

Transcendental Vision / Sand City

Richard Whittaker

Photo R. Whittaker

This is an exhibit you might be interested in, the email read—*Transcendental Vision*. And there was something else. The exhibit was in Sand City. Sand City? What could be a better metaphor for this world of shifting impermanence? Where could transcendental vision be more needed? As I paused to take this in, memories of Shelley’s poem “Ozymandias” started rising from the shadows—with its far and level sands stretching far away. And there was a movie, wasn’t there? *Woman in the Dunes*, where the wind never ceased blowing in a dream-like world of sand. It drifted relentlessly across walkways, under the doors and through window cracks...

But there really is a Sand City. Over the years I’d driven past that name on an exit sign on the way to Monterey. It always set off a little buzz in my head, although I’d never taken the off-ramp to investigate. Coming down the coastal highway, the last ten

or twelve miles before reaching Monterey, it was impossible not to notice dunes suddenly appearing around one like small mountains. The sign for Sand City was an added touch.

So instead of deleting the note, I left it, intrigued by my immediate associations. The full title was *Transcendental Vision—Japanese Culture and Contemporary Art*. A pdf of the exhibit catalog was attached and I took a peek. “Things are not nearly so comprehensible and sayable as we are generally made to believe— (*Letters to a Young Poet*).” It’s hard to go wrong with Rilke, I thought. Then came a short text from Craig Hubler—chairman, Sand City Arts Commission. Sand City had an arts commission? Who knew?

At each little step into this missive from cyberspace, my interest was growing. As I continued to scroll through the catalog, I came to: *breathing silence*. And scrolling further, I found, “artists who have transcended

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the ancient East-West divide to express a vision of spirituality and the sacredness of everyday things.”
Hmm. Even getting close to that would be special.

I looked through the entire catalog and ended up sending Gail Enns, the show’s curator, a little note of appreciation. And to her question, why didn’t I come down for the opening? I wrote, “It’s a long shot.” It was a drive of a hundred miles.

How Things Sometimes Add Up

Thanks to an unrelated string of events about the same time, I’d met an intriguing Japanese man. I’d first heard his name a couple of years earlier while talking with Carin Jacobs, the director of the Center for Art, Religion and Education at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. She had an idea for an event in their Doug Adams gallery. I would moderate a conversation with an artist and a GTU faculty member. We would look for and explore any overlap between the artist’s work and the theological interests of the faculty member. Ron Nakasone might be a good faculty choice, Carin said. He knew a lot about Asian art and was an artist himself. But in the months that followed, nothing materialized and eventually I just set the idea aside.

Then one evening, I found myself giving the Reverend Heng Sure, abbot of the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery, a ride home from a talk he’d given. Heng Sure was someone I’d already thought of in relation to Jacobs’ proposal. He taught at the GTU. He’d been a folk singer before taking up the robes of a Buddhist

monk and still sang, only now with a Buddhist message. He was also a puppeteer with a knack for improvisation. So I brought up Jacobs’ idea. He was game. And he told me there was another person I should talk to: Ron Nakasone. It turned out that Ron had been Heng Sure’s PhD advisor earlier at the GTU. Small world! Heng Sure added that not only was Ron a master of large-brush calligraphy, he was also a Buddhist priest. He taught at Stanford, too. Would I like an email introduction? I would.

And that was how, some weeks later, I found myself having coffee across a little table from Dr. Nakasone, or was it Reverend Nakasone? In any case, this amiable stranger put me at ease right away. We talked about many things and, at some point, a memory came up I thought I’d share. It had been sparked by something I’d heard listening to the radio—about Buddhism, perhaps. Out of the weave of whatever was being said one phrase stood out: *pure land*. This wasn’t about a perfect soil for growing onions, say. Somehow, hearing that phrase had propelled me inward to a kind of vision, and I wanted to tell Dr. Nakasone about that. Trying to describe it, I felt my words falling flat. *Some things are not sayable*. Actually, many things are not sayable. And perhaps this is where art could come in. Because, if certain things cannot be said, still—to invoke Wittgenstein—*they might be shown*.

Dr. Nakasone listened attentively to my effort to describe the beautiful place hearing the phrase *pure land* had taken me to and then responded, “That’s what the Buddhist path I follow is called, Pure Land Buddhism.”

At such a moment, there is simply a stop. No words. No thoughts. Just sitting there across from a promising new friend. And after a pause, our conversation continued.

