

Seeing the things you cannot see: (Dis)-solving the sublime in interreligious aesthetics through the paintings of Hiroshi Senju
By Peter L. Doebler

The painter is as far from despair as from self-importance, and one must wish for humanity many persons who, like him, contemplate the world with solidarity and transform it.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Abstract:

This paper examines the artwork of the contemporary Japanese painter Hiroshi Senju as a vehicle to explore how fissures within a religio-aesthetic concept like the sublime can provide productive openings for interreligious engagement. A focused study of Senju's installation at the Shofuso Japanese House outside Philadelphia serves as a lens to view two different responses to the antagonistic excesses of the Western sublime, one from Japanese and Buddhist aesthetics and the other from Christian aesthetics. Considering further how Senju's art mediates these two different perspectives, the paper claims that it provides a unique response to the problematics of the sublime, a response that envisions a peaceful sublime that sustains a participative relationship.

Introduction

The waterfall paintings of the contemporary Japanese artist Hiroshi Senju¹ are enigmas because they create sound, but the sound is silence; they generate movement, but the movement is stillness. Like champagne they simultaneously refresh and intoxicate, stimulate and subdue with a feeling of weightlessness. They are both ravishingly beautiful and disembowlingly sublime. But wait. Beautiful *and* sublime? Can these coexist?

In what follows I will use the artwork of Hiroshi Senju as a vehicle to explore how fissures within a traditional religio-aesthetic concept like the sublime can provide productive openings for interreligious engagement. First, I will introduce Senju's artwork, suggesting that it evokes a unique experience of depth. Next, I will amplify this idea of depth by drawing on the Japanese aesthetic concept of *yūgen*, specifically noting its relation to the sublime. Third, I will discuss recent critiques of the sublime from within Christian theological aesthetics. Finally, I will consider how Senju's art complements these two different perspectives and provides a unique response to the problematics of the sublime, a response that envisions a sublime that sustains a peaceful, harmonious depth.

¹ Regarding the order of Japanese names, I have written Hiroshi Senju's name throughout in the English order because his personal webpage uses this order. For works cited, if the work was written in English I have used the English order. If a work was translated from the Japanese I have retained the Japanese order.

Discovering Depth in the Art of Hiroshi Senju

The breakout point in Senju's career was receiving the Honorable Mention prize at the 46th Venice Biennale in 1995.² The prize was for his massive work *The Fall*, one of the earliest iterations of what has become a consistent subject of his work up to the present, indeed the subject Senju is perhaps best known for. Senju paints his waterfalls by pouring white paint down the surface from the top and then airbrushing.

One notable feature of Senju's body of work is that it often goes beyond the boundaries of art galleries or museums. Senju has carried out commissions for numerous installations in both public and private settings. These included the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Tokyo (2001), the Tokyo Haneda Airport (2004), the Daitokuji Temple in Kyoto (2005), and the Shofuso Japanese House in Philadelphia's West Fairmont Park (**Fig. 1**).³ Here I will focus on Shofuso.

Installed in 2007, there are twenty screens on traditional Japanese sliding doors, laid out in two rooms. Senju named the larger room "Imagination of Dynamics" (**Fig. 2**) and the smaller room "Imagination of Silence" (**Fig. 3**).⁴ These suggestive names are reflected in the ways Senju uses color and line differently in each room. Overall, "Imagination of Dynamics" is much lighter than "Imagination of Silence"; it has fewer dark sections and the succession of horizontal streams all the way across gives the room a lightness and verticality. In contrast, "Imagination of Silence" is more varied in its use of color and line. Dark tones are more evident, giving the room a deep, somber feeling. Furthermore, the use of diagonal lines formed by the rising mist creates a different kind of movement, still vertical but more focused on the solid shaft of white that stands out vividly from the surrounding darkness. Combined, the rooms generate a complexity, a complimentary movement and stillness that evokes a profound depth that is both spatial and emotive.

