Transitory nature

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Transitory Nature

by

Josianne Ishikawa

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Integrated Visual Arts

Program of Study Committee:
Barbara Walton, Major Professor
April Eisman
Anson Call

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

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A special thank you, to my dear friends and family for encouraging me to follow my dreams at any age. You have always been there for me, through thick and thin.

Last and foremost, I want to thank my daughter for her devotion and love. I watched with pride as she always achieved her goals, which inspired me to achieve my own. Without her, I would not be who I am.
ABSTRACT

This thesis is the written component of the art exhibit Transitory Nature, which took place from March 19, 2016 at the Gallery in the Round in the Unitarian Church, and from March 20, 2016 at the Gallery 181 in the College of Design at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa. In my artwork it explores the Japanese aesthetic wabi-sabi in relation to the profundity of spirit found in the prairie landscape. The artwork uses encaustic painting in combination with cyanotype, mixed media, textile, and nonfiction video essay, to address the philosophy of wabi-sabi and the transitory nature of birth, growth, and decay.

This text documents my intention in creating the artwork. It also documents the physical methods of creating the artwork and the conceptual development. A history of wabi-sabi and Dr. Ada Hayden’s work on prairie preservation will place the artwork and explain its relevance in relation to the wabi-sabi philosophy of artistic creation. A thumbnail documentation of the artwork exhibited follows. The artwork in this exhibition is a documentation of my art philosophy relating to wabi-sabi and the prairie landscape in relation to transience.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE JOURNEY HERE

I find it interesting to look back over the past and reconnect the dots. One experience seems to magically lead to the next; like stepping stones crossing a pond, there seems to be an order to safely help us cross to the other side. Some people refer to this as fate, I prefer the word serendipity; it sounds more whimsical.

I decided to become an artist my sophomore year at Grand View University in Des Moines, Iowa, where I grew up. I originally started my undergraduate studies in theater arts with the intention of studying set design. My advisor suggested a studio-drawing course might be useful. At that time I had received no art instruction since 7th grade, where I remember making a clay ashtray with a large peace symbol design. Peace symbols were all the rage in the 70’s during the Vietnam War era. What I find interesting in hindsight is that an ashtray was one of the choices we were given; it seems like some kind of encouragement to smoke. My junior high school didn’t really have an art teacher. Maybe if I had received better art instruction then, I might have found my path sooner.

I wasn’t very happy in theater arts at Grand View, there was too much Shakespearian backstabbing drama amongst the theater students for my quiet character. Competition for acting parts was fierce and my theater professor always cast me as the ingénue, or in other words, an innocent and unsophisticated young woman. At 18 years of age, I certainly fit the part. I had no interest in acting but still kept being cast in the most desirable parts, which made me even more unpopular among the other theater students. As a result, I grew to prefer
the peace and quiet of working by myself. Too busy with rehearsals and dodging daggers to study set design, I became disillusioned with the theater.

I did not initially have an interest in making art, because my father was artistic and my oldest brother was the one everyone thought inherited his talent. In fact, all three of my siblings were seen to be more talented than me at drawing, and so it just never occurred to me to study art. My mother is the one who suggested I change my major. I remember very clearly my mother closely watching me while I was working on a drawing for class, and saying she thought I would be much happier in studio arts. So the seed was planted, and I started, or stumbled on to, the road to becoming an artist.

I completed my BA with a major in painting at Grand View University in 1981. I had the equivalency of a BFA but at that time Grand View did not have a BFA degree (I was only the second graduate to come out of the new four-year degree course in the art department; another student beat me to first by one semester).

My style of painting was American Modernist in the vein of Georgia O’Keefe and Arthur Dove. I liked painting still lifes that encompassed not just a tabletop of objects but a whole room, and my perspective was deliberately slightly askew (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Josianne Ishikawa, Still Life. 1979. Oil on canvas.
By my senior year my interest turned to reflections, and I went around snapping photographs of windows in Des Moines. Now, these paintings reflect nostalgic landscapes that no longer exist (Figure 2).

After graduating I really didn’t know what to do with myself, so I worked a variety of low paying service jobs and continued to enter competitions and do exhibitions. I shared a studio space in downtown Des Moines with another artist I met through work, and I switched from painting on canvas to painting on paper. My subject matter and style changed too. I became more realistic but still rooted in American Modernism. I began painting small portraits of friends and family after being inspired by the David Hockney painting, *Mr. and Mrs. Clark and Percy* (Figure 3). For practical reasons, switching to paper and painting in a smaller size also made it easier to enter competitions that were farther away. I was accepted into the Sioux City Eight-State Juried Show and The Fred Wells Ten-State Juried Show in Nebraska.

