

In-Progress Narrative Recollection, 2013-2015
Christian Kōun Alborz Oldham

Imagination (in my case) rarely precedes the idea; it is the latter, and never the former, that excites me. But the latter without the former produces nothing but a useless exaltation. The idea of a work is its composition. Because of imagining too rapidly so many writers of today create ephemeral, poorly composed works. With me the idea of a work precedes often by several years its *imagination*.

As soon as the idea of a work takes on consistency—that is, as soon as the work organizes itself—the elaboration consists in little more than suppressing everything that is useless to its *organism*.

I am aware that everything that constitutes the originality of the writer is added unto this; but woe to him who thinks of his personality while writing. It always comes through sufficiently if it is sincere, and Christ's saying is just as true in art: "Whosoever will save his life (his personality) shall lose it."

This preliminary work, then, I perform while walking. Then it is that the outside world has the greatest hold over me and that distraction is most dangerous. For since work must always be natural, you must develop your idea without tension or violence. And sometimes it does not come at once. You have to wait. This requires infinite patience. It's no good to seize hold of the idea against its will: it then seems so surly that you wonder what attracted you in it. The preferred idea comes only when there is no other idea in its place. Hence you can evoke it only by thinking of nothing else. At times I have spent more than an hour waiting for it. If you have the misfortune, feeling nothing coming, to think: "I am wasting my time," it's all over and you *have* wasted your time.

— Andre Gide, 1893

I first ever saw the work of ikebana master, Kosen Ohtsubo, on June 24, 2013, in a used bookstore called *Nemoto Congen* near Ekoda train station, located in a quiet suburb tucked away in Tokyo's northwest Nerima district. I ended up there with my friend Laurel Schwulst because of a recommendation by our friend Daniel Abbe, an art historian specializing in Japanese post-war photography, who we met for pastries at a nearby bakery called *Mother Goose*, just prior. We had met with Daniel once before on our trip, and he exhibited great generosity with his recommendations of places that might interest us. But his suggestion of visiting *Nemoto Congen* felt spontaneous, most likely because of its close proximity to where we were currently meeting for breakfast.

When Laurel and I arrived, we were presented with what was more or less an average second-hand book shopping experience in Tokyo – floor-to-ceiling and wall-to-wall books, with ad-hoc room dividers of stacked printed matter randomly scattered around the already petite shop – a digging scenario not for the faint of heart or those with an empty stomach or sensitive bladder. After some time of sorting through publications, I looked to the top of the bookshelf I was situated in front of, and my eyes came across a two-volume set of books entitled *Contemporary Ikebana Today*.

One of the primary reasons I was in Japan and studying the language, was due to my interest in ikebana and my frustration in the difficulty of locating decent

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publications or resources about the art form that were produced in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. However, finding this two-volume set – a collection of 23 different flower artist's works produced in the late 1980s – very quickly helped fill some of the gaps, and renewed my hopes surrounding the art form after an unfortunate interaction with one of the more conservative schools of the medium, while visiting Kyoto on the same trip.

It was the arrangements by the hand of Kosen Ohtsubo, out of all the work featured between the two books, that struck me most. The first image to open his portion in volume 1 is a portrait of the artist in his newly renovated bathtub, surrounded by Japanese iris flowers and other miscellaneous flora. The work – present in the first iteration of this exhibition – is titled, *Feeling High - Ikebana Bathing*, and later renamed the more subdued, *I am Taking a Bath like this*, and is the only work in the volume to feature the likeness of the artist as a part of the total work.

Other arrangements of his in the book include a nourishing soup with grilled vegetables, noodles, and an egg in a nearly two foot wide ceramic dish, titled *Frizzling Vegetables-Avant-Garde Ikebana?*, and another is a totem of a basic human form sculpted out of plants and wire, known as *Walkman II*. It's this work, along with his others, that struck me as wholly different from the rest of the other flower artists. Whereas the majority of other works felt like the arrangers were working within the framework of ikebana to speak about the art form to its other practitioners, Ohtsubo's work was intended for a much broader audience, with a level of rigor, experimentation, and levity that felt boundless.