This feeling of depth is further compounded through the material support of the paintings, the fact that rather than being on a framed canvas hung in an interior room, these paintings are mobile on sliding doors. This puts in motion two kinds of relationships. (**Fig. 4**) First, since the doors can be opened to the outside directly, this creates a permeable space between outer and inner. Therefore, changes in the weather and light, depending on the time of day and season, will affect how the waterfalls appear, thus creating new paintings at any moment. Second, since the doors slide rather than turn on hinges, they open on a smooth continuum. In this way you can see the paintings in the

² Examples of this and other works by Senju mentioned below can be viewed at the artist's website at <http://www.hiroshisenju.com/exhibitions>.

³ More information on the Shofuso Japanese House can be found at the organization's website <http://www.japanesehouse.org>. I wish to thank Shofuso for their kind permission to reproduce photos of Senju's paintings.

⁴ See Yuichi Ozawa, *Story of Shofuso: A Cultural Bridge between Japan and the United States* (Philadelphia: Friends of the Japanese House and Garden, 2010), 47.

adjacent room in a variety of ways, so, there are in fact numerous paintings between the rooms. This ability to activate multiple visual planes that expand and contract accentuates a shifting feeling of depth.

Expanding Depth in the Japanese Aesthetics of *Yūgen*

When we look at concepts in Japanese aesthetics for some explanation for the depth evoked by Senju's waterfall paintings, one of the most suggestive is *yūgen*. Approached etymologically, *yūgen* (幽玄) is made up of two components: *yū* and *gen*. Discussing these, literary scholar Makoto Ueda notes that “*yū* means deep, dim, or difficult to see, and that *gen*, originally describing the dark, profound, tranquil color of the universe, refers to the Taoist concept of truth.”⁵ Together then, the word suggests a mysterious, obscure depth.

Yūgen became a prominent aesthetic value in the twelfth century when *waka* poets employed the term in their criticism, *waka* being a traditional poetic form composed of thirty-one syllables divided into five lines (5-7-5-7-7). In particular, it was the prominent poet Fujiwara no Shunzei (1114–1204) who set forth *yūgen* as the aesthetic ideal of a *waka* poem. Shunzei drew on Tendai Buddhist thought, including the practice of *shikan* meditation, a contemplation that stills the mind, takes in all things without discrimination, and becomes aware of the fundamental interdependence of all things.⁶ *Yūgen* names this feeling of awareness that a poem evokes.

Surveying the literature of this period, the twentieth century Japanese aesthetician Ōnishi Yoshinori summarizes *yūgen* as a mysterious depth that has a certain fullness or heaviness. The basis of this depth is a profound experience of pure existence where “the immediate wholeness of being is recalled in a split second....”⁷ This description of pure experience as awareness of fundamental interrelatedness links Ōnishi with Shunzei and *shikan* contemplation.

What is especially relevant for our discussion is that Ōnishi compares *yūgen* with the Western sublime as part of an attempt to discover a universal category of the sublime. For Ōnishi, the sublime is generally motivated by the greatness of nature, but in the West it tends towards the tragic while in the East it tends towards *yūgen*. And these differences can to some extent be predicated on different attitudes towards nature. This can be seen in a contrast between Ōnishi and Immanuel Kant made by Makoto Ueda: “...whereas the German philosopher stressed the resistance of human reason against nature's overwhelming force, the Japanese scholar wants to emphasize man's love for and harmony

⁵ Makoto Ueda, “Zeami and the Art of *Nō* Drama: Imitation, *Yūgen*, and Sublimity,” *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Nancy Hume (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 182.

⁶ See William LaFleur, *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 88.

⁷ Ōnishi Yoshinori, *Bigaku* [Aesthetics], vol. 2 (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1959–60), 234. The translation is my own.

with nature. He believes that sublime beauty arises when the artist faces nature not as an enemy to conquer but as an object of aesthetic contemplation, an object with which he ultimately entrusts his soul.”⁸

Preserving Depth in Theological Aesthetic Critiques of the Sublime

This hint of an antagonism at the heart of the Western sublime noted by Ueda is made explicit in recent critiques of the concept by theologians such as John Milbank, David Bentley Hart, Graham Ward, and John Betz, among others.⁹ This cluster of theological approaches has identified ontological problems in the sublime, arguing that the modern division between beauty and the sublime expresses a view of reality that is at root, violent. At the same time, they offer constructive proposals that advocate for the interrelation of beauty and the sublime rooted in Christian notions of trinity, incarnation, and the analogy of being.

