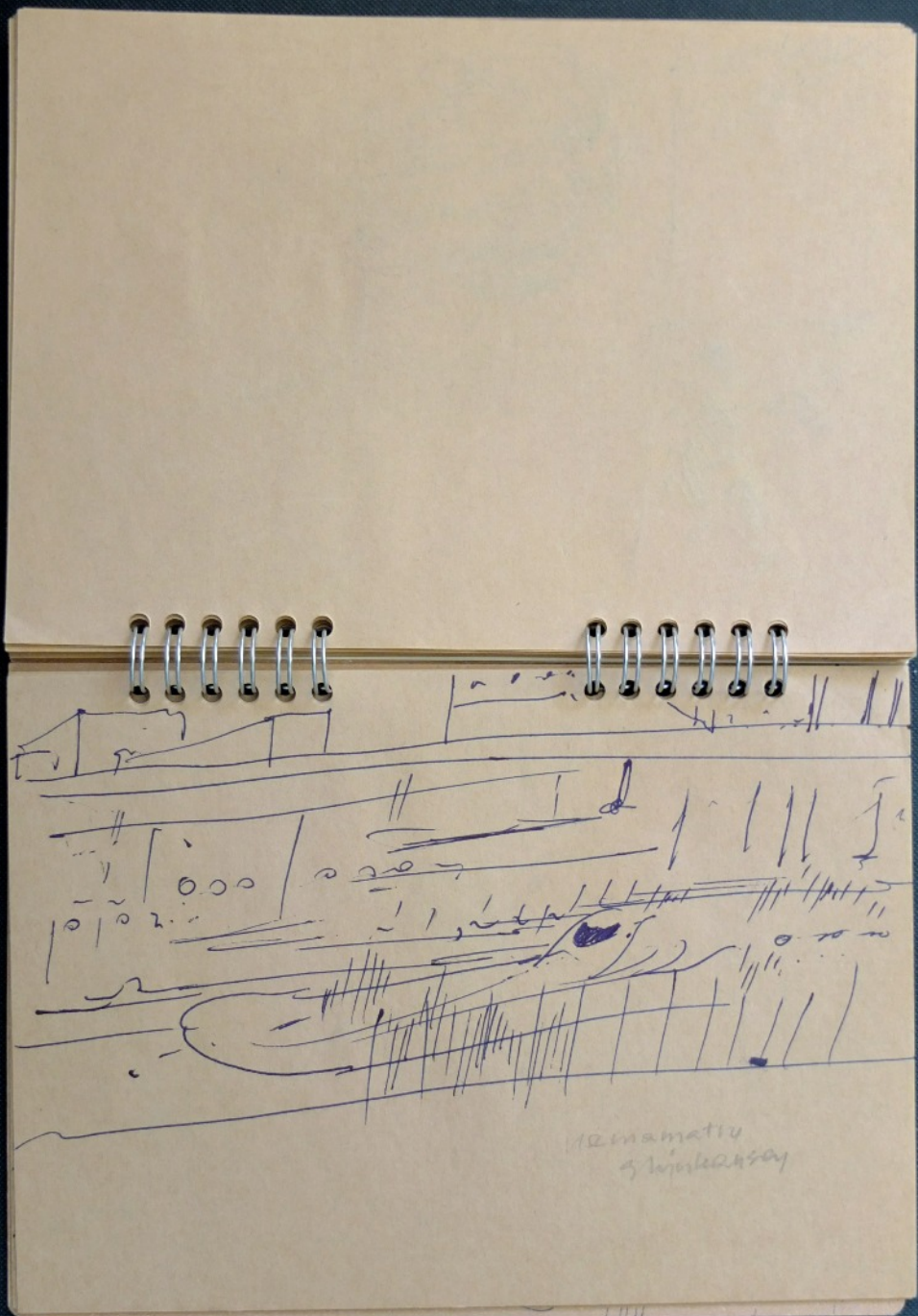
- XXXV -

Aleksander Woźniak, sketchbook, ballpoint pen on paper. 2018



- XXXVI -

Aleksander Woźniak, sketchbook, ballpoint pen on paper. 2018







- XXXIX -

Aleksander Woźniak, sketchbook, ballpoint pen on paper. 2018



- XL -

Aleksander Woźniak, sketchbook, ballpoint pen on paper. 2018







- XLIII -

Aleksander Woźniak, sketchbook, ballpoint pen on paper. 2018





- XLV -

Aleksander Woźniak, sketchbook, ballpoint pen on paper. 2018



The above text was created as a result of a research project entitled
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Project leader: dr. hab Aleksander Woźniak

This entry comprises a (1/3) part of documentation of the project.

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*Picture above: Aleksander Woźniak and Seiichiro Miida, intaglio studio,
Tokyo University of Arts. Photo courtesy of Fernando Saiki, 2018.*