

YOSHIO IKEZAKI: LOS ANGELES, 2017

By Peter Frank

Born, raised, and educated in Japan, Yoshio Ikezaki has been living and working there on a full-time basis. But his career is intimately involved with southern California, where he lived and taught for many years, and where he is now returning to work and to exhibit. Ikezaki has shown here frequently and, even more notably, has educated several generations of art students in the arts of paper-making and painting in Sumi inks, as well as Japanese aesthetics and philosophy. Los Angeles and its art scene continue to remember and honor Ikezaki (who himself studied in Florida as well as in Japan). This year alone, he has been shown in one-man exhibitions at Art Center College of Design (where he taught for many years), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's Japanese Pavilion, and the newly established Kylin Gallery in Beverly Hills. Indeed, 2017 has been a kind of "Ikezaki year" in Los Angeles, providing audiences with different views of a varied yet consistent, and always gripping, oeuvre.

Ikezaki's work is many-faceted, ranging from painted pictures to sculpted-paper and cast-metal objects, from landscape subjects to notations in Chinese script. Accordingly, the recent and current exhibitions have themselves been multifarious, treating the breadth of his art at once as a continuum of and a dialogue between disparate forms and functions. The shows contrast with one another and celebrate contrast within themselves. For the more casual viewer, the impulse overall might be to regard Ikezaki as several artists in one. But the cohesion between his artworks, irrespective of their formats or materials, maintains no matter how much any selection favors diversity. For an artist dedicated to age-old, well-established techniques and media, Ikezaki's is a restless talent, seeking as much to push at the boundaries of practice as to follow and perfect tradition. If his talent is restless, however, Ikezaki's spirit is patient and focused, seeking in both the artwork and its fabrication an understanding of the universe. Through the materials, the immaterial is revealed.

"Yoshio Ikezaki: Elements," mounted at Art Center College's Alyce de Roulet Williamson Gallery last spring, in fact engaged an emphatically contrasted selection of the artist's work so as to turn the space itself into an artwork. Curated by Ikezaki's erstwhile teaching colleague Jacki Apple – a veteran performance and book artist, highly sensitive to the drama of space and the presence of narrative implication – "Elements" dispersed the range of objects throughout a several-room environment painted varying shades of black, white, and gray. This strategy not only unified the space, but harmonized with the artworks without absorbing them – despite some subtle play with sub-visibility, appropriate to the elusive images and textures that in particular characterize Ikezaki's more recent works.

Apple's installation was designed explicitly to reflect and amplify the philosophical as well as aesthetic qualities she identifies in Ikezaki's art. His works, she writes in the catalog to the show, "are the embodiment of *Yūgen*, a Japanese word pertaining to a profound awareness of the universe that evokes feeling that are inexplicably deep and too mysterious for words." Appropriately, the *Yūgen* principle drove Apple's approach to the exhibition's design, both directly and through its presence at the heart of Ikezaki's work. She let not simply the appearance, but the sensibility, of his art point her in a direction remarkable for its delicacy and its visual magic. The whole exhibition was neither greater nor lesser than the artwork it presented, but was a "second experience," an optical and spatial event related to but distinct from its contents. The gallery formation was based on rectilinear angles, their severity enhanced by the color differences between walls; but that only set off the sinuousness and radiance of Ikezaki's works all the more, especially in the black-white palette that rhymed work with wall).

If “Yoshio Ikezaki: Elements” presented the master’s work in a context evolved directly from its spirit, “Atmosphere in Japanese Painting” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (until February 4) displays it as a logical evolution of the aesthetics uniquely associated with Ikezaki’s homeland. In curator Hollis Goodall’s sensitive selection and distribution, “Atmosphere,” built around Ikezaki’s Washi and Sumi art, also puts it in relationship to other Japanese artworks (including a couple, similarly “modern” in style but still rooted in ancient practice, by his contemporaries). Rather than span Ikezaki’s career,, Goodall’s selection alights on very specific groupings, most notably the recent “Timeless Air”/“Timeless Wind” series of Sumi ink landscapes and “The Earth Breathes” paper sculptures from 2008. Where “Elements” sampled these modes of expression and demonstrated continuity between them and his other series, “Atmosphere” examines these two groups in what in the intimate context of LACMA’s famed Japanese Pavilion is intensive depth. The contemplative spirit of the Art Center College show carries over to LACMA, but invokes it in a different way: where Apple’s curation conjured slow-unfolding drama from Ikezaki’s art, Goodall’s conjures elegance and a delicate monumentality.

The basic contrast “Atmosphere” poses to the Art Center College show is in the architecture of the gallery and its relationship to the work. Where the spare, spacious design of “Elements” bore Ikezaki’s objects like a jewel box, the relative extravagance of the Japanese Pavilion seems to coax a sensuousness out of those same objects. Here, in Bruce Goff’s voluptuous structure, the visitor is once again prompted to move in and among the artworks (Ikezaki’s and others’). But here as well, the “colony” of Ikezaki’s paintings and handmade paper sculptures that appears at a particular level of the pavilion serves as respite to the architecture no less than as partner to it. The artworks echo the curves of walls and bannisters, but also countermand the soft textures and gilded highlights of the décor with their own ashen tones.

Beyond its own shaded walls and a small, modified rock garden, the Kylin Gallery does not present Ikezaki’s art as part of a larger experiential whole, leaving that discretion to the museums. Rather, in “Traversing,” its second exhibition of the master’s work, the gallery hangs the work simply and forthrightly. The holistic concepts that have underscored the presentation of Ikezaki’s art at Art Center College and LACMA here reveal themselves entirely within the artworks themselves. One sees the *Yūgen* principle manifest in a single swath of Sumi ink across a textured white surface. One sees it in the book-like crease of molded paper. One sees it in the languid curves and agitated surface of a cast bronze shell hung on the wall, resembling a fish, or a leaf, in water.

Of the three exhibitions presenting Ikezaki’s art, the selection at Kylin ranges the most broadly across his entire oeuvre, going back as far as the late 1980s, and includes gold-leaf collages, curious and striking variations on the recurring theme of the inscribed book, and other early and exceptional items not found in “Elements” or “Atmosphere.” Where the museum shows have striven for formal and thematic unity, or at least continuity, “Traversing” presumes it, allowing each work to speak for itself fully. The logic of Ikezaki’s overarching style is readily apparent, but does not dictate the selection.

This is as it should be. The public venues are sites of discussion and revelation. The commercial venue is a site of individual regard and acquisition. One comes from Art Center College or LACMA with a full sense of what Yoshio Ikezaki does, of who he is as an artist. One comes from Kylin having seen such doing and being in microcosm, embodied, potentially and actually, in a single artwork. In the Kylin display, Ikezaki’s craft and sensibility reveal themselves both across his decades of artmaking and in any one artwork he has made. The whole is not just equal to the sum of the parts, it is found in that sum.

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