Figure 2. Josianne Ishikawa, *Younkers*. 1980. Oil on canvas.

Figure 3. David Hockney, *Mr. and Mrs. Clark and Percy*. 1971. Acrylic on canvas. Tate Gallery, London.
Around this time, I attended a one-week workshop in Minnesota at the Split Rock Arts Program in Duluth on Roketsu-zome, a Japanese wax-resist fabric painting technique. After the workshop, I took my new skills and went on to make and sell my own fabric designs on silk scarves. I sold my scarves at the Des Moines Art Center gift shop, Reichardt’s Clothing Store, and at the annual Des Moines Art Fair. My fabric designs took on a more Asian-inspired style. Little did I know, that this experience would become a central influence on my life and eventually my art practice at Iowa State University (ISU).

Bored with working service jobs and not seeing a bright future for myself, I decided at 29 years of age, to take a big step in fulfilling a dream I had since childhood to live in another country. I accepted a job in Japan working at an English language school. I only planned on staying one year, but ended up staying for more than twenty-five. In those following years, with the demands of working, learning to live in a new culture, marriage, and parenthood, my painting fell by the wayside, until I decided in 1995 to organize a solo exhibit. I did a series of ten paintings, oil on canvas, on the Noh theater mask of a young woman (Figure 4). I positioned each mask in the middle of a Japanese landscape as Georgia O’Keefe had positioned her skulls in the desert (Figure 5). I did this unconsciously until someone pointed it out to me. I was still an American

Figure 4. Josianne Ishikawa, Ten Masks series: Despair. 1997. Oil on linen.

Figure 5. Georgia O’Keeffe, Ram’s Head White Hollyhock and Little Hills. 1935. Oil on canvas. The Brooklyn Museum.
Modernist, except now with a Japanese base. After the exhibit, I put down my brush and concentrated on raising my daughter. Many years later, I exhibited these paintings at a gallery in Rome, Italy. I came to realize these were self-portraits of my face, and I had been hiding behind a mask.

It was ten years before I painted again. By this time my daughter was a teenager in junior high school and I had acquired a laptop. The world was at my fingertips. I was no longer isolated in the mountains of Japan. My daughter, a strong-willed child, decided she wanted to go to high school in the US and I arranged for her to stay with my sister in Ames, Iowa while I returned briefly to Japan. I had hoped to soon join my daughter again in Iowa, but we never know what’s around the corner. I suddenly became ill with a hereditary disease and suffered debilitating pain that would take several years to completely recover from. It was on my 50th birthday, unable to get out of bed, and looking out my window at a clear blue sky, that I made a mental bucket list. At the top of the list was to become an artist again.

I have a disease that affects millions of people of Celtic heritage all over the world, Dupuytren’s Contracture. It’s a thickening of the fibrous tissue under the skin in the palms of the hands and fingers and can also affect the feet. This thickening causes the fingers to curl in towards the palm. In my case, my first symptoms were in my feet. I could barely walk, and then my shoulders froze. People with Dupuytren’s are more susceptible to frozen shoulder. Needless to say it was painful. Maybe through my own determination, I have recovered my ability to walk, to move my arms, to live a life without pain. My only symptom now is that I cannot straighten the little finger on my right hand. It’s unusual for someone’s symptoms to
reverse. Dupuytren’s is a chronic and progressive disease, and I do not know if my symptoms will worsen again. I only know that the mind and will are a powerful mystery not to be underestimated. On my 50th birthday I made a promise to myself to join my daughter, and by my next birthday I did.

In the beginning of my long road to recovery, I had to practically strap the paintbrush to my hand, so my work was small in size, on wood panels that were easily purchased at the local hardware store. I started each work by spray-painting over rice or soybeans to add texture to the background, but not only for that reason; rice and soybeans are so important in the Japanese diet, that they are also a symbol of Japanese culture. I then would paint a simple image on top with oils. I did two series called "Landscapes on Kimono" and "Lily Pond"; the series "Lily Pond", was influenced by the Nobel Prizewinning Japanese novel, "Snow Country" by Yasunari Kawabata; the title "Milky Way" (Figure 6) comes from the last sentence in the novel, “and the Milky Way flowed down inside him with a roar.” In this sentence Kawabata gave his anti-hero a greater connection with the universe by swallowing up its dimensions of distance, perspective, and size.
The Landscapes on Kimono series also reflected important Japanese cultural symbols. In Candles on the Water (Figure 7), I recreated the annual O-bon festival of the dead as I experienced it in the town where I lived in Japan. At the end of the festival, I would light a candle, place it in a little boat, and let it float down the river current to send the spirits of loved-ones back to the spirit world.