I purchased the books and poured over them upon returning to America, still primarily fascinated by Ohtsubo's arrangements. Searching his name on the internet in 2013 didn't yield many results, though I found his website that now still looks about the same as it did then, e-flowerplanet.com. The site, made together with his daughter Keiko, has versions in English, Japanese, and Chinese, and features writing and information on Kosen and his artistic activities. There was a section on the site detailing his bibliography, which led me to searching used book sites to see if I could track any of the publications down. Eventually, I found his first book, *Plant and Man*, published in 1981 for \$50, sold by Michael Houghton Rare Books. I bought the copy on December 25, 2013.

Around this time, I also found Ohtsubo's blog and Twitter account, which were in Japanese and Chinese. If recollection serves right, I direct messaged him over Twitter, and from there he provided his e-mail address. I then wrote my first e-mail to Ohtsubo on January 14, 2014, explaining my admiration of his work and how I originally came across it, eventually sharing pictures of my own arrangements. He wrote back generous responses, sending me English-language articles written about him from the late-1990s, when he exhibited in Minneapolis, Minnesota at the Weisman Museum. He even sent a signed copy of his 1995 book that was part of the *Flower Artist* series, with a DVD of a television program that covers certain elements of his practice and included footage from an opening of an exhibition of his where there were electronic musicians playing live acid house music.

At the time that we were corresponding over e-mail, Kosen was living in Beijing for nearly a stretch of eight years. Ikebana was something he could make a reasonable

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living on while there, and he was also studying the history of Chinese ikebana, which precedes the codified Japanese medium. He wrote to me that, prior to deciding on Beijing, he considered New York as well, but that Beijing at the time was much more compelling. Later, he explained to me that somehow it felt like Japan, which had at one point been so open to the world during the height of the 1980s economic bubble, was now quite insular and conservative, with the majority of people primarily looking inward. Beijing in the late 2000s, on the other hand, was the opposite to him, where one had a sense that people were actively looking out to different parts of the world to inspire changes that could take place locally.

In 2014, I was wrapping up my undergraduate degree in art history. My thesis writing was on the origins of ikebana and its contemporary practice. Ohtsubo's work was a large part of it. The *Contemporary Ikebana Today* volumes I found while in Japan, with their page-long, translated essays by prominent ikebana critics and historians were extensively quoted. Dissatisfied with the lack of scholarly writing on the topic in English, I wanted to try to create a compendium of all the ikebana facts I found across whatever publications were available to me through Inter-Library Loan. Upon finishing the writing, it made me realize reading and understanding the history of the art form was one thing, but living and engaging in its culture was entirely different. I knew I had to somehow get funding to study in Japan, potentially with Ohtsubo.

Around this time, I become aware, through an ikebana exhibition at the Portland Japanese Garden, that located in Oregon City was an instructor for the same school that Kosen was a part of, the Ryusei Ikebana School. The instructor, Reiko Granade, was the only Ryusei School instructor in the United States. I was living in Salem, Oregon while attending university, so it was just under a one-hour drive from my house to her studio. I gave her a telephone call and made a plan to meet with her, to explain my interest in studying ikebana and to apply for fellowships and funding that allowed me to study in Japan with Ohtsubo, and to show her the work I had already made based on my self-teachings. She was curious, and invited me to meet during a class one evening on August 26, 2014. Upon seeing my work, she paid me a very high complement by saying that it already was on par with some of the work of masters of the school. Granade welcomed me to join the class and I started officially the next month, on September 23. The evening of the 23rd, Granade also gifted me her copy of Ohtsubo's *Plant and Man* publication from 1981. I studied with Granade, who also served as my main point of communication to the Ryusei School, up until May of 2015.

