



REMEMBERING KIICHI USUI: A Tale of Two Paintings

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Kiichi Usui (1931–2001), was the Curator of Oakland University’s Meadow Brook Art Gallery from 1967 to 1997, and was also—almost secretly—a wonderful painter. He gave me two of his paintings, each of which bookends the second “period” of his artistic life. And thereby hangs a fascinating tale.



The first painting hangs in my family’s living room.

If you look at the painting from the bottom up, you see, at first, nothing at all: fully a third of the total surface seems empty; then there is some green; not much at first, but then more and more as you gaze up into a wonderfully simple and distinct landscape: ordinary nature it is. But this is ordinary nature as seen by (1) an arduously schooled Japanese craftsman (2) who studied, and was profoundly influenced by, Chinese nature painting, and (3) who was also an American-loving and partly American-ized artist in a neo-realist tradition who brought all these influences together into a deceptive simplicity.

Kiichi gave me this painting to thank me for writing an



S. Brook Barron, oil on canvas, 1992, 33" × 42". Kiichi Usui.
Florence and S. Brooks Barron Collection.

essay on his work as the curator of the Meadow Brook Art Gallery, and his impact on Oakland's campus as a whole. The essay, "A Gift to Be Simple," appeared in *Familiar Faces and Places*, the catalog for an exhibition of Kiichi's paintings which appeared in 1997, the year he retired. I attempted a summary of his curatorial work:

These 30 years have seen a dazzling variety of works, artists, collectors and imaginative approaches. Of the 52 exhibits in those 30 years, 17 have been built around the work of individual collectors. The Baker and Barron collections have each, after their pioneering appearances, made encores. So too has the former Governor of Michigan, G. Mennen Williams, made a double appear-

ance. Kiichi has tended, over the years, to combine the collectors' work with a theme: "Soapy" appeared first merely as "African Art Collected by G. Mennen Williams." His second appearance—which coincided with the happy years in which he was a faculty member at Oakland University—was titled "G. Mennen Williams' African Mission."

Kiichi and I met as members of the ad-hoc committee that planned the second Williams exhibit (as "Soapy" was in the Honors College, which I then directed). We enjoyed working together and became good friends. He also enjoyed reading my work and especially liked a verbal portrait I had written of the English composer William Alwyn, which was based on taped conversations. Eventually, he suggested we trade our arts: I would create a similar portrait of him; and, in return, he would paint portraits of my wife Toni and daughter Lauren.

But it was not to be—not quite. By the time he made this proposal, his beloved wife Betty had died and he himself was already ill with the cancer that would, all too soon, kill him at the age of 69—on June 11, 2001.

Thus, the second painting, which hangs in our hallway, is an unfinished portrait of Lauren: work on the elaborately colorful kimono Kiichi had used for the pose is barely begun, but he was happy that he had caught Lauren's bright smile and the sparkle in her eyes.

These two paintings represent not only a sort of first and last but also show his two great themes—the beauty of nature and the beauty of women (which is much deeper than merely liking beautiful women). Even in what proved to be his final exhibit, there are two paintings of his patrons, one of Richard Brown Baker and one of Maxine and George Brewer: *all* the rest are landscapes or portraits of women.

The early landscape he gave me represents a sort of "first" in that it was among the very first of the paintings he did after a 10-year absence from painting.

It came about this way: his being offered the job of Meadow Brook Art Gallery curator, in the Sixties, coincided with a crisis in his artistic life. When he came to New York, after the end of the Second World War, he studied at the Art Students' League, and at that time the only approved method was Abstract Expressionism. Having the advantage of a formal, classical training in the craft of painting in Japan, Kiichi found he could certainly "do" abstract-expressionistic paintings (a couple are in the Meadow Brook permanent collection).

But he was a man to whom "sincerity" was a frequently invoked term of praise for artists whose work he admired. And he came to feel insincere: Abstract Expressionism was not really for him. And although he was part of a generation of artists just about to rebel—Warhol and Rosenquist and even Kiichi's good friend Yoko Ono were all about to take art in drastically new directions—fate brought him to Rochester, Michigan; and here he became a superb curator, building a base of supporters in the Gallery Associates, inventing imaginative exhibits, and commissioning the outdoor sculptures that make our whole campus something of a work of art.