A few days after our conversation, Dr. Nakasone sent me the draft of an introduction to a book he was working on about the topography of Huayan Buddhist thought. He writes, “Cartographers face many of the same challenges of philosophers, researchers, artists, scientists, ascetics, spiritualists, and anyone who tries to explain and make intelligible his or her discoveries, thoughts, feelings, and experiences.” His subject was really spiritual cartography.

How does one make intelligible to others certain moments of realization, or of seeing? As we’d talked over coffee, he’d explained this was certainly one way of thinking about one of the most important things an

artist might be doing, or trying to do—that is, mapping part of an inner territory.

A Small Question about Consciousness

Things must always be going on below our awareness. But it doesn't feel like that. So when the conjunction dawned on me: Ron Nakasone, Japanese culture and contemporary art—*hey, there's resonance here!*—it felt like something *I* had realized: *I* this, *I* that. And there was Sand City itself, too. It dawned on me I'd run into a powerful, ready-made metaphor. Imagined together, all this vibrated subtly in some intangible constellation.

Too bad we don't have a middle voice in English. At every turn, thanks to our verb structure, everything is an ego-based event. "I" changed my mind. But is that what really happens? Isn't it more akin to *my mind changes*? What would an immersion in that subtle, basic shift of perspective do to our outlook?

In any case these things were happening. And if I didn't take some action, they would pass by just as quietly as they had arrived. So I found myself seriously considering a trip down to Sand City. I sent Gail Enns a note. "No promises, but the opening sounds like it might be worth the drive."

Then the date came and went. The drive down, the drive back, the time, the hassle—all in all, the resistance proved stronger than the attraction. But a couple of days later, it occurred to me, I could *still* go down there. So I sent Gail another note.

"Even better!" she wrote back. "Patrick Frank is coming up from Los Angeles and we could all have dinner."

Patrick Frank, not Peter Frank. I haven't yet met Peter Frank. But, as close readers of *works & conversations* will know, he's been quoted [#23]. He lives in LA, too. It was Patrick Frank who had written one of the short essays in Gail's exhibit catalog. He writes, "We might wonder if 'breathing silence' is possible or even desirable in our multi-channel era of 24-hour news cycles. But the question only arises if we countenance the victory of cacophony over quiet, of the shrill over the subtle." Indeed.

Evidence of Something

"There were a thousand people at the opening," Gail told me. This is not a point of contention. I just accept it. And even if, in her joy, the number expanded, one can understand. So let's say the number was 800. Ask any gallery owner how they would feel

about 800 showing up for an opening. Later, I got a note from one of the artists, Jerry Takigawa, claiming there were *more* than a thousand people.

And Gail added, "Every day, people just keep coming in. Fifty, sixty. Amazing." Fifty or sixty people a day at a MacDonalds would not be so good. But fifty or sixty people coming into almost any fine arts gallery in the country, on an ordinary, non-opening, non-artist-talk, non-celebrity, non-anything day, is something to write home about. (Closer to 2000 visited the exhibit in all.) And this was happening in a tiny place tucked in between Monterey and Seaside; add Pacific Grove and Carmel and you have a total population of only about 75,000 to draw from. Given that, such a response could never have been predicted.

Sand City Incorporated

"Very pleased to meet you," Craig Hubler said as we shook hands. Finding 600 Ortiz Blvd. had been a little tricky, especially since, once I took the exit for Sand City, I figured I'd be able to find the place without worrying about street names. I knew the one address I needed and, besides, all of Sand City—as I'd heard—covered only forty acres. Had I heard that correctly? [It covers a bit more, six tenths of one square mile.]

Most of the streets were laid out in a grid tilted diagonally to Del Monte Blvd. on the east and Highway 1 to the west. And several of these little streets were dead ends, terminated by sand dunes. The whole city, I'd been told, was built on the grounds of an old sand-mining company ("sand-shoveling" company might be more apt). And now the place seemed to consist of big-box stores mixed in with little-box stores with a few houses sandwiched in, and small industry—urban sprawl running north out of Monterey.

Having ignored the place's street names, I'd found myself lost in a little maze. Nevertheless, it wasn't long before I found the place—a four-story, recently-built commercial building. The exhibit was on its spacious ground floor.

Walking in, I spotted Gail Enns. She introduced me to Craig. And I soon learned Craig was also a Sand City city councilman.

"This place has a city council? I asked. "You mean, Sand City is actually incorporated?"

