

# MAKOTO FUJIMURA: AN IMMANENT ABSTRACTION

**By Peter Frank**

Every serious, substantive artwork, no matter how worldly, somehow embodies an act of faith. Its maker realizes it to fulfill not a function but a more profound, ineffable need. Its audience witnesses it (optimally) not as a mode of mere distraction, but as a manifestation of perception and connection. Indeed, it has only been over the last two or three centuries, and primarily in the West, that artworks have largely divested their overtly religious purpose – even as they remain capable of manifesting spiritual essence. No matter what realm of discourse the artwork addresses, no matter how of its time and place it strives to be, that artwork is born of inexact, inexplicable impulse, leaving room for human passion and imperfection even as it might inhere serenity and might dazzle with its craft.

The work of Makoto Fujimura accepts, even declares its own spiritual, indeed religious, devotion. Engaged at once with pure form and reference to the seen world, Fujimura's painting and related work places itself with great deliberation, great flourish, and great breadth on the cusp of the real, in that visual border region where the everyday abuts the visionary – an existential liminality, even hypnagogy, where the mundane and intimate can be dreamed of and the metaphysical can approach the tangible. Fujimura occupies this border realm by resolving disparate elements whose contradictions might confound us but to which he in a sense was born, and to which he returned almost as a coming-of-age. Fujimura is a committed Christian, deriving not only thematic material but philosophical and moral resonance from the New and Old Testaments. At the same time he is steeped in the cultural, especially aesthetic, heritage of Japan, where his family was from, where he spent a large portion of his childhood, and where he undertook his most profound artistic studies. As a result Fujimura's art entirely conflates East and West, relying on Japanese craft and tradition for an outcome that is modern and abstract. Practice and outcome alike are suffused with a reverence that he expresses as Christian but which he recognizes as universal – applicable in theory and intent to anyone and everything, as any religion should be.

For Fujimura the cultural and cognitive differences between Western and Eastern sensibility, differences he has lived with his entire life, require not resolution, but, rather, harmonization. And, in the orientation of the painter's practice to the immaterial and the ethical, that harmonization comes as readily as belief itself. Fujimura's art does not seek syncretism, but exemplifies it, cultivating automatically what might seem to us irresolvable cultural dissonance. That dissonance, in fact, is the crucible in which Fujimura forges his art. Indeed, it is not so much Fujimura's art itself that exercises a kind of cross-platform meld, resting on diverse levels and sources of conscious practice; it is the conditions under – and from – which the art is made.

Fujimura's work, then, emerges from the confluence of faith, tradition, and history: the artist's Christian faith; his study and maintenance of Japanese cultural/artistic traditions; and the primarily Western history of painting as an art form, especially as that art form has metamorphosed so dramatically in the last 200 years. Fujimura makes art with all these factors foremost at hand; if his responses to various stimuli are automatic or improvisatory, he still directs those responses to a discourse appropriate for a broad address to, and assessment of, contemporary humanity. The work is life-affirming because it wants to be. It is spiritual because it has to be. It is capable of different layers and scales of profundity because it mirrors broader human response to nature. It is capable of monumentality, intimacy, opacity, and transparency because it is immersed in the discourse of earthly existence – a discourse which by inference includes the unearthly. The Abstract Expressionists insisted their non-objective artworks addressed identifiable, if immaterial, subjects and even feelings; Fujimura's do no less, irrespective of their imagery, abstract or otherwise.

"My sense of theology is very much somatic," Fujimura has observed, "and flows into the rational through the imaginative, intuitive sense of knowing." The painter has also framed this manifestation of faith in art in metaphorical terms, comparing the exacting process of studio preparation and realization to religious ritual, especially private devotion but, as his live painting-performances evince, also in public assembly. The remarkable thing here is that there is a sense of theology to begin with, that Fujimura regards his artmaking as an expression of his faith – that is, an expression of a world view, specifically described but universally applied, he shares with millions. To be sure, Fujimura's art results from a personal, individual, even hermetic studio practice, one inflected by a system of nuances unique to his personality and experience. And he does not regard his art as an evangelical

tool; its capacity for affecting others' credos is secondary to its ability to broaden others' perception.