I painted my portrait during my recovery time (Figure 8). In the painting you can see I am dressed in a robe and pajamas. The mask I am holding is the Noh theater mask of a bedraggled middle-aged woman. At this time, I am liberating myself from the mask by symbolically removing it and revealing my face.

Living in Ames with my daughter, who by then was in her senior year in high school, and gaining back my mobility, I started a series of paintings based on small Japanese photo booth self-portraits called “purikura” (Figure 9), that were popular in Japan. The term purikura comes from the English words “print club”. Purikura can be altered and manipulated through background choices and by digitally drawing designs and messages before taking the photo.
The first painting I did in the *Purikura* series was a portrait of my sleeping husband (Figure 10), but as I progressed in this series, my message became more about pop culture. I chose two people at the top of pop: Michael Jackson and Madonna. They are wearing masks as a comment on the pressures aging pop artists have to maintain a youthful appearance through plastic surgery. This reflection on perfectionism would later develop into my current art philosophy on “flawed beauty” (Figure 11).

After graduating from Ames High School, my daughter decided to attend Iowa State University. I received a grant to attend a one-month art residency at The Vermont Studio Center, after which I planned on returning to Japan. It could not have been a more beautiful Vermont autumn in September of 2009. The first two weeks of the residency, I remember crying a lot in my room, overwhelmed and intimidated by the presence of one hundred other accomplished writers and artists, I didn’t believe I deserved to be there.
The second two weeks, a group of supportive women befriended me, and it was the happiest I had been in years. By the time I left, I felt like an artist again.

I decided to work out of my comfort zone at the residency and teach myself how to paint with pastels. I thought it was best to choose a simple subject matter, so I did a series of pastel paintings on Koi (Figure 12). It was at the residency that I met guest speaker, Ed Smith, a professor at Marist College and two-time Guggenheim fellowship winner. Ed was very encouraging and the one who suggested I get my MFA. I carried that advice, like a secret present, for the next four years while my daughter completed her bachelor degree.

While at the residency, a couple of the other residents and I drove up to Montreal and stumbled upon an exhibit by an artist none of us had heard of before, Canadian artist Betty Goodwin (Figure 13). She worked in a large variety of media, including collage, sculpture, printmaking, painting, drawing, textile, assemblage, and etching. It was after seeing this amazing exhibit that I decided that I, too, wanted to be able to work in a variety of media.
That September in Vermont was very influential on me. I made many new connections and supportive friendships with other artists from all over the US and the world, I was encouraged to get an MFA by someone I respected, and I started to use a variety of media. Exactly one year later, the Vermont September residents organized an exhibit in London, which I attended. I did a series of paintings on washi (Japanese paper) using a variety of mediums: gouache, acrylic, sumi ink, charcoal, graphite, and pastel (Figure 14).

The next year, while trying to organize another exhibit of the Vermont residents in Japan, I lived through a major disaster on March 11, 2011.

I was at home alone working on a painting, when a magnitude 9.0 earthquake, followed by a massive tsunami and nuclear melt down, devastated Japan. My house was about 300 miles from the affected area. This phenomenon not only affected my daily life, but also greatly affected me as a person and the subject matter I would paint for the following year.
I listened to the stories of survivors everyday, which inspired me to paint. These stories turned ordinary people, into extraordinary ones. The painting titled, *One Step Forward* (Figure 15), is about a survivor who went to the top of a cliff overlooking the ocean, and mourned all the people who had been swept out to sea. She thought if she took one step forward off the cliff, all of her sorrow and worries would be over, but instead she chose to take a step forward towards rebuilding her life.

I continued exhibiting in many countries with my Vermont friends, but as my daughter approached her graduation from ISU, I began to think about applying to the MFA program in Integrated Visual Arts. The earthquake changed my perspective on life as it did many people in Japan. It propelled us to make changes in our lives, to fulfill long-time dreams or goals, to not put them off, and to take one step forward.

My acceptance to ISU marked a new beginning and came with a research assistantship with Associate Professor Barbara Walton in the encaustic lab, because of my previous experience working with wax-resist dying. I had for several years before this wanted to learn how to paint with encaustic, the ancient art of painting with hot wax, but it didn’t exist in Japan. Much to my delight, I call it serendipity; I started to learn everything about encaustic painting.
Encaustic painting was extremely frustrating in the beginning. Painting with wax was completely different from anything I had experienced before. I however had the opportunity to learn textiles and photography too, and found encaustic painting to be an ideal vessel to combine a variety of mediums.