It was. 300 people live in Sand City, he told me. And it had its own mayor, police force and four city councilmen. "And counting the mayor, three of us are professional artists!" Craig added. I let the phrase

“professional artist” pass—what exactly is a professional artist?—in favor of contemplating a city with a majority of artists at the top of its bureaucracy. The silence that followed in the wake of his statement begged for at least a *bon mot* but, for the life of me, I couldn’t think of a single thing to say. So Gail Enns made a move, “*But the city still doesn’t give much money to the arts!*” Her comment was received with nods all around. *Just the way it is.* By then, Patrick Frank had joined us. We all chatted a bit more and then I wandered off to get a look at the actual exhibit.

What Is Seen? What Is Heard?

What was it about this exhibit that had touched people, had drawn so many to it? I was reminded of Agnes Martin who wrote, “You have no idea how sensitive people are.” Of course, the opposite seems just as true.

Many in the local Japanese American community had turned out for the exhibit. What currents lay silent in that community just waiting for a measure of honorable recognition? Tom Graves’ sensitive black and white portraits of Japanese Americans who fought for the U.S. during WWII, must have played a part. The photos were displayed as an adjunct to the work of the twelve artists included in the exhibit catalog. They reminded me how powerful a photograph can be. Looking at the portraits, something essential is revealed about Graves himself—because what does it take to create the space that allows someone to appear and be seen?

Later That Evening

As Gail, her husband John, and Patrick and I were having dinner that evening, we tried to account for the astonishing turnout. Gail pointed out that the show had been well advertised. All the local papers covered it, she said, adding, “We even had our own logo!” And my goodness—maybe that was the secret.

I imagine the Carmel/Monterey area as a place of tourist art. But does an echo of Robinson Jeffers and John Steinbeck still resonate? Edward Weston? For years, Ansel Adams’ Friends of Photography had been located in Carmel. Many of the country’s best photographers used to come to Carmel in those days. And thirty years earlier, Pacific Grove’s art center was having some good exhibits.

It brings back a memory. I’d gone into a bar—it might have been in Carmel—and I fell into conversation

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with a man sitting next to me. He was obviously well-oiled and when he discovered I had an interest in the arts, he became expansive. “You know those paintings of children with the big eyes?” I nodded. “The artist’s name is Walter Keane. Have you heard of him?” I had. I’d seen the paintings. In those days, who hadn’t?

“I didn’t get your name,” the man said, sticking out his hand.

“Richard, and yours?” I asked.

“Walter Keane.”

Not so easy, I guess, having hit it big with a sort of gimmick. Fifteen minutes of fame, or in this case a few years. But here was something else in Sand City. Fame was not likely to play any part in it at all. But then, maybe there would be less likelihood of any of the artists ending up spending too much time in bars later on. So what is it that’s actually *important*?

Not Large-Eyed Waifs

The work on display in *Transcendental Vision* was quiet, thoughtful, often contemplative. It required attention. It was not the kind of art that had made Walter Keane and his wife, Margaret, so successful for a while.

That evening while the four of us were having dinner, Patrick asked, “Did you see Madonna?” and laughed. I hadn’t seen the Superbowl, or the half-time



Photo R. Whittaker

show—although someone had described the spectacle. Madonna had been wrapped in smoke and light and riding high on a chariot thing, like some western version of a Hindu goddess’s temple car, pulled around the field by dozens of bare-chested men. There was an elaborate dance number on this outsized contraption.

Something like a hundred million people had watched. And with YouTube maybe millions more will watch. None of us felt like getting into a twist about it. *It is what it is.* Spectacle is the name of the game, and what’s the game, exactly?

“I love this work,” Gail Enns, said, speaking of her exhibit and leaving the world of spectacle behind.

“What do you love about it?” I asked, curious to hear what she might say.

She thought for a little while and said, “It’s honest.”

What Is Art For?

That was the daring title of an exhibit at the Oakland Museum a few years ago. What was even bolder was that the question was posed without a hint of irony. That took some chutzpah.

While I was walking around looking at each piece in the Sand City exhibit, one of the artists happened to come in, Jerry Takigawa. It turned out he was also the catalog and logo designer, and the only artist in the exhibit I had the pleasure of meeting.

I hadn’t paid careful attention to his large color photos, but after a congenial conversation with him, I took a new interest. The colorful content in his photos came from bits of plastic carried from the massive gyre of plastic waste—maybe 100 million tons of it—slowly rotating in the Pacific Ocean. The bits of plastic he photographed were retrieved from the stomachs of dead seabirds, or could have been. According to marine biologist Dr. Jennifer Lavers, more than eight million pieces of plastic enter our oceans each day, and each day more than 200 seabird species mistake these pieces of floating plastic for food. It becomes trapped in their stomachs. They die.