These critiques generally are united in reading the sublime in its modern and postmodern manifestations—paradigmatically in Immanuel Kant and Jean-François Lyotard—as two sides of the same coin, as ultimately a mistaken, hollow, and possibly destructive attempt to maintain a sense of immanent transcendence. The only difference, as John Betz notes, is that “...modern philosophy tends to construe the sublime in terms of an ultimate presence and identity...whereas postmodern philosophy construes the sublime in terms of an ultimate absence and difference.... In either case, however, the beauty of being disappears, because it is ultimately an illusion—either of the One (or Absolute) or of Nothing at all.”¹⁰

⁸ Makoto Ueda, “*Yūgen* and *Erhabene*: Ōnishi Yoshinori’s Attempt to Synthesize Japanese and Western Aesthetics,” in *Culture and Identity: Japanese Intellectuals During the Interwar Years*, ed. J. Thomas Rimer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 293.

⁹ See John Milbank, “Sublimity: The Modern Transcendent,” in *Transcendence: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology Approach the Beyond*, ed. Regina Schwartz (London: Routledge, 2004), 211–234; Graham Ward, “Transcendence and Representation,” in *Transcendence: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology Approach the Beyond*, ed. Regina Schwartz (London: Routledge, 2004), 127–145; David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004), 43–93; and John R. Betz, “Beyond the Sublime: The Aesthetics of the Analogy of Being (Part One),” *Modern Theology* 21/3 (2005): 367–411; and “Beyond the Sublime: The Aesthetics of the Analogy of Being (Part Two),” *Modern Theology* 22/1 (2006): 1–50. Other recent discussions of the sublime from a theological perspective include Ben Quash, “The De-sublimations of Christian Art,” in *The Art of the Sublime*, ed. Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding, January 2013, accessed 30 August 2014, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/ben-quash-the-de-sublimations-of-christian-art-r1140522>; Grace Jantzen, “On Changing the Imaginary,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 289–90; Frederick C. Bauerschmidt, “Aesthetics: The Theological Sublime,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, et. al. (London: Routledge, 1999), 201–219; and Paul S. Fiddes, “The Sublime and the Beautiful: Intersections between Theology and Literature,” in *Literature and Theology: New Interdisciplinary Spaces*, ed. Heather Walton (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 127–152.

¹⁰ Betz, “Beyond the Sublime (Part One),” 371.

Space does not permit a full discussion of these critiques, but what I want to focus on here is how Betz employs the doctrine of the analogy of being as a means to bridge this division between beauty and the sublime. He specifically builds on the understanding of the analogy of being developed by the twentieth-century theologian Erich Przywara (1889–1972). Przywara identifies two analogies: the immanent analogy and the theological analogy. The immanent analogy is the creature’s basic state of being, which is suspended between “essence in existence” and “essence beyond existence.” The theological analogy is the relation between human becoming and divine Being, where essence and existence are identical.¹¹

The relevance of this for aesthetics is that it provides a model for how to relate beauty and the sublime in a fruitful way without collapsing them. On the one hand, in accord with the immanent analogy, “every experience of the beautiful is always pervaded by the sublime wonder over its sheer facticity, its sheer possibility....” On the other hand, this immanent experience by the creature intersects with the theological analogy, where “the sublime not only reveals the gratuity of created beauty, but also interrupts it in the name of an *ever greater* beauty...the beauty of one whose essence is to be and whose beauty is sublime.”¹²

Sustaining Depth with Hiroshi Senju

Our surveys of Senju, *yūgen*, and the theological perspectives were brief, but by placing them together, what can we see?