In *Human Genome* (Figure 16), I have combined the photo process cyanotype with encaustic. The cyanotype is processed on paper, adhered to a wood board, and coated with layers of beeswax. These cyanotypes (Figure 16) are not made from photographs, but scanned machine parts with my hands. They reflect my struggles with Dupuytren’s Contracture. I was relating my hands to the running and rusting decline of machine parts.

In *Pins and Needles* (Figure 17), I have combined collage, watercolor, and mixed media: imbedding pins and fabric in the beeswax and then carving the surface. It shows the versatility of combining other media with encaustic. I was thinking of Japanese Yukio-e woodblock prints when I did this painting. The subject matter is about the role of women in society; referring to material I studied in Figure 16. Josianne Ishikawa, *Human Genome*. 2014. Beeswax and cyanotype mounted on wood.


art theory about the “male gaze”, the tendency in visual culture to depict the world and women from only the male point of view.

In 2014, I received a Focus Grant for my project titled *Encaustic Prairie* (Figure 18). It combines cyanotypes on fabric, encaustic paints, and photo transfers burnished on top of the wax. This image comes from a photograph I took at Ada Hayden Heritage Park in Ames, Iowa. It was the beginning of what lead me to my thesis idea of the prairie landscape in relation to transience.

Now that I am in my third and final year at ISU, I have finally developed an art philosophy that I feel reflects and combines both my Japanese and Iowan backgrounds.

“To study the way is to study the self, to study the self is to forget the self, to forget the self is to be enlightened, by the ten thousand things.”

*Eihei Dogen*
CHAPTER 2
ARTIST STATEMENT

My art philosophy is based on the Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi. Wabi connotes rustic simplicity or understated elegance. It can also be the natural flaws that occur in the process which give an object its uniqueness and grace. Sabi is beauty or serenity that comes with age such as a patina in the natural wear and aging of objects or the change of light and color from one season to the next. If an object can bring a sense of melancholy and spiritual longing, then that object can be said to be wabi-sabi. It is defined in art as “flawed beauty” or the Japanese art of finding beauty in imperfection and the profundity of nature, of accepting the natural cycle of growth, decay and death.

Wabi-sabi can be a place, an object, a feeling or a philosophy. It can be subject matter that questions our desire or attachment to things to obtain a deeper insight, a heightened perspective and appreciation for beauty in qualities of randomness, humble simplicity, rough textures, organic shapes, muted colors, or rough patterns and scratches.

I combine my philosophy of art with a mix of traditional studio and contemporary media: photography, textiles, paint, encaustics, and creative non-fiction videos. Integrating these media makes it possible to communicate not just through images or the written word, but also through the composition of sound, narration, and pacing.

At the heart of my work is the unseen aesthetic, quietly waiting to be discovered through the three simple truths of wabi-sabi: transience, impermanence, and imperfection—nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is ideal.
CHAPTER 3
THE ARTWORK

Visual Development

The visual development of my thesis exhibit started on long walks at Ada Hayden Heritage Park. One day I took this photo in the late afternoon (Figure 19). I felt something, looking at the sudden shift of wind gusting over the prairie grass and water reflecting a cloudy sky. It created a kind of tension; an emotional feeling captured in that one second on film, a feeling of profundity, a connection to a heightened perspective and appreciation of the land and our Iowa heritage. I used this photo (Figure 19) to make my Focus Grant project (Figure 18).

From there I started to experiment in Photoshop, combining, reversing, inverting, and overlaying images. I discovered, what appeared to be an altar emerging out of the prairie grass (Figure 20). This marks the beginning of the visual development of my thesis exhibit.
I then used this image (Figure 20) to paint an encaustic prairie “cathedral” (Figure 21).

![Figure 21. Josianne Ishikawa, *Prairie Cathedral*. 2016. Encaustic and digital photo mounted on board.](image)

I also discovered if I multiplied the same photographic image (Figure 20), new images emerged that appeared to me to look like an X-ray of female Siamese twins connected at the head, their arms formed from prairie grass fanning out like wings (Figure 22).

From these images, I was inspired to combine my studio art and digital art knowledge to create the artwork for my thesis exhibition.

![Figure 22. Josianne Ishikawa, *Digital Photo Multiplied*. 2016. Digitally altered photograph.](image)
Process And Material

My work is comprised of a mix of encaustic painting, textiles, cyanotype, traditional painting, and creative nonfiction essay. I learned everything I know about encaustic painting through working as Associate Professor Barbara Walton’s assistant on her collaborative research project with the ISU Food Sciences Department. We worked together with scientists to develop a soy wax with the same properties of beeswax for use in encaustic painting. In order to do this research, I first needed to learn how to paint with beeswax so I could compare the “working characteristics” with soy wax.