One’s attitude toward the pleasing look of Takigawa’s photos shifts once this is known. His aim, he wrote, “is to cause the viewer to recognize the importance of beauty as well as our ultimate



JERRY TAKIGAWA, UNTITLED [DETAIL], 2010, PIGMENT PRINT, ORIGINAL IN COLOR, 30" X 40"

interdependence with one another." Yes—and how does one wake up to that? This is a question that's more than just difficult to answer. But surely it's still worth asking. Maybe in a time of spectacle, certain quiet voices can follow an unexpected trajectory. And Takigawa is not the only photographer trying to raise awareness about the horrendous toll on sea birds.

But there were twelve other artists included in the

exhibit. I'm not qualified to comment about how, or whether, each artist's work reflects the influence of Japanese aesthetics. It's perhaps most obviously true in the work of potter Rob Barnard whose life has been deeply shaped by his study in Japan with Kazuo Yagi. Half of the artists are Japanese—or Japanese Americans—but the work of each quietly casts a different light. A few pieces spoke more directly to



GALLERY VIEW: FOREGROUND, INSTALLATION BY TAMIKO KAWATA, *RAIN FOREST*, 2012, SAFETY PINS,

me than others—Tamiko Kawata’s sculpture, made entirely from safety pins, for instance. And Sharron Antholt’s large painting of a coastal landscape touched something of the sublime.

What are the sources of transcendental vision? This is not exclusively Japanese territory. But thinking about this work another phrase comes to mind—one I found in Dr. Nakasone’s draft: *dependent co-arising*. It’s not a bad phrase to bring up in the context of Gail Enns’ exhibit. Looking at the work of these artists, it’s easy to imagine some kind of common, if unseen, ground from which the work of these artists emerges. How exactly this is identified is another question.

It would have been good to meet and talk with each artist. Each has something to say. And today, where can such quiet voices be heard? I’m struck by the strange poetry of finding such thoughtful work

hidden away in a city of sand. ♦

Postscript

After the exhibit, Jerry Takigawa wrote, “It was the comment of one visitor that brought the whole purpose of the exhibition into sharp focus. A middle-aged Japanese woman was quietly crying in the presence of the artwork. [Gail] Enns approached her and asked if she was okay. The woman said she felt that this was the most healing exhibit she had ever seen—in either Japan or America.”

The artists: Sharron Antholt. Rob Bernard. Laurel Farrin. Mary Annella Frank. Tamiko Kawata. Grace Munakata. Tom Nakashima. Lisa Soloman. Masako Takahashi. Jerry Takigawa. Mark Tanous. Sandy Yagyuu. Tom Graves. [Painting on inside front cover is by Sharron Antholt.]



A Little More Sand City

Richard Whittaker

A few weeks after the exhibit, I drove down to Sand City again to take some photos. When I'd come down earlier, I was focused on finding my way to the *Transcendental Vision* exhibit and didn't pull out my camera once. This time I explored the place a little making sure I drove down all the streets that ended in sand dunes.

It was one of those idyllic California days and what could have been a better assignment?

Quick take: Sand City is incorporated, with a population of 334 according to a 2010 census. It has its own police force, mayor and city council. According to Wikipedia, the city covers an area of only .6 of a square mile. But since its borders extend into Monterey Bay, it claims a bit more of a footprint. It's a place mostly of light industry. Except where it meets the Bay, it's surrounded by the larger town of Seaside, California.



The Photos

Top of page: One of the streets dead-ending into sand dunes. And here's a Sand City black and white.

Right hand page: The place with the quonset hut was for sale, too. And here's a hidden little street than runs right out to the beach. Only the locals would know about it. ◆





Above: Fred and Lori Saunders. They own Sculpture Works, Inc. in Sand City. They're artists and also metal fabricators. They built the piece behind them, a fountain, designed by Greg Hawthorne. Standing in plain sight, it caught my attention. I had to stop and get a closer look. That's how I met Fred. Inside the shop, a woman was at work welding. Turned out to be Lori, his wife. Here she is, having taken off her helmet.

Right hand page: I did find a tiny neighborhood of newer houses in Sand City. Here's the corner of one. Notice the sand. I even found two older, wood-frame houses tucked in between the more typical commercial light-industrial buildings in town. It was like spotting a tiny piece of Pacific Grove that unaccountably had migrated a few miles north. Quick take? If I didn't love where I am, I'd start thinking about moving. ♦

