

## Sho and non Sho :Overlaps

In the introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition 'Sho and Non Sho: Overlaps' which took place in JARFO Art Space in Kyoto from 20th January - 4th February 2024, it is stated that a new art form may result from an exploration of the juncture of Sho (usually translated as calligraphy) and other arts, non Sho. The investigations so far have concentrated on visual 2D art namely painting, but it is reasonable to assume it can cover many other non Sho art forms as well.

The exhibition series began in 2003 and has continued annually ever since, with a break of five years between 2014 and 2018. The title in Japanese is 「書と非書の際 (きわ)」 its romanisation is *Sho to Hi Sho no Kiwa* and in English it is translated as 'Sho and Non Sho : Overlaps.' The title itself deserves unpacking as the Chinese character, kanji in Japanese, *Kiwa* 際 has associations which bear on the Sho/non Sho debate.

This essay will therefore first consider the origin of the kanji for *kiwa* and how it may enlighten the discussion of the relationship between Sho and non Sho. It will then look at the translation of the word *kiwa* as overlaps, as the kanji is more commonly translated as boundary or border. The second part of the essay will describe the artwork in the present exhibition and look in what ways it is developing a new art form as proposed in the introduction.

Jo Ishida, director of JARFO and of the series of these exhibitions chose the kanji *kiwa* 際 for the title. He explained the choice by referring to its origin. The radical (the component in any character under which it is categorised) is 阜 *oka* in Japanese, 'hill' in English. According to scholar Shirakawa Shizuka 白川静 the radical originally meant a large pile of rocks on a hill in the shape of a divine ladder, a ladder to the gods. The right hand side of the kanji 祭 referred to rituals performed to invoke the gods. (Nowadays it means festival.) As a whole the kanji would therefore mean the encounter between people and the gods.

In what ways might the original meaning of *kiwa* be useful in the context of exploring the relationship between sho and non sho?

There are various implications: First the suggestion that there is an actual place in which gods meet man. Second that it is a place of importance and value. Third it is one in which two distinct forms of existence meet or mingle and rituals are performed.

It is this last I will start with. It is perhaps easiest to understand this mingling of different existences or energies as one between inspiration and creation. As artists we listen to our hearts, experience and record emotion, we read, think and research the world and around us and if we are working with words and language, the scripts and styles. While trying out our medium, experimenting to see what is possible, we begin to conjure up some form the art work may take. We work to allow a flicker of an idea to burn more strongly so we may channel it into physical form.

In order to do so we need a place to work, an actual studio space, however small, perhaps just our lap and a notebook. Wherever it may be, it is a place of value, one which is important to us and one to which we may retreat from our everyday life .

With these kind of associations in its hinterland in what way can kiwa be best translated in the sho/non sho context? Clearly border or boundary is not enough. It is a binary division, one is either on one side or on the other. In our present social climate we are keenly aware that these kinds of divisions do not reflect reality.

The original meaning of kiwa suggests we are inspired and we create in ways which could either be defined as sho or non sho, something in between or beyond both. The act of creation is first, and is dependent on the integrity of the artist and their direct link with their inspiration and production of artwork.

If we incorporate this aspect of kiwa, ie that the creation of artwork is prior to the definition of the art form, then in the current multi media art world it is perhaps as much the job of art historian or art critic as it is of the the artists themselves to decide on the definition of the art form. It is a question which perhaps can be addressed more easily in retrospect, as the many examples of the artwork mount up over time.

To return to the English translation of kiwa. It is a pity there is no word which encompasses the depth of meaning of the kanji. Overlaps in this context refers to the overlapping of different art forms out of which something new can be born. However, overlapping also suggests there are different separate entities which layer one on top of the other. This implies that the art forms are distinct and retain their identities as they are stacked one on the other.

Overlaps as a translation can work if it is understood that the overlaps mix and run into each other, as so often happens in reality. The hybrid result can be born of impulses from two, three or more different art forms, the resultant work may or may not exhibit features of one or another or of any of them. We can see the overlapping area as a new space in which elements can mix, mingle and mutate. As suggested earlier in the discussion of kiwa, it is a space first and foremost of inspiration for the individual artist.

In the second part of the essay I survey the artwork in the exhibition this year, 2024. There were 20 artists, plus one specially invited. The age range was wide, from those in their 30s to one or two who were nearly 90. There were slightly more men than women and there was one non Japanese.

Nearly all the artists have been trained in sho and regularly exhibit or have exhibited sho artwork. Most of the artwork had been made with the traditional materials of sho, ie sumi ink and Japanese or Chinese paper, but it was often combined with colours and mixed media and with Western papers or supports. Artwork was displayed in a variety of ways, mostly in frames, a few in hangings, one on the floor. Only one piece was mounted in a traditional scroll.

Among the artists' comments about their work, by far the most common was wanting to break through to a new form of artistic expression and on a personal level to break through their own limits to express themselves and their feelings in artwork. Even among those who did not explicitly state this intention, their work clearly reflected the desire to express something new.

These aspirations are not new, avant garde calligraphic movements post war held such aims and parallels were found with Abstract Expressionists in the US and Art Informel artists in France. Links were established with the Gutai performance art group in West Japan.

In order to investigate the emergence of this new art form, it may be instructive to survey how kanji have been used in the artwork in this exhibition.

**For a few artists the kanji were distorted but legible**, especially after reading the title or the artists' comments.

**Junko Takezawa** wrote 「美」 'Beauty.' She was consciously using the blurring of sumi ink lines into the paper to suggest the opening up of a new space for a new form of art.

