

Imagination (in my case) rarely precedes the idea; it is the latter, and never the former, that excites me. But the latter without the former produces nothing but a useless exaltation. The idea of a work is its composition. Because of imagining too rapidly so many writers of today create ephemeral, poorly composed works. With me the idea of a work precedes often by several years its *imagination*.

As soon as the idea of a work takes on consistency—that is, as soon as the work organizes itself—the elaboration consists in little more than suppressing everything that is useless to its *organism*.

I am aware that everything that constitutes the originality of the writer is added unto this; but woe to him who thinks of his personality while writing. It always comes through sufficiently if it is sincere, and Christ's saying is just as true in art: "Whosoever will save his life (his personality) shall lose it."

This preliminary work, then, I perform while walking. Then it is that the outside world has the greatest hold over me and that distraction is most dangerous. For since work must always be natural, you must develop your idea without tension or violence. And sometimes it does not come at once. You have to wait. This requires infinite patience. It's no good to seize hold of the idea against its will: it then seems so surly that you wonder what attracted you in it. The preferred idea comes only when there is no other idea in its place. Hence you can evoke it only by thinking of nothing else. At times I have spent more than an hour waiting for it. If you have the misfortune, feeling nothing coming, to think: "I am wasting my time," it's all over and you *have* wasted your time.

— Andre Gide, 1893

I've known about the work of artist and ikebana master, Kosen Ohtsubo, since 2013, after finding selections of his work in a book at a second-hand bookstore while visiting Japan. Using the internet, I found Ohtsubo's website and Twitter page. He was living in Beijing at the time, and we began correspondence over e-mail and Twitter DMs. I had been teaching myself ikebana for two years up until that point, reading every book I could acquire. Books were my primary source of knowledge and understanding of the art form. When I first saw Kosen's published work at the second-hand shop, I felt what the artist, Sturtevant, calls, "the silent power of art." I wanted to know everything about these images and see more. I applied to two fellowships that would allow me to study with him in Japan and was fortunate enough to be the recipient of one of them. Between 2015 and 2016, I lived in Japan and studied with Ohtsubo, becoming a master of freestyle Ryusei School ikebana myself under his tutelage.

In his home studio, Kosen has a humidity-controlled cabinet filled with hundreds of photographic positive and negative film images of his works dating back to the 1960s. He allowed me to look through them, and I spoke to him about the possibility of making a book of these works, considering his last publication solely dedicated to his practice was distributed in 1995, and before that, 1981. He was interested, and wanted me to select the works and pick the title for the book. He even specified it should mostly be in English, except for a few significant points that should also appear in Japanese. But without a dedicated publisher, the idea just lingered in the ether. As the fellowship was wrapping up and unsure about my ability to make a living for myself in Japan, another mentor of mine suggested I apply and move back to the United States to participate in the Photo/Media graduate program at the University of Washington. I was uncertain about whether I wanted to actually get an arts education, but was convinced to apply as the program allowed me access to a Hasselblad Flextight X5 scanner, where I could

digitize Kosen's film archive. I got into the program, moved to Seattle, Washington, and within three months of classes starting, Kosen sent me a box with over three hundred images of his works to scan.

I met the founders of Paid, Sean Lockwood and Nicholas Strobelt, while in graduate school, where we all participated in the Photo/Media program at staggered, but overlapping times. During our tenure in school together, they saw the development of my practice as I worked on scanning all of what Ohtsubo had loaned me, though it didn't amount to any particular public expression at the time, in part, because I didn't yet have an idea as to how to properly present the images in such a way to preserve their context. Since leaving graduate school, my advocacy of Kosen's work continued, that in part led to an opportunity with a gallery to present physical works of his, instead of just prints. We were very interested in this opportunity as it presented us the chance to share the work with a very different audience than the already familiar ikebana world of Japan. But with the pandemic striking at the beginning of our preparation, and the realization of the logistical difficulty of matching materials in different climatic regions of the world, the show unfortunately never materialized. The process of working on this unrealized exhibition, however, brought up very interesting philosophical questions about the nature of how ikebana is created and moves economically, which has since inspired this exhibition series.