Encaustic painting with beeswax is an ancient form of painting dating as far back as the 5th century B.C. when they used wax to paint portraits of the deceased and attached the painting into the mummy wrappings. (Doxiadis) Today the beeswax is combined with resin and pigment and kept molten at 200 degrees on an electric hotplate. The wax hardens quickly once it leaves the plate, so encaustic painting is a process of applying a layer, reheating the applied layer to fuse it to a porous surface such as wood, scraping back with a tool or razor, then applying another layer and repeating the process, slowly building up layers of wax and pigment. Encaustic painting also combines well with a wide variety of other mediums such as: photographs, textiles, ceramics, drawings, prints, and collage. With its rough textures, patterns, and scratches, encaustic is also an excellent medium to express the philosophy of wabi-sabi. It seems fitting to combine this ancient art with an ancient philosophy and an ancient prairie landscape.

I like combining encaustics, with cyanotype, a traditional photo process that produces a cyano-blue print. At Ada Hayden Heritage Park, I took pictures of prairie grass and wild
flowers to record a closeup intimate view of the prairie flora. To make the cyanotypes in Figures 23 and 24, I first printed a photo negative on transparency film, and placed this on top of paper painted with cyanotype chemicals. After exposing it to light, the print is magically revealed as the chemicals are washed off in a water bath. Next, I tinted the cyanotype in a bath of wine tannin or coffee to give the cyano-blue a more aged appearance.

Coffee produces a more steel blue color, as in Figure 23, and wine tannin produces a print with a slight purplish color, as in Figure 24. After I adhere the cyano-print to a hard surface, I apply at least five layers of beeswax, fusing each layer with heat before applying the next. The addition of beeswax gives the cyanotypes an added depth of feeling and mystery.
The painting in Figure 25 started with the same prairie image as used in Figure 22. I transferred the image as a print onto linen with acrylic polymer and then painted over it with fabric markers, oil paint, and finally a layer of cold wax. In this version of the image (Figure 25), I painted it in a more abstract style. To me, its organic quality and energetic line reflects a living landscape and expresses nature’s cycle of growth, decay, and death.

I have been involved with textiles for many years, going back to my scarf designs, which I sold at the Des Moines Art Center thirty years ago. At ISU, I have studied both digital and hand printing textile design with Professor Teresa Paschke. Textiles combined with art are termed as “art cloth” or “complex cloth” and refer to surface designs on fiber. (Dunnewold) Professor Paschke introduced me to a variety of different printing techniques on textile, but the one I have been most drawn to and feel is the most connected to the wabi-sabi philosophy, is rust printing. It draws on the wabi-sabi qualities that appreciate an organic patina developed through a natural aging process.

In the art-cloth *Rusty Nails* (Figure 26), I made rust prints by placing rusty nails on fabric saturated with a vinegar and water solution. Left between plastic sheets for a 24-hour period, the rust is released onto the fabric making a permanent mark. There are both controlled and uncontrolled elements in rust printing. I can place the nails where I want them to be, but I cannot control how the rust will imprint. You can see in Figure 26 the rust traveled in streams along the fabric even though it was laid perfectly flat.

Creative nonfiction video essay is a new media that Associate Professor Barbara Haas introduced me to her writing class. It is half-essay and half-film. Nonfiction film, like the written nonfiction essay, confronts difficult questions and pushes the viewer towards deeper insights or truths. Through visual images, sounds, editing, and words, the artist addresses personal thoughts and experiences with powerful visuals and a skillful text that weaves a story together. Where images resist the precision of language, they ignite emotional responses, and where they mystify the viewer, text can clarify. Images alone or text alone are not components in the essay-film. They are a feature, just as sound, narration, and pacing are also a feature. The creative nonfiction video essay combines many art forms: creative nonfiction, poetry, arthouse indies, documentary, experimental media, art, animation,
performance, and theater. It is a personal path and a personal creative process of expression. It is reflective, subjective, autobiographic, poetic, and interdisciplinary.

For my thesis exhibit I filmed a trilogy of video essays to teach the viewer about my art philosophy. I used a digital camera and movie editing software. Since advancements in digital technology have decreased in cost and the Internet is more widely available, artists now have easy access to video editing tools, animation, software, and digital cameras and as a result, filmmaking now also shares the space of a personal pursuit like writing or painting.