During this time of study, I remained in regular communication with Ohtsubo. It was due to political tensions between Japan and China that it was less viable for him to make a living and maintain residency abroad. He moved back to Japan towards the end of 2014. With this news, and after speaking with advisors at my university, it was recommended that I apply for the Fulbright Research and Luce Scholars Fellowships to try and secure funding for my goal of living abroad to study with Ohtsubo. When asked if he would be my sponsor for the Fulbright, he agreed, saying he had provided sponsorship once before for a former student of his from Europe. He sent me his affiliation letter on September 18, 2014. The Fulbright application was a complex project too exhausting to recount. And in contrast, was a mountain compared to the Luce's molehill – due a week or two later after the Fulbright's –

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where I remember writing about Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* in part of a personal essay.

While driving up Interstate 5 from Los Angeles to Sacramento one holiday vacation, I received an e-mail indicating I was a finalist for the Fulbright. However, that's as far as I would go with that particular fellowship, which was notable, but not what was desired. The Luce Scholars Fellowship, on the other hand, required two rounds of interviews, and in contrast to the Fulbright, preferred non-specialization in case a desired placement might not work out. I had to try my hardest when speaking to de-emphasize the fact that I was applying essentially with the same hyper-specific project I applied to the Fulbright with, by also explaining I was interested in making and studying ceramics in Korea.

I passed the first interview, though when asked if I had any concerns of living in Asia by myself, I naively and over-excitedly said I had none. The interviewer, a former fellow himself, informed me about his time in China, and the feelings of isolation he felt living in a foreign nation with few long-term ties. In time, I came to understand perhaps similar feelings to those he felt while living abroad, though luckily in the moment, this lack of foresight wasn't enough to disqualify me. The second interview required a flight to San Francisco on February 5, 2015, where myself and fourteen other candidates were housed in a strangely, if not tackily renovated Scarlet Hotel, apparently not far from John Waters' residence, and underwent a back-to-back marathon of seven different interviews with different esteemed panelists who decided whether or not we'd receive just over a year of funding to live/study/work within Asia.

I asked prior if I could bring along a portfolio of work to share with the interviewers and was allowed, but only if they requested to see it. Prior to leaving for the Bay Area, I made a small spiral-bound book of my ikebana works and other related projects up until that point. The interviews I remember being a flurry, each being twenty-five minutes long with a professional focused on a different field of study or research. A professional entrepreneur asked me a number of memorable questions: "How do you want people to remember you, or what would your gravestone epitaph read?" "What's in your life that you wish you had less of?" "What's not in your life that you wish you had more of?" I remember answering that having already written and published my will in 2014 for my 22nd birthday, I wished upon my death to be subjected to a sky burial and fed to vultures; that I wanted to be taken by less distractions; and love.

I was told later on by the director of the program, that six out of the seven interviewers didn't know what to do with me when it came time to make a decision. They looked to one person, Emily Sano, director emeritus of the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco to decide. She approved. My interview with her went well, I remember Sano being interested in my trajectory of having first made music to coming to visual arts, then ikebana. It was an unconventional path, but she saw that I had kept busy and had hopes to stay that way. She believed in me, and maybe it was not a big gamble for her in her retirement, but her belief catalyzed certain events in my life that have allowed this show to happen and for you, patient reader, to read these recollections. For that, I am very grateful.

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Once I had gone through all seven judged interviews, there was an eighth, unjudged meeting focused specifically on country and professional placement with David Kim of the Asia Foundation. Here is where I revealed the specificity of my desired position, studying with Ohtsubo at the Ryusei School. After the final interview, it was customary to depart from the hotel and head to your next destination, which in my case was Los Angeles. At the group dinner the night before the interviews, the higher-ups of the Luce Foundation said the most important thing they recommended us to do was to “be yourself,” in part because all of us contending for a position were already there because we were worthy candidates for the program – it was just about revealing our personalities to see if we were additionally a cultural fit. Upon leaving, I felt that in all of my illegibility, I had been myself, but did not have a sense of the outcome.

It was the following day where I got a call informing me that I had been selected to participate. The application’s submission dates between the Luce and Fulbright Fellowships were so close together that upon learning of my success, people, including Kosen, were confused as to which I had received. In April, David of the Asian Foundation spoke excitedly about meeting Ohtsubo at the Ryusei Ikebana Center.