And so he threw away his paints and brushes and decided to become a scholar, an art historian. In "A Gift to Be Simple," I attempted another summary:

After a decade without painting, but with success as a curator, he decided to acquire a Masters degree at the University of Michigan. The University was then especially rich in Asian Studies, and Kiichi concentrated on a close, in-depth study of Chinese art. He was particularly drawn to the art of the 10th through the 13th centuries, a period in which Chinese artists, before the European Renaissance, devised a new kind of spare realism.

Suddenly, the sight of the wintry landscapes around Ann Arbor (and also around Meadow Brook Hall) seized him and,

combined with his Japanese craft and Chinese studies, helped him find his own vision: he began to paint again with a newfound passion. The 1997 exhibit was simultaneously a farewell and a premiere: it was his final exhibition, and it was the first time he had ever exhibited his own work in his own gallery.

What his fans and friends had hoped for—that this signaled the beginning of a new and lengthy period—was not to be.

But even when he became mortally ill, he never forgot about the idea of taping some conversations: he had some things on his mind.

And so he turned the first of my hospital visits into the first of several taped conversations. Unfortunately, he was too ill to speak very clearly; and the cancer floor of Beaumont Hospital is unbelievably noisy, so his words on the tapes are barely audible, much less comprehensible. In any case, Kiichi was always (in English, at any rate) a soft-spoken man of relatively few words—unless the subject was Paul Cézanne, in which case his typical brevity turned into a torrent of almost unstoppable loquacity.

While the tape machine rolled (uselessly as it transpired), I did make some notes, and thus can describe what Kiichi had *wanted* to talk about, what was on his mind, when he knew he was dying.

He commented that his roommate fought his cancer with every drug, every treatment, every new approach he could discover.

“Mine,” Kiichi whispered, “is the opposite strategy.” He was, I understood him to mean, resigned, accepting, even ready to embrace whatever Fate had in store.

And what was on his mind?

He wanted to talk primarily about the story of three women: he was fascinated by seeing how three Japanese artists of his generation responded to the change from Japan to American life. One story ended tragically, in a suicide. Another was the story of a woman trapped terminally between two cultures. And Kiichi had a great admiration for the third, for the character and achievements of Yoko Ono: he admired

one who could use her art to so totally reinvent herself. (Yoko sent a charming note to Eriko, Kiichi's daughter and only survivor, at the time of his memorial service.)

His last conversations were usually about these fascinating women or more general subjects. One day, I arrived at Beaumont Hospital and with no preliminaries whatsoever, he asked me, "Now, who do you think has power in families?"

Nonplussed, I mumbled something.

He said, "Women! Wives exercise more *conscious* choice. This is true in the U.S., but it is *also* true in Japan: but there it is a *secret*."

He talked, a very little, about himself. He was "pained and puzzled" by the non-response to his final exhibition and the beautiful catalog of his work by one his life-long supporters. He told me that this patron was homosexual and was at first angry that Kiichi had married; but—life can be like this—then the patron and Kiichi *and* his wife Betty became the best of friends. He talked about some early disappointments and rejections with an almost Zen-like air of detachment. He was aware that he was too easily discouraged. He was amazed at his own youthful self who left Japan and came to America because *one* gallery owner in Tokyo had declined to take his work. It was clear that he did not forget disappointments and rejections, but it was equally clear that he did not dwell on them or let them poison his life.

Generally, he wanted to talk about art, culture, men-and-women, sexuality, particularly about how difficult it was (or still is?) for women to become free individuals as artists.

At the end of his life, he was, if anything, even more curious and aware than he had always been. He pointed to a painting that happened to hang on the wall of his hospital room.

I said I thought it looked like the kind of painting you'd see on a hospital wall.

"No, no," he said. "That is a very interesting painting. I'd like to meet that artist."

He was—literally, to the end—curious about and interested in art. His profound love of his art helped (I think) to

account for his “strategy”: what I saw in our last meetings was a man at peace with himself, an affirming peace based on an inner harmony and a deep strength. That characterized Ki-ichi’s life, and that was how he faced his death.

His ultimate legacy consists both of that affirmation and a true treasure-trove of beautiful paintings.