(Bresland)

In my video essay *It’s Been A Long Time* (Figure 27), I symbolized the wabi-sabi philosophy and acceptance of time passing while telling the story of a woman recovering from jet lag. The viewer is confronted with underlying questions on aging and the path to self-fulfillment.

The video essay *Tracing Ada* (Figure 28) is about my thesis research on Ada Hayden, my own creative process, and how I discovered their connection.
In the video essay *Five Elements* (Figure 29), I signify the three truths of wabi-sabi: transience, impermanence and imperfection, and the acceptance of the cycle of growth, decay, and death through personal loss.

*Videos are viewable at* [www.josianneishikawa.com](http://www.josianneishikawa.com).

“Like vanishing dew, a passing apparition or the sudden flash of lightning already gone, thus should one regard one's self.”

*Ikkyu*
The Evolution Of Wabi Sabi

Originally the words wabi and sabi were used separately and had a different meaning from what they have today. Wabi referred to a hermit-like lonely existence in nature, isolated from society. Sabi meant withered, cold, and desolate. Something of these original meanings still clings to the definition of wabi-sabi today. Wabi-sabi has its roots in Zen Buddhism, which migrated from China to Japan in the twelfth century. Zen, with its principles of emptiness and humble spirituality, stresses austerity, communion with nature, and above all, reverence for everyday life as the real path to enlightenment. To reach enlightenment, Zen monks lived self-denying, often isolated lives, meditating for long periods of time while sitting on cold floors.

Originally it may have been a Chinese concept, but the Japanese refined it. According to Japanese legend, in the fifteenth or sixteenth century a young man named Sen no Rikyu sought to learn the intricate set of customs known as the “Way of Tea”. At that time, the upper classes had developed elaborate and expensive rituals for tea ceremony. As a reaction to the prevailing aesthetic of lavish ornamentation, Rikyu established the Japanese tea ceremony as we know it today, the quiet, simple ceremony in small tea huts with ikebana-style flower arrangements, bamboo utensils, and green tea served in a simple bowl of earthen pottery. Out of this came the philosophy of wabi-sabi; to enjoy the simple things in life, a simple cup of well-brewed tea served with self-effacing grace and elegance. (Cooper)
From its humble beginnings in Zen Buddhism and Japanese tea ceremony (Figure 26), wabi-sabi has evolved into a world philosophy centered on the acceptance of transience and the appreciation of imperfection. A philosophy of making do with less and trimming down the unessential, it is not an impoverishing but rather a removing of the heavy weight of material concerns from our lives. We are all transient beings living in a transient world with a transient climate on this earth, so reduce your carbon footprint! Wabi-sabi has also evolved into a Japanese design aesthetic that rejects western views of youth and perfectionism, finding beauty in age and flaws. In art, it is the natural flaws that happen in the process: a scratch, a happy accident, going with the flow, regarding the uncontrollable, letting the artist create in the moment.

Prairie Restoration and Ada Hayden

The inspiration for my thesis exhibit, the prairie landscape, started at Ada Hayden Heritage Park. Many years ago, my sister who lives in Ames introduced me to the park; this was not long after it opened. I was living in Japan at that time and would come back to visit my family every summer. I always wanted to know more about the person after whom this beautiful park was named. For my thesis research, I went to the ISU herbarium and talked with the current curator, Deborah Lewis. She kindly sent me papers and pulled out folders of information for me to examine for my video essay titled Tracing Ada (Figure 28).
Ada Hayden (Figure 31) was a pioneer in prairie preservation. She grew up on a farm next to what is now known as The Ada Hayden Heritage Park. During her childhood, her father left several acres of remnant prairie and wetland unplowed for Ada to explore, and she embraced an abundant love for and loyalty to the prairie that lasted her entire life. She became the first woman to receive a doctorate at Iowa State University where she was appointed Assistant Professor of Botany and later curator of the herbarium now named in her honor.