**Tatsuji Masuda**'s sho, while roughly written was legible, depicting animal enemies in the natural world playing out their lives on his veranda. It is titled: 「ベランダで展開する妄想天敵変身」 'Delusional natural transformation unfolding on the veranda.'

**Yasutoshi Fujita** wrote 「門」 'Gate.' He is concerned to open up a new aesthetic space for Sho. His choice of this character reflects that.

**Kenseki Honjo** wrote いちご 'Ichigo' (the title) in hiragana phonetic script in a large wild hand, very different from standard kana artwork. It is probably the first half of the saying 'Ichigo ichie', 「一期一会」、roughly meaning 'Seize the day.' In his comment the words 'space key' point with an arrow to parentheses enclosing a space. His comment suggests he is referring to kiwa, the space in between Sho and non Sho.

There were two politically inspired pieces. One was by **Baioku Taguchi** about the war in the Ukraine, on which he had written the kanji for flower 花 broken up and scattered over the Ukraine flag. The title was 「花 (引き裂かれ、踏み躪られた)」 'Flowers (torn and trampled)'

The other was a message from Hiroshima by **Taeko Ogawa**

「かけがえのない人間の命」 'Irreplaceable Human Life' written in sumi ink on a painted yellow semi circle. It was the only work in the exhibition mounted on a traditional scroll.

A special exhibit by **Sadaharu Horio**, a former member of the Gutai Art movement who died in 2018 was hung in the entrance to the exhibition. Horio was a visual artist, well known for his performances and installations. The artwork in the exhibition was of the kanji 「度胸」 'Grit' written with a broom. The decision was made not to mount the work, as Horio would have liked it to have been shown just as he had brushed it, unmounted.

**For some artists the kanji or text was the inspiration for their work but it was either so distorted as to be illegible or not visible in the work at all.**

**Choryusui Okuno** was inspired by the character 入 (to enter) and a childhood memory he had of the entrance to a stone basement. Interestingly the 入 that had attracted his interest was used in its alternative meaning of 'switched on.' The title is 「入口」 'Entrance.'

**Kukiko Arai** uses literature as an inspiration for her artwork with lines and simple forms. Her artwork is called 「琵琶行」 'Song of the Biwa' (a kind of lute)

**Taikou Yamamoto's** work is based on the katakana phonetic script for heart ココロ and depicts the fearful beating of his heart during the Noto earthquake at the beginning of 2024. 「ココロ」 is the title.

Inspired by ancient forms of art and the origin of words to find something new **Yukari Tanigawa** uses sumi ink on resin coated paper to produce her piece, entitled 「月雫」 'Moon Droplet'

### **Artwork based on abstract criteria or other concerns such as an investigation of material:**

**Wataru Takahama's** work is an abstract piece expressing his strong intention to break through his limitations. The title in English only is 'Go beyond your limits!!! Limit breaking fireball!!!!'

**Ryouichi Tomoyoshi** uses traditional media, sumi ink and Chinese paper to produce a unique surface. The title describes the composition and is 'Moving Dots' 「動点2401-A」

**Hiloki Tanaka** wanted to express his complex feelings through this abstract mixed media work. He felt that words would not have been enough to express what he felt. The title in English only is 'Condition Scene 003.'

**Chikako Hosoma** is not a Sho artist, she has been influenced by Gutai artists whose work reflected the concerns of the avant garde calligraphers post war. Hosoma did a performance at the gallery in which the sumi ink was made to run freely down a long sheet of paper with no human intervention. The title is the name of the exhibition, the occasion of the performance. 「書と非書の際2024」 'Sho and non Sho: Overlaps 2024.'

The interest in the natural flow of sumi ink is shown in **Yumiko Sou's** artwork. In the face of the increasing use of Artificial Intelligence she feels the sense of chance and what can't be logically explained is being lost. The title is 「Detarame -人間のしごと」 'Nonsense:The Human Task.'

**Christine Flint Sato** submitted artwork using soot (carbon) which is one of the ingredients in sumi ink and which is also the main atomic element of humans, indicating that neither would exist without it. The title is 'Focus on Carbon' 「カーボンの着目」

Soot was also used in a mixed media piece by **Talking Maki**. While producing her work the Noto earthquake struck and cracked the work. Maki saw the character 曲 Song in the result and entitled the work 「混沌 (曲)」 'Song of Chaos.'

A purely abstract piece, playing on the title of the exhibition, is by **Yuichi Sakamaki**. The artwork is a row of a popular chocolate snack 'Pocky,' and is entitled 「チョコとスナックの際 (きわ)」 'Chocolate and Snacks : Overlaps.'

**Michio Nakamura** has spent his artistic career focusing on the relationship between the basic forms of circle, square and triangle which he feels exist in the world around us and also in our hearts. He feels that by discerning this relationship in order to produce artwork differentiates non Sho arts from Sho. The title is 「まる三角しかく24-113」 'Circle Triangle Square 24-113.'

**Takesada Matsutani** , one of the last generation of the Gutai art movement was represented by one of his classic pieces in graphite and wood glue. He sees the search for a new form of art beyond both sho and non sho as one which transcends conventional aesthetic definitions. It is this space he defines as kiwa. The title is 「無題 1996」 'Untitled 1996.'

In summary, since the Second World War the large shodo (calligraphy) organisations have controlled acceptable calligraphy styles in Japan. Over the last twenty years independent sho artists have emerged. While respecting the traditions of sho and using writing skills they have mastered during their training, they are producing distinctive work. The sho artwork in this exhibition displayed the unique styles of 20 individual artists. Their comments demonstrated awareness of their position and their serious intent. In the spirit of the original meaning of kiwa, they are listening to their muses, producing original artwork and attest to the richness of this growing art form.

Christine Flint Sato  
February 2024