

Norito Udagawa's highly original work arrives at a time when westerners are once again beginning to debate aesthetic issues and preconceptions that are in many respects very different from their own. In its combination of deliberate roughness and gentle refinement it embodies ideas that are fundamental to the traditional arts of Japan, but does so in forms that are recognizably linked to the Modern Movement. In doing so it follows a path that comes almost full circle to the actual inception of Modernism.

The discovery of Japanese art by the Impressionists and their immediate successors is now generally acknowledged as one of the major liberating forces that led to the creation of a new sensibility in Europe. Europeans and Americans, however, took some time to absorb the fundamental values that formed the core of the Japanese sensibility – particularly the idea that true beauty was in essence both imperfect and incomplete. This aesthetic stance is part of the Japanese inheritance from Mahayana Buddhism

Related to this, but sometimes in conflict with it, is the Japanese concept of 'iki', which inspires much of Japan's urban culture at the present day. 'Iki' brings together values that are at first sight contradictory. The word suggests that things have aesthetic value because they are simple, straightforward and have the air of being improvised. It implies both calm unselfconsciousness and a spontaneous audacity. While it cannot be applied directly to nature and natural things, it can be used to describe human reactions to nature. However, these reactions cannot be deliberately cultivated, or acquired through an act of will. They are something intrinsic to the human spirit.

Udagawa says that his inspiration comes from the patterns in wood grain, and that this in turn relates the experiences he had as a child, when living in the Japanese countryside, and watching the light creeping through gaps in the rough wooden walls that enclosed the room where he slept. In fact, the grounds he uses for his paintings are like an extremely elaborate trompe l'oeil representation of just such a wall, created by a technique the artist likens to traditional western methods of marbling. Over these grounds he puts both boldly drawn abstract markings in transparent paint, which allow the wood grain patterns beneath to show themselves quite clearly, and sometimes also, in addition to these, finely drawn figurative images, such as the small exotic birds that appear in his painting *:Heart-bird'*.

The result is a seductive combination of apparently incompatible genres. On the one hand, his procedures hark back to Leonardo da Vinci's celebrated recommendation that the artist take inspiration from the random markings to be found on a wall. On another hand, there is a relationship to the painting of contemporary American abstractionist such as sean Scully, whose paintings often look as if they are derived from vernacular architecture – an impression reinforced by the fact that Scully makes and exhibits photographs of buildings of this type. And on yet another hand there are references to Pop art – the heart in *'Heart-bird'* inevitably reminds one of Jim Dine's use of this image.

Despite all this Udagawa's work remains quintessentially Japanese in its commitment to freshness and spontaneity.

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