In looking through old photographs and papers I think I can see something of the personality that was described by those who worked with her. They said she was fearless, independent, brusque, eccentric, and above all devoted to duty and a loyal friend. She was not only a gifted scientist but also a photographer, illustrator, and writer. She is credited with having added 40,000 specimens to the herbarium, photographing, hand painting, and illustrating many of them herself. (Isley)

In 1919, at the first meeting of the Iowa Board of Conservation, her skills in writing shone through in her lone proposal for prairie restoration. I included this speech in my video essay on Ada Hayden’s work *Tracing Ada*, while showing her hand-painted photos:

Iowa is said to be a prairie state, but what is a prairie to the present generation? Within 40 or 50 years, the broad stretches of tall shining grass trembling in the sunlight or tossed by the breezes into billowy waves, gorgeous as the season progresses with its pageant of brilliant hued flowers… is fast passing… Few but the farm boy and the meadow lark know where the swamp now lingers, where the marigolds glitter in the marsh, where the red-brown
knoll, fanned by the winds of March, turn pale lavender as the pasque flower wakes in the spring… What park planting can equal a mile or two of flaming Turk’s cap lily which frequents the damp native prairie in July, or the white beds of nodding anemones, the red and white sweet William, the purple patches of gauzy spiderwort, the gorgeous butterfly weed, the glowing goldenrod, and the banks of stately, radiant sunflower. All these plants are carefully cultivated by florists in parts of the country where they are not native why not preserve now at a small cost what cannot be replaced at any cost? (Lewis, 216)

And I was delighted to find this passage from a speech Dr. Ada Hayden made in an appeal for donations of prairieland: “then there’ll be a preserve for your grandchildren and great-grandchildren to enjoy not as a park but as a cathedral, a monument to the past.” (Wise)

There was my confirmation. I had discovered, stumbled upon, the image of a cathedral made of prairie grass in the creative process (Figure 19). Perfect. I had found my connection with Ada Hayden.

Before I knew about Dr. Ada Hayden, before I discovered her work, all I knew was that there was a beautiful park named after her, and I had fallen in love with the tall grasslands and wildflowers, the birdsongs and insect hums, the seasonal changes of light and color and all the sights, sounds and smells that pulled me back to my own Iowa childhood. It became my sanctuary and my inspiration when I was recovering from the pain of Dupuytren’s Contracture, when I was traumatized by the disasters in Japan. After I moved back to Ames, I went there when I struggled with culture shock and loneliness. When my life was overwhelming, I found comfort in nature, in the profundity of the prairie landscape. I found a spiritual connection to lift me up and to heal me. Being surround by the natural world can help us to connect to our real world. In Zen it is a “flash of awareness” in which we will experience reality, a deeper understanding, and perceive the world directly and clearly.

“Letting go” is where creativity can begin.
CHAPTER 5
THE THREE TRUTHS

Transience, Impermanence & Imperfection

I call them the “three truths” of wabi-sabi; transience: nothing lasts, impermanence: nothing is finished, and imperfection: nothing is ideal. In my video essay titled Five Elements(Figure 29), I explain these truths by telling the personal events of last summer in my own life and connect them with the natural world by using the Japanese five elements of earth, wind, fire, water, and heaven.

I start the video by introducing myself as a non-traditional student at ISU working on my MFA, with an image of the ISU campanile in the background. It is the first image of passing time, the tower bell ringing. I then return to my home in Japan for one month, at the beginning of summer, visiting all the places I loved. It was also the first time I was able to visit my father-in-law’s grave. He passed away one year before. When we pay our respects at a shrine for the deceased in Japan, we ring a bell three times in greeting; the bell sound in the video this time, symbolizes the passing of our spirit (heaven). “Transience reminds us that our physical presence on this planet is temporary, that our bodies, as well as the material world around us, are in the process of returning to dust” (earth). (Lawrence, 1) My father-in-law was cremated (fire), as is the usual practice in Japan. He is gone but I show that there is something of his spirit living on in his pet Koi fish swimming in the garden pond (water), as shown in the video. After one month, I return to Iowa where I grew up. My mother suddenly collapses in her kitchen, and one month later she passes away from liver cancer. In the video, while I show pictures of my parents when they were young and pictures of my siblings and
me when we were children while walking through my mother’s house, a bell chimes with each photo that marks the passing of time from birth to death. Impermanence reminds us that nothing is finished, that life goes on in a cycle of growth, decay and death repeated over and over. My mother also wanted to be cremated (fire), and as I stand in her garden, the leaves rustle (wind) and I show that her spirit is in the flowers she planted that are still blooming. In the final image I overlay my father-in-law’s Koi and my mother’s flowers. They have returned to the elements and live together in my memory. Imperfection reminds us that nothing is ideal. “Through wabi-sabi, we learn to accept both the glory and the melancholy found in these marks of passing time.” (Lawrence 1)

“In the presence of eternity, the mountains are as transient as the clouds.”
Robert Green Ingersoll
CHAPTER 6
ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

