Exhibition Essay for Martin

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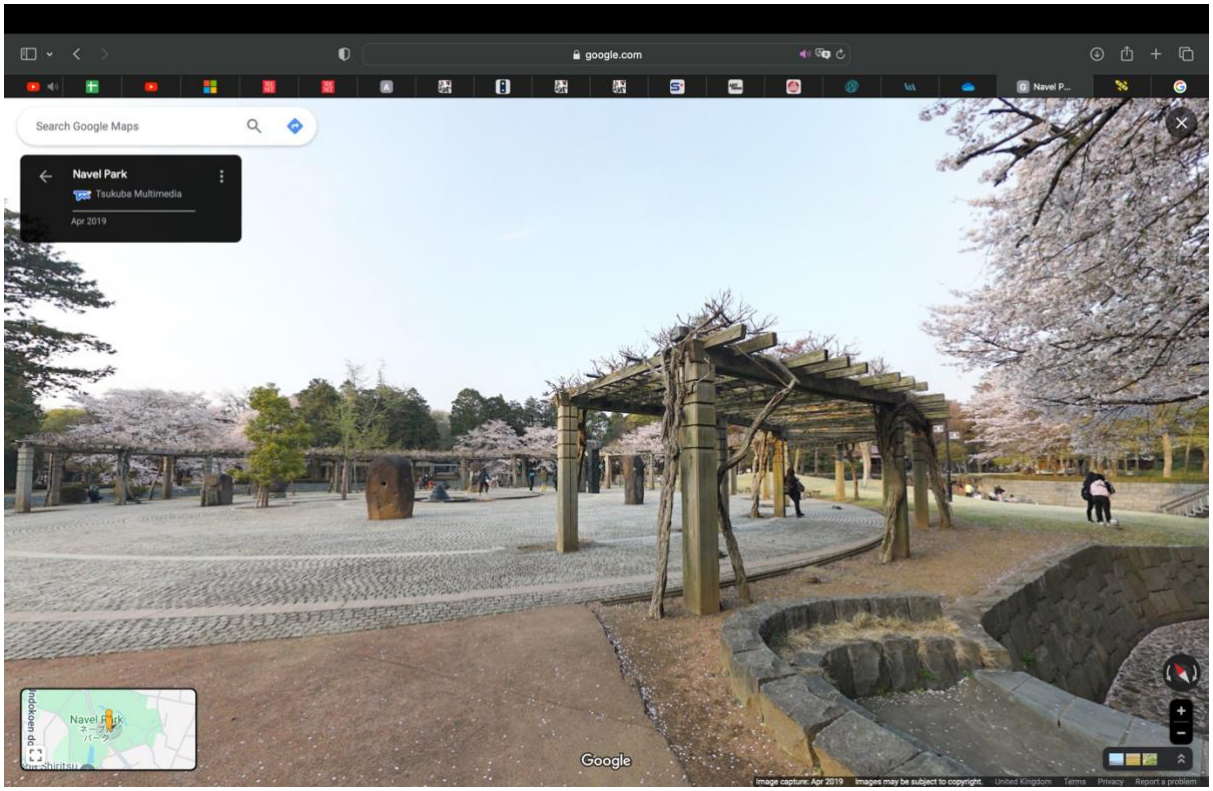
Ways of perceiving-Imagined Display Space

The Relationship between Humans and Yokai.

The exhibition is for the work of a Japanese artist from the 19th century, who was given a crater on Mercury to honour him; “Kyosai, for Kawanabe Kyosai (1831-1889), a Japanese artist who attained a reputation as a caricaturist. In addition to his caricatures, Kyosai painted a large number of pictures and sketches, often choosing subjects from the folklore of his country.” (Space ref (2012). The artworks that have been chosen for this exhibition are original Japanese woodblock prints, that are featuring a mythological creature/s. These creatures are typically called yokai, which can include ghosts, demons, animated/possessed objects, ogres and other similar beings. The mini theme of this exhibition is the relationships between the yokai and the human, however the main theme is older techniques and art styles due to this ideally being one in a series of exhibitions displaying older or traditional styles and techniques.

It would be held in Navel Park in Koga, Japan, which was where Kyosai was born. This way he can be honoured in his hometown and have the artwork about his country’s mythologies to potentially inspire future generations. The park also has cherry blossoms, which ties in with the materials used for woodblock.



(Google maps, to show where the exhibition would be: https://www.google.com/maps/@36.1663482,139.7541474,3a,75y,36.68h,92.41t/data=!3m8!1e1!3m6!1sAF1QipNTYgo1dmdyR3AldA2Uk6Y0kR9CJQ4yCOKfRRp_!2e10!3e11!6shttps:%2F%2Flh5.googleusercontent.com%2Fp%2FAF1QipNTYgo1dmdyR3AldA2Uk6Y0kR9CJQ4yCOKfRRp_%3Dw203-h100-k-no-pi-0-ya187.35303-ro0-fo100!7i12000!8i6000?entry=ttu)

The artworks were done by Japanese woodblock printing, which were a common form of art in Japan throughout a few different historical periods. Woodblocks are done by carving a design into wood and then painting colours onto the carved designs, then transferring that paint onto paper. According to the Japanese Gallery, Sakura (cherry

wood) trees were the most commonly used due to it being “tough enough to print a sizeable number of prints before lines start showing wear, but soft enough for complex patterns and designs to be carved into it.” (Japanese Gallery, undated) in addition to “its ability to remain stable under damp conditions.” (Japanese Gallery, undated). Woodblock printing can be used on a variety of materials from paper to fabrics, and has been used in different industries for patterns, artworks and lettering.

