

Rikuo Ueda · Winddrawings

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Everyone knows wind. Wind blows wherever and whenever it wants. It knows no boundaries. It is a symbol of freedom, as in the Winds of Change. Those who admire the wind for its freedom should also be aware of its unreliability. Wind cannot be provoked – one must wait for wind. And once it does arrive, it may come flying with unexpected force. Yet we don't resent it. After all, this no longer is wind – this is a storm. Higher than force 12, it is called a hurricane. A breeze or a gust, the first spring storm, especially welcomed in Japan, or the destructive typhoon – there are many words for and various emotions linked to this phenomenon. Scientists have described it as the acceleration of air due to the pressure gradient force, compensating the difference between a high atmospheric pressure region and a low-pressure region.

Everyone knows wind. But what does it look like? How does wind become substantial? As a faint breeze touching the skin? As a tree-bending, berserk force? As a kind greeting to the branches of a solitary tree that has survived Hiroshima?

Wind works wonders. It provides relief in southern midday heat, caresses the hair of the beloved; it inscribes swaying waves in the nearly ripe cornfield. It carries with it fascinating unknown scents and vapors of foreign humidity. In the spring it will transport fertilizing pollen and in autumn disseminate flying seeds. It can even speak: A rather emotional, very old language – a hissing, whistling, a howling and a roaring.

Everyone knows wind. But how can wind be captured? It can be harnessed for the purpose of turning mills, for pushing a boat behind a sail or accelerating an airplane in the jet stream. It is also possible to catch it – in cans – as Rikuo Ueda has done. But then it is dead... or at least sleeping, and may only be aroused through art.

Those who know wind should know Rikuo Ueda. The artist from Osaka, who was born in 1950, is a wind artist. The fact that his name bears the word root "ue", which in Indo-Germanic circumscribes "wehen" (to blow), is something that may be noticed only outside of his homeland. It certainly suits him. For the past thirteen years, this artist has been helping wind to achieve a more finely distinguished expression: He has given it its own writing.

How can it be that something as powerful as the wind would actually apply notations to something as delicate as a sheet of paper? Rikuo Ueda assists the process by constructing specific gadgets or machines – hinges between nature and art. Though often improvised, using found material and built as simply as possible, they sometimes appear quite complicated. For the transcription of the wind into the visual, for it to come forth as a picture, there are small self-built screens or sails and a long pole, similar to a fishing rod, all serving to capture, enhance and illustrate wind movements. These installations appear diffident and sketchy, even conveying the impression of being a drawing in three-dimensional space – delicate devices which, with the least possible effort, will bring the pen or ink brush and the paper into the appropriate position. The sheet of paper may be found outside, close to the moving natural or artificial element, or perhaps it is safely stored in a dry place, an enclosure constructed especially for this purpose, in a teahouse, an artist's studio or a gallery.

Most of the time Rikuo Ueda doesn't invite the wind to leave traces directly via his constructions. He often lets bushes and trees act as intermediaries, allowing their wind-swept branches to write down what the wind is saying as it passes by. When building such devices, the artist / translator must regard various aspects that many others do not take into account. He observes the effects of natural forces in places where others will not look for them. Moreover, he must be familiar with the characteristics of the plants used. He must consider that branches settle at different heights during a day's cycle, he must assess how the humidity will affect the branches and, considering the desired outcome of his art, must decide whether he will allow coloured juices to drip down from fruit and alter the drawing. Thus are created many variants in the notation of the wind's traces.

The big abstract mover seems to note his cosmic code all by himself. But even the wind, the breath connecting all of life, relies on the artist as a translator – without Rikuo Ueda's ingenious and delicately tuned machineries, its depiction would not materialize. The question arises, why this self-expression of the wind appears to resemble Asian calligraphy. Have Buddhist and Shinto concepts entered the constructions to such a degree that the wind can answer in Asian writing only?

Maybe wind approves of the notion that Asian writing still bears remainders of ancient pictorial elements and is not, as compared to European lettering, merely reflecting arbitrary agreements. This presumably is why, to Europeans, wind writing somehow looks like Japanese / Chinese characters. Yet, just as in the vast universe of these characters we may find very ancient and rare ones, becoming increasingly unknown, the wind writes in a script perhaps existing long before human life.

Not only Buddhists believe that everything in the world somehow relates to the cosmic order. The mindful caring for even the tiniest of elements, however, is more likely to be found in the Asian way of thinking, aimed at preserving cosmic harmony – though increasingly rare in economical and ecological practice. The breath of the wind, the water's flow, the song of cicadas – it always changes and yet remains the same. The phrase that "everything flows" is found both in Buddhist scripts as with the ancient Greek Heraclitus. Everything is in a state of flux – and yet in its essence remains constant.

The drawings created by the wind for Rikuo Ueda seem to be rather coincidental. But their appeal lies not only in this random beauty, not only in the process of developing poetic associations related to the wind's notations nor in believing that the wind should have something to reveal, which only an initiate would be able to decipher. The core of their beauty actually lies in being a small sign of the vast universe.

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