When I started working on the cathedral prairie series, I was reminded of Monet’s famous Haystacks series (Figure 28). When Monet exhibited his Haystacks series in 1890, art critic Gustave Geffroy said they represented “the poetry of the universe in the small space of a field.” This sounded very wabi-sabi to me. Monet, in this series’ representation of the transience of light and season, is actually wabi-sabi. I recognized a kindred spirit in Monet’s depiction and repetition of this humble subject. (Brettell)

German artist Anselm Kiefer’s Morgenthau Plan (Figure 33) series is another influence on my work where I borrowed his process of painting over digitally altered photographs. Kiefer
also thought of Monet’s landscapes in his series:

I had these wonderful photographs of Barjac, of flowers, fields of poppies, all kinds of flowers, like those you find in Monet’s paintings. I liked these photographs very much. I started to paint the flowers and I thought, “Ugh, flowers! What can I do with this? This is nonsense—flowers!” And I realized I needed to combine them with a negative or cynical element, and I said to myself, “Oh, I can make a Morgenthau series. And in this series Germany will be covered with beautiful flowers, will be wonderful, because as a result of the Morgenthau Plan there will be no more industry, no more highways, just flowers. (Kiefer, np)

Like me, Anselm Kiefer did not want to express the western idea of ideal beauty but rather of beauty corrupted. (Danto)

Christa Blackwood’s *Naked Lady: A Red Dot* (Figure 30) series uses traditional photo processes. She photographs isolated landscapes and places a red dot somewhere in the composition. For Blackwood, the red dot is a feminist statement about the ambiguous use of the female form in art. (Heymann) I decided to use a dot as a meditative presence as well as representation of the tension between traditional and modern (Figure 31); the dot represents modern, the cathedral, traditional.

*Transitory Nature-Triptych* (Figure 32) was my exhibition image. It shows the growth of prairie grass and the changing color of light coming through a cathedral window changing from red to yellow. This is my representation, inspired by Monet, of transience in light and season, and the ever-changing circle of life inspired by wabi-sabi.
“The artist who aims at perfection in everything achieves it in nothing.”

*Eugene Delacroix*
Transience, impermanence, imperfection. Nothing lasts, nothing is finished, nothing is ideal. This is the philosophy of wabi-sabi and it is this that connects the dots leading from one experience to the next in my life. It is also what has connected my two worlds. I have lived an unusual life between two countries and two cultures. I started life as a small-town girl in Iowa during the socially turbulent 60s and 70s and during my childhood I witnessed the first moon landing, the Vietnam War, the feminist movement, the civil rights movement and the violent deaths of Martin Luther King and President Kennedy. I also watched the Watergate trials after school. From the time I moved to Japan in my late 20s in 1986, I witnessed the emergence of AIDS, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the birth of the worldwide web as well as the Gulf War. I married, had a baby, built a house, raised a family, made a life in Japan; I was living in Japan when the September 11th terrorist attacks lead the US into another gulf war, the human genome was deciphered and the world watched in terror as a 9.0 earthquake, caused a devastating tsunami and nuclear meltdown that ravage Japan, not far from my home.

In 2013, I returned to where I began my life, to the prairieland, and I brought with me everything I had experienced and learned from Japan. Since starting my studies at ISU, my mother has passed away and my daughter has married. Despite the changes good and bad life throws at us, I found it possible to return home, to complete the circle, and to accomplish my goals. My work is about my life, and my life is transitory.
WORKS CITED


*Ada Hayden*. Photograph. Iowa State University Archives


Nails and Bark. Cyanotype and encaustic on board. 6 x 8” panels, 2016
Nails and Bark Tile. Cyanotype, encaustic on ceramic tiles, rusty nails, and tree bark. Tiles are 6 x 6”. 2016.


*The Road*. Cyanotype and encaustic on board. 6 x 8” panels. 2016.
Boro Cloth. Sachiko thread, various textiles, and cyanotypes. 56 x 70”. 2016.

*Human Genome.* Cyanotype, rust prints, and encaustic on 8” wood panels. 40 x 40”. 2014.

*Encaustic Prairie.* Cyanotype and encaustic on 11” wood panels. 44 x 77”. 2015.

*Pieces of Prairie.* Cyanotype and encaustic on 8” board. 40 x 40”. 2015.

*Human Genome on Glass Tile.* Silver nitrate photo process on colored glass tile with string lights. Tile 4 x 4”. 2014.


Equality. Encaustic over photo on cradled wood. 18 x 24 “. 2016.
Encaustic Cathedral-Diptych. Encaustic over photo on cradled board. 20 x 40". 2016.

Yellow Dot. Encaustic on wood. 22 x 22". 2016.

Transitory Nature-Triptych. Encaustic and collage on cradled board. 16 x 36". 2016.