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“Cut and Paste”  
by Shiva Balaghi, Ph.D.  
Text for Kour Pour Exhibition  
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Showing Kour Pour's block print paintings alongside traditional Japanese prints, many from his own collection, this exhibition offers a window onto his longstanding interest in Japanese culture and its sustained influence on Western art. Pour's ongoing dialogue with traditional Japanese printmaking has formal and art historical dimensions. But he also explores the ways that influence can become erased, such that the East and the West become constructed as discreet even disparate cultural spheres. Kour's approach acknowledges that Japanese prints are not just works of art, but have historically been objects of trade, and as such signs of social exchanges embedded in historical cultural flows.

Like the Persian carpet, another artistic tradition that holds great interest for Pour, the traditional Japanese print is deeply rooted in local aesthetic practices, while resonating within a global marketplace. Through the process of adaptation and appropriation, the object itself can become a stand in for a distant time and place. A Persian carpet in a Victorian British

home or a Japanese print hanging in a Paris salon become signs of a distant time and place – “the Orient.”

Dutch traders first brought Japanese prints to Europe in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it was in shops in Antwerp that Van Gogh began collecting Japanese prints. Back in Paris in 1887, he began sketching elements from Hiroshige's woodcut prints with pen and pencil onto grid paper, eventually creating three paintings based on Hiroshige prints. In his *Bridge in the Rain (after Hiroshige)*, Van Gogh wedded the Japanese master's composition and perspective with his own characteristically deep colors and vivid brushstrokes. “All my work is based to some extent on Japanese art,” Vincent Van Gogh wrote in a letter to his brother.<sup>1</sup> “Look, we love Japanese painting, we've experienced its influence—all the Impressionists have that in common...After some time your vision changes, you see with a more Japanese eye, you feel color differently.”<sup>2</sup>

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Japonisme had grown in popularity. Claude Monet designed his iconic water gardens with a wisteria covered footbridge on images he gleaned from Japanese prints. An avid collector of the art form, he pinned some on the walls of his painting studio. The story goes that Monet first discovered traditional Japanese prints in a spice shop in Holland where they were being used as wrapping paper.<sup>3</sup> James McNeill Whistler was reportedly a regular customer at A La Porte Chinoise shop in Paris, and Japanese decorative elements figured prominently in his paintings.<sup>4</sup> In 1890, Mary Cassatt was quite taken with an exhibition of ukiyo-e prints at Paris' Ecole des Beaux-Arts. She collected Japanese prints by Kitagawa Utamaro, displaying them throughout her home. Their bold patterns, strong colors, and sense of space inflected her own prints and paintings.<sup>5</sup>

The assimilation of Japanese aesthetic practices in the West has remained pervasive – from Impressionist painting to the modernist architecture. As the writer Claire Voon noted, by the time Frank Lloyd Wright visited Japan for the first time in 1905, Japanese aesthetics had influenced his architecture and landscapes for over two decades. “By the time of this trip,” Voon wrote, “the American architect was already an avid collector of ukiyo-e prints, and the journey through Japan, in his words, was made 'in pursuit of the print'.”<sup>6</sup> An online exhibition of Wright's Japanese photographs shows an inclination to frame every day scenes through the familiar lens of ukiyo-e prints.<sup>7</sup> In turn, Japanese aesthetics deeply influenced Wright's practice, which was a profound articulation of American modernism.

As a contemporary artist, Pour points to this history of cultural appropriation and assimilation. He extracts elements from Japanese

prints—colors, outlining, cropping, patterns—blending them with aspects of contemporary painting. Drawing inspiration from *mokuhanga*, the technique used to make *ukiyo-e* prints, Kour has devised a process all his own. He begins by extracting elements from Japanese prints and tracing the images onto sheets of vinyl that are laid down onto wooden platforms. He works with an assistant to roll ink onto the block and then using a jig system on hinges, lowers the canvas onto the platform and makes the imprint by hand using a small disc-shaped printmaking tool. He lets the paint dry and applies another color the next day. The temperature might affect the ink. The jig might slip causing variances in the print. And given the large scale of his paintings, he extends his entire body across the canvas, sometimes leaving traces of his palm or his knee onto the surface.<sup>8</sup> The process is laborious, both carefully planned and inevitably extemporaneous.

*Ukiyo-e* prints are traditionally made on paper that is modestly sized. Their hallmark is controlled duplication and flattened surfaces. Pour's paintings are made on raw canvas, on a large scale. They are characterized by variations, multiplicity, and textured surfaces. They are both familiar and completely original. Beyond matters of form and technique, Pour's paintings are at their root thoughtful gestures to pressing contemporary questions about the role of the artist in society, about how we choose to live in this world, and about how overlooked fragments make up the larger whole. In a sense, they reflect the ethos of *ukiyo-e* (which roughly translates to "pictures of the floating world"), which combined the quotidian with the ethereal.

Pour's borrowing from Japanese prints is a considered artistic interjection, one that disrupts notions of cultural hybridity and singular originality. He questions simplistic categories like East and West, traditional and modern. His own beautifully compelling paintings point to multivalent cultural flows that have marked our interwoven histories.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, Arles, July 15, 1888, [www.vangoghletters.org](http://www.vangoghletters.org).

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, Arles, June 5, 1888, [www.vangoghletters.org](http://www.vangoghletters.org).

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<sup>3</sup> See Colta Feller Ives, *The Great Wave: The Influence of Japanese Woodcuts on French Prints* (NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> John Sandberg, "'Japonisme' and Whistler," *The Burlington Magazine* (November 1964), pp. 500 – 507.

<sup>5</sup> "Aestheticism and Japan: The Cult of the Orient," Resource Unit for The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989, Exhibition at Guggenheim NY, January 30 – April 19, 2009, <https://www.guggenheim.org/arts-curriculum/resource-unit/the-third-mind-american-artists-contemplate-asia-1860-1989>.

<sup>6</sup> Claire Voon, "Seeing Japan Through the Eyes of Frank Lloyd Wright," *Hyperallergic*, October 13, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/405148/seeing-japan-through-the-eyes-of-frank-lloyd-wright/>.

<sup>7</sup> The online exhibition, "1905: Japan Through the Lens of Frank Lloyd Wright," is from the collection of the Frank Lloyd Wright Trust. <https://www.wrightsjapan1905.org/>

<sup>8</sup> Kour Pour: In Conversation with Robert Summers, *NYAQ/LXAQ/SFAQ*, October 1, 2016, <http://sfaq.us/2016/10/kour-pour-in-conversation-with-robert-summers/>.