I moved to the western part of Tokyo, Japan from Salem, Oregon, on June 24, 2015. Over e-mail, Kosen and I arranged to meet in person for the first time on July 3, at the Mitsukoshi Theater for an ikebana lecture. Afterwards, we visited the Azabujuban gallery to see a show by his friend and flower design artist, Ryusaku Matsuda, whose work I was familiar with because of its inclusion in the same volume of *Contemporary Ikebana Today* where Ohtsubo’s work had appeared. If memory serves right, we ended this day with shaved ice and sweet red beans at a local dessert shop nearby the gallery.

This itinerary, of the two of us visiting ikebana exhibitions around Tokyo, was a large part of what we did together during my time living in Japan. Kosen e-mailed information as to the location of what the show or event was a couple nights before, and I showed up. Over time, people started to recognize us as a pair. Azuma Seiko, a fellow Ryusei School master of ikebana, who I met as she was studying the most traditional form of ikebana, *rikka*, from Kosen, told the two of us years later that the odd coupling of us, a younger American with a revered Japanese master, added to a certain mystique and curiosity as to why one was with the other. She felt that our differences most likely magnified our prestige in our respective homelands.

Kosen, in nearly all of these situations, was incredibly generous in his introduction of me to his contemporaries. Though, he always ended an introduction after explaining who they were to me with, “...and they speak very good English,” which made the subject of the introduction blush and frantically admit that they could speak very little. Ohtsubo, in response, said in Japanese to them, “He speaks very good Japanese, please talk,” to which I reacted in the same manner as they had. It was so common an occurrence that every time, I rolled my eyes lovingly, smiled, and had the same genuine startled reaction. This was part of Ohtsubo’s disarming humor.

My Japanese at the time was alright, and only got better, eventually getting comfortably conversational though with a limited vocabulary. This forced me to very

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creatively explain scenarios that with the proper handle of the language, might become more muted and straightforward, which I was and still am ambivalent about as the lingual diversions add a psychedelic fog of humor to much of any interaction. Kosen has a strong handle on English because of a series of classes he took at the YMCA in the 1970s, and we often found ourselves communicating between the languages, especially over e-mail.

I was first invited over to lunch with Kosen and his family at their house and studio two days after our initial meeting, on July 5. After the meal, I explored the studio, which was mostly still packed away from when Kosen had left for China some eight years prior. I found ceramic vessels that were in some of my favorite photographed works of his from the mid-1980s, postcards announcing prior exhibitions, and a variety of books and records, it felt like a treasure trove. A bit later into the early evening, miso soup was prepared along with a small fried snack and tea. Once we were finished with those, Ohtsubo asked me to make an arrangement with what was left on the table; mostly water glasses, a pitcher, tomatoes, a tea dispenser, a pink towel, watermelon, along with some long stalks of an unfamiliar grass. Kosen was amused with my final result, and while I wasn't entirely satisfied with what it was I made in the moment, the immediate prompting to use what was around me to make an improvised arrangement was a prelude for the lessons Ohtsubo made me undergo when we started regular lessons four months later.

Between the studio introduction and the starting of regular weekly lessons, we primarily visited exhibitions, though Kosen showed me two things that are worth expanding upon here. The first is known as Hanaike Battles. The name, Hanaike, is a reversal of the kanji that makes up the word, ikebana. What usually reads as "living flowers," is now reversed. The reasoning for this odd title comes from the founder of these battles, a man named Ueno Yuji. Yuji is known in the ikebana world for a very controversial action he committed while still a student of the well-known Sogetsu School of Ikebana that was relayed to me one evening by long-time Japan resident and Ichiyo School of Ikebana master, Kathleen Adair.