That ability results no little bit from Fujimura's formal, and technical, mastery of scale. His paintings, no matter their size, display one of two scales, vast and intimate. These two extremes are oppositional in human regard; but in nature, where Fujimura's art thrives, they are simply two sides of the same coin. In life, after all, as in his art, the thunderous emptiness of the sea abuts the granular detail – the living as well as mineral highlights. – of the beach. In life we habituate somatically to such jumps in natural scale; Fujimura wants to reassert such dimensional elasticity in his painting as a testament to the miracle of the world itself and the position of humankind, at once fixed and fluid, within it. Fujimura's art strongly reaffirms ecological values, but pictures them in a manner that deliberately conveys the sanctity of Earth as the primary domain of life. In Christian terms this can be seen as an avowal of the Holy Spirit. But Fujimura does not make such an avowal explicit, preferring to invoke the presence of something vital and cosmic. This is an immanent abstraction.

In this, of course, Fujimura inherits a rich history of European and American landscape painting, whether that of Cole or of Friedrich, Constable or Turner, Corot or Cézanne. He also professes the influence of more recent American artists engaged, for the most part in abstract terms, with vivid yet fugitive light and looming, empty space — Mark Rothko, to be sure, as well as Agnes Martin, but also notable West Coast painters as diverse as Mary Corse, Richard Diebenkorn, and Morris Graves. Equally, though, Fujimura inherits a parallel tradition of painting in the Far East, a much older tradition than the West's and an even more variegated one – and yet a much less restive one, grounded as it is more in the expansion of technical or subjective practice than in its philosophical conflict. In the West, styles and technologies replace one another as a rule; in the East they do so as an exception. One painterly phenomenon where we find Eastern tradition reacting to Western evolution is in Japanese */nihonga/* (literally, "Japanese painting") – a relatively recent practice incorporating and building upon techniques and aesthetics that had characterized Japanese art for centuries.

Too recent to be a "tradition" in the Eastern sense, */nihonga/* is old enough, stable enough, and based enough on ancient conventions to be regarded, certainly by now, as a distinct and established style. It emerged around 1900, during the Meiji restoration – a period of Japanese fascination with Western art (*/yōga/*) and culture – as a reassertion of modes and methods peculiar to

Japanese art. It was to study /nihonga/ at the Tokyo University of the Arts that the young Fujimura, already an art student in the United States, returned to Japan. His study, lasting almost 7 years, cleaved him to an array of media, techniques, and tools rare in Western painting but capable of producing many of the effects and sensations sought by abstract expressionists and other gestural abstractionists. With the materials of /nihonga/ Fujimura sought a way of capturing natural beauty and power without relying on image alone – an abstraction reliant at least as much on substance as on gesture, even as it relies as much on atmosphere as it does on image. In this, Fujimura is sustained and refined by his faith, impelling him to seek a scope reflective of natural space – and, again, natural scale.

Recently, Fujimura has engaged himself with a somewhat older Japanese art form. Kintsugi, dating back at least 600 years, is an art not of fabrication but of re-fabrication – of repair and transformation. Building on the Japanese regard for quietude and simplicity (/wabi/), wear and decay (/sabi/), and light and sensuousness (/suki/), kintsugi finds room for invention as well as restoration in the repair of damaged utilitarian objects, most notably ceramic vessels associated with another quintessentially Japanese art form, tea ceremony. Kintsugi directs that the repair of cracks maximize the visual scarring with infusions of precious metals – gold, silver – into the lacquer fix, in order to admire the vessel's experience through its distress; to animate the vessel's surface through light reflected through darkness; and even to find pictorial reference to nature in the shapes the cracks make. The great master of such abject extravagance was the 16th century tea master Sen no Rikyu. Many of his followers's re-fused cups and bowls survive, and Fujimura has taken the opportunity to provide several with their own simple display cases. These the living artist has adorned with a rich painterliness, as if caressing the poignantly damaged vessels with color and form.

This collaboration with an artist who flourished six centuries ago seems a logical tactic for a contemporary artist whose practice is grounded in tradition and driven by extra-aesthetic belief. By embracing Rikyu's altered objects, Fujimura embraces his forebear's insight and honors the prominence of Rikyu's achievement in native artistic discourse. It is a gesture of homage and gratitude, an honoring of ancestors that imagines the survival of the soul through artifacture – and avers thereby the Christian belief in the soul's immortality. Rather than presuming to address Rikyu as an equal by even seeming to manipulate the vessels further, Fujimura "frames" them with the same humility the ceramics themselves evince, a devotional gesture that recognizes Rikyu as a kind of saint, even patron saint. The circle completes:

the reach across tradition is a reach across history, manifested in aspects of fabrication and equally of faith.

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