First, Senju’s paintings are particularly effective instantiations of the analogy of being. On the one hand, there is the relation of the paintings between the adjacent rooms. This exemplifies the immanent analogy, being in-and-beyond existence, since the viewer’s experience of the single room is always in relation to and modified by an awareness of what is “beyond” in the next room. On the other hand, the relation of the paintings to what is outside of them exemplifies the theological analogy, being in-and-beyond creation, as the experience of the paintings is further modified by the intersection with a different world, as it were, the outside world of nature. Across both “analogies”—the relation of the internal rooms and the relation of the rooms to the outside—there always exists a gradual continuum where the experience of spatial depth may open to an experience of ontological depth. In this way, Senju’s paintings give vivid expression to the analogy of being in a form that enables the viewer to grasp its rich insight in one look.

Second, if we look more specifically at the relation of the theological aesthetic perspectives to *yūgen*, we can note that the latter proves to be a useful ally. Ōnishi contrasted *yūgen* with the tragic sublime of the West, emphasizing a non-dualistic

¹¹ Betz, “Beyond the Sublime (Part Two),” 22.

¹² Betz, “Beyond the Sublime (Part Two),” 34, italics original.

perspective that does not view the encounter between subject and object as one of confrontation. So, in some ways Ōnishi—writing in the first half of the twentieth century—was already aware of the problems with the sublime that the contemporary theological perspectives identify. Inasmuch as the theological perspectives aim to correct Kant and his postmodern progeny through recourse to pre-modern, Christian theological notions, it is possible to view the Western sublime that has developed over the last two hundred years, especially with its implicit idea of conflict, as an aberration. Therefore, Ōnishi's attempt at finding a universal category of the sublime may not be entirely misguided, but the tragic sublime would need to be replaced by a peaceful sublime—especially as expressed in the analogy of being—as a true counterpart for *yūgen*.

But while the respective perspectives from theological aesthetics and Japanese aesthetics show points of similarity, it is important not to elide their differences. These are seen in their distinct intellectual concepts that have been mentioned, such as *yūgen* for Japanese aesthetics and the analogy of being for theological aesthetics. These different concepts, in turn, rest of distinct presuppositions. *Yūgen* has roots in a non-theistic Buddhist perspective that does not posit a unique personality at the basis of the universe. Instead, it stresses the impermanence and interrelatedness of all things in their simultaneous co-arising. By contrast, the theological perspectives are based on the notion of a personal, Triune God that provides a ground for existence as relational, but also preserves the difference of God from creation, highlighting the need for analogy.

Yet, despite the presuppositional differences, the two separate approaches reach a similar conclusion: a peaceful depth that harmoniously crosses borders of difference, the very thing we saw was the hallmark of Senju's paintings. Returning to Shofuso one last time, we can see this in the interplay of black and white in the paintings. The challenge, as Senju notes, is to find the harmony in competing forces, such as black and white, and this reveals art's primary function. As he says, "In other words, art is the wisdom of creating peace. It is wisdom for how to get along."¹³ Thus, across the paintings in Shofuso we can feel the beautiful surface of the screen of white give way to the sublime depths of black beneath, showing how it is not only possible, but necessary to maintain a relational continuum across the two.

¹³ Hiroshi Senju, わたしが芸術について語るなる, *Watashi ga geijutsu nitsuite katarunaru*, [If I speak about art] (Tokyo: Poplar-sha, 2011), 170. The translation is my own.



Figure 1: Yoshimura Junzo, Shofuso Japanese House, 1954. Philadelphia, West Fairmont Park. Photo by Peter Doebler, 06/04/14.



Figure 2: Hiroshi Senju, *Imagination of Dynamics*, 2007, acrylics on hemp paper. Philadelphia, Shofuso Japanese House. Photo by Peter Doebler, 06/04/14. Reproduced with permission from the Shofuso Japanese House.



Figure 3: Hiroshi Senju, *Imagination of Silence*, 2007, acrylics on hemp paper. Philadelphia, Shofuso Japanese House. Photo by Peter Doebler, 06/04/14. Reproduced with permission from the Shofuso Japanese House.



Figure 4: Hiroshi Senju, *Imagination of Dynamics* and *Imagination of Silence*, 2007, acrylics on hemp paper. Philadelphia, Shofuso Japanese House. Photo by Peter Doebler, 06/04/14. Reproduced with permission from the Shofuso Japanese House.

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