The second headmaster of the avant-garde Sogetsu School, former film director, Hiroshi Teshigahara, was famously quoted saying, "Smash tradition." Since Hiroshi had since passed away, it was his daughter, Akane, who rose as the next headmaster, one of the first women to lead one of the largest ikebana schools. Akane was making an arrangement live, an activity that commonly happens at ikebana exhibitions to help teach certain techniques or considerations to studying practitioners, in one of her father's hand-made ceramic vessels. It is during this that Yuji, then in his twenties, still relatively early-on in his studies, walked up with a hammer, proclaimed Hiroshi's, "Smash tradition," and broke the vessel.

From what I've been told, he's the only ikebana practitioner to ever be expelled from a school. After this, the rumor is that to support his family, he took a job as a cab driver, and it was after about ten years of silence from flower-related activities that he started to make a resurgence, eventually starting these Hanaike Battles. The reversal of kanji in the name, coming from the fact that his banishing forbade him from using the word, "ikebana" to describe his activities.

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The battles present an interesting format for flower arrangements to be made. During each round there are two flower artists, of any particular background – whether it be ikebana or flower design – and the arrangers have five minutes to make an arrangement with the materials offered, which is a large enough array of cut flowers to stock a flower shop. Sometimes battles have limitations. One battle specified the artists could not use ceramic vessels, which had one artist hack the ceiling panels above his bar table to find loose wires to suspend the table upside down to use as a vessel. The competing arranger was so overwhelmed at the direction the competition was taking, he took off his shoes to use as an improvised vase in response. At the end of the allotted time, the members of the audience vote between one of the two participants with wooden paddles. There are multiple rounds of this throughout the night, with one final winner being determined. I attended three of these events with Kosen, who participated and got quite far in the July 27 tournament, though would not be the final winner.

The other activity that Ohtsubo introduced me to was the Ikebana Labo, short for laboratory, that was a monthly class that met in the Okubo area of Shinjuku, specifically at the building that housed the Yamato School of Ikebana. The laboratory classes had been running for years, and brought together masters from different schools who formed a group interested in collectively pursuing new avant-garde expressions within the medium. Classes were led by different guest masters for three months at a time, with each class focusing on different challenges or concepts put forth by the guest master. The group would be handed papers discussing the theme for each meeting, and from there would break off to select desired vessels and arrange for one hour. Afterwards would be group critiques with the occasional dinner afterwards. I attended my first class on October 30, and would regularly attend when possible, during my time living in Japan.

Shortly after this first Ikebana Labo class, my regular classes with Kosen began at his home studio in Tokorozawa, located in Saitama Prefecture. Ohtsubo, since having moved back from Beijing the year prior, was teaching rikka style classical ikebana to masters who had been studying the medium for decades. I was his only beginning student. The usual speed at which one takes ikebana lessons from a master is roughly one lesson a week. At this rate, it would take someone from beginning to end for a certain type of course, about four to five years to get their master's degree. Ohtsubo knew I had studied independently, and in combination with the classes I had taken with Reiko Granade, he felt it was necessary to push me to do that amount of study within the year I was living in Japan. We would meet once a week, often when his rikka students were practicing, and I would produce anywhere from four to six arrangements throughout the day. This speed would get me to a master's level of certification for freestyle arranging by my time of departure.

Kosen lived and taught out of a very unique house, designed by architect Hiroshi Nakao. The exterior of the house was covered in raw corten steel, that over time darkened to a reddish black. The interior surfaces were all structural plywood, stained with charcoal-black oil, making for a very dark interior as well. Within the structure were also ingeniously designed storage spaces, where Ohtsubo had stored vases, books, records and other materials while away in Beijing. When there was time after my lessons, I often dug through these storage areas with his permission, curious as to what I might find relating to my interest in Kosen's works both past and

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present. In the middle of December, Ohtsubo showed me a humidity-controlled cabinet in one of these built-in storage areas of his house, filled with positive and negative film of works of his dating back decades. I was enthralled. There was so much work in these slide-holders I had never seen before, that had so many interesting ideas and realizations of what ikebana could be. Even though they were in some cases from before my birth, they still felt fresh and immediate.

To be continued