(full artwork available to view at: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/78669)

Artwork one is called Hyakki Gadan (Pictures of One Hundred Demons) and consists of a very long artwork not unlike a scroll, which folds up and is classified as an illustrated book (read/looked at from right to left as per the normal way Japanese literatures etcetera are created). The artwork depicts many yokai in a parade, which is an event that is referred to in Japanese mythology where various types of yokai (demons) will parade the streets at night causing humans to hide in their homes. Its dimensions are 19.8 x 12 cm, presumably when folded, and was published in 1890 (first edition published posthumously in 1889).

(available to view at: https://www.artoftheprint.com/artistpages/kyosai_kawanabe_thestoryteller.htm)

The second artwork is called Jigoku no Kyujitsu (Holiday in Hell), which is a vastly different size to the previous piece. This piece is mainly made up of yokai, however the two in the bottom right corner could be humans conversing with the yokai in the underworld. Perhaps this could represent the different beings getting along, especially as the title is 'holiday'.

(available to view at: https://www.artoftheprint.com/artistpages/kyosai_kawanabe_thespectralcat.htm)

The third artwork is called Banekeneko (The Spectral Cat), depicts a yokai being restrained by villagers, which could represent the struggle between the humans and supernatural creatures. The armour being worn by some of the villagers suggests that they are samurai, though their statuses are unclear.

(Available to view at:
https://www.artoftheprint.com/artistpages/kyosai_kawanabe_masterartistsatwork.htm)

This artwork is called Master Artists at Work and depicts artists working whilst onlookers either attempt to assist or just watch in curiosity. There is also an oni watching in the top right corner, perhaps out of interest, but ultimately ignored by the artists. It is another peaceful interaction, showing that otherworldly beings can get along with humans.

(Available to view at: https://moonlitseaprints.com/inventory/mls2021267-kyosai-kawanabe-bunbuku-chagama/#)

The final artwork is called Bunbuku Chagama (The story of the teapot-tanuki) and has a supposed story to go with it. In short, the story follows a tanuki that transformed into a teapot and ends with the tanuki finding a way to live peacefully with the humans. The title has some hypotheses surrounding it due to the unusual word 'bunbuku', however none have been proven as of yet. This artwork could represent the struggles between humans and yokai, as in the story the tanuki is initially seen as a mistake to have obtained, and yet when traded to someone else ends up offering to help them earn money in return for kindness.

As previously stated, the idea is that this will be one exhibition in a series so as to showcase different artistic techniques and bring attention to their decline and skills required. This would hopefully cause people to look into more traditional skills that are sadly dying out. The majority of the skills require a lot of time to master (as per usual) and take a while to actually create the desired products (an example would be that the entire process to make a traditional kimono takes approximately 3 months) and as a result the items created have a very high price point due to the sheer amount of manual labour. Whilst the method used to make these particular artworks is still being used, the style is very different and so displaying these older art styles could influence current artists to create newer works in an older style. Many styles of art and creative careers are being given up as people no longer have the time and money to pursue them. People are proud of their cultures but aren't always able or willing to help preserve them, and traditional crafts would be the easiest way of visibly doing so; "Traditional craftsmanship is perhaps the most tangible manifestation of intangible cultural heritage." (Unesco, undated)

Whilst woodblock prints are still in use more so than many other older crafts, it has largely been replaced by modern printing techniques and so is no longer as common as it used to be. It's likely that it's more common due to the fact that it doesn't usually take anywhere near as long as my previous example, and the longest part of it is typically the carving which can take a few hours to weeks depending on the size and complexity of the piece. It is being kept alive by modern artists which is refreshing in contrast to other more difficult trades/techniques.

Hopefully the preservation of ancient/traditional techniques do get preserved and more people show interest in keeping the crafts going as it would be devastating to lose them, especially to mass manufactured products. These mass manufactured products are generally worse for the environments and the quality is not the same as products that are handmade with more time taken to do so. Maximalism has unfortunately taken over recently in contrast to the previous minimalistic trends, where "One of the major problems that comes with maximalism is the fact that it promotes overconsumption. Maximalism encourages having as much clothing as possible, and it doesn't specifically promote getting it from ethical sources" (Giorio, The Chariot, undated). This rise in overconsumption has made some peoples' appreciation for handmade items decrease as they turn to massive companies for their items. However, I have seen many handmade items at fairs and conventions which is reassuring, although they aren't always created using sustainable or recyclable materials. It's amazing that people have got creative businesses, but it would be interesting for some to be more unique trades as the majority seem to be 3D print work, woodwork, paints/drawings and jewellery. It's great that these are pathways people actively want to participate in and pursue, and I hope more people are encouraged to follow their passions, but people should definitely look to learn crafts that are on the decline instead of opting for the arguably easier and more available modern methods if possible.

In conclusion, there is a need for more natural ways of creating to return as we have unfortunately gotten way too comfortable with mass manufactured products and their lack of quality due to the rise of maximalism. As a result, the waste created has taken a toll on the planet and perhaps our mental health being surrounded by it. The potential of creating more jobs and opportunities with these careers would be beneficial to society and cultures, providing the people are supported whilst doing them due to the time and materials it takes and as it would be a risk to most people due it not guaranteeing them a stable income. Ideally more people will seek to learn these trades and that this exhibition helps in that endeavour, however it is understandably difficult to encourage it is a lifestyle/job.

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