The gallery proposed to manualize, in a post-conceptual fashion, a number of Ohtsubo's works, remaking a number of different historical vessels that Kosen had since discarded. Previously not attempted in ikebana to my knowledge, I was interested in this historical challenge. The end goal of this approach was to sell the vessel and instructions together to make a new iteration of the historical work for collecting institutions. At the time of this plan, Ohtsubo specified that the work could be made either by specified masters who would be flown in, in case he was not available to make the work, or the work was to be executed by someone at the institution who had absolutely no training in ikebana. These steps were considered to establish Ohtsubo as a legacy artist, which would allow him to exhibit new works and most likely garner interest in publishing articles of printed matter pertaining to his past works.

During this process, I was thinking about how to make the sort of publication that mirrored certain tenets or traits of ikebana production and exhibition. I started by thinking about how ikebana appears in the home, traditionally in a *tokonoma*, or alcove, specific to a certain era of Japanese architecture that still makes casual appearances today. In the *tokonoma* an ikebana arrangement and calligraphic scrolls are most commonly displayed. Occasionally, a bonsai or some sort of special object might also make an appearance, but the overall goal of this space is to act as a temporal display that reflects the goings-on in the home or neighborhood where the specific alcove is found. Thus, calligraphic scrolls are regularly changed out, new ikebana works are produced with different seasonal flowers, and the space is constantly renewed.

Ikebana, being temporal, has an interesting souvenir economy that reveals itself at any number of public exhibitions. Since the arrangements themselves can't be purchased,

what is offered to visitors are books, postcards, and vases that reproduce the images of ikebana works, or are the tools themselves to allow visitors to make similar arrangements in their own homes.

The marriage of these ideas – the constant rotation of the items in the *tokonoma* to match the mood and season, and the combination of affordability and availability of the reproductions at ikebana exhibitions – is how we arrived at the format of this exhibition. It can be seen as a calendar, but I prefer to additionally view it as a book made in slow motion, constructed and customized by individuals in personal folios. Each iteration of this show will exhibit a different twelve photographs from Ohtsubo's archive, adding an additional twelve pages to a potential future publication. Alongside the prints are binders that contain interviews and press write-ups about Kosen's work through the years. These prints have been graciously scanned by Empty Gallery, and will over time be translated from Japanese into English. I will also write for each iteration of the show and expand upon my experience studying and working with Ohtsubo. Additionally, writers will be commissioned to pen texts about their understanding and reception of the work, and historical materials that help to illuminate the contextual framework surrounding avant-garde ikebana will be translated and included.

When I was living in Japan and studying with Kosen, he would refer to me when speaking to others as his *deshi*, a term meaning something similar to a disciple or apprentice. When used in traditional object-oriented craft production, like in the study of making pottery or lacquerware, a *deshi's* job is to remake the work of the master as a form of technical training, before ever getting to make their own designs. I don't make as many images these days as I used to, but I circulate them regularly and consider this movement a part of my artistic practice. In the same way that Kosen identified me as his disciple, I feel that this exhibition format, in all of its doubling and advocacy, is my way of continuing my apprenticeship for the work and ideas of my master.

The poster for the exhibition at Paid is a side-profile photo by Nicholas Strobel of the Hasselblad Flextight X5 that was used to produce most of the prints present in the exhibition. The board that bisects the garage that the prints are pinned to comes from the Photo/Media Room 10 in the basement of the University of Washington Art Building. The Hasselblad Flextight X5 was at one time located in the same room.

This show could not happen without the support of Kosen Ohtsubo and his daughter Keiko Ohtsubo for their permission, continual support, and research into the information pertaining to these new presentations; the Ryusei School of Ikebana for their cooperation and support of this exhibition; the Empty Gallery for their labor in scanning different parts of Kosen's archive, historical press materials, and continued interest in Kosen and my artistic practices; and Nicholas Strobel and Sean Lockwood of Paid for their dedication to this project.

Christian Kōun Alborz Oldham, August 2022