

2014-04-20 comments on asama og and eating the other

The usual neoliberal response to an accusation that cultural assimilation has teetered into cultural appropriation is to borrow a scene from *West Side Story*, and present the accused as if talking to Officer Krumpke, explaining the condition of post-modernity:

*"..aw gee. Officer Krumpke, I've got a neo-liberal appropriation disease. I can't help it. I was brought up within a culture of imperialism, post-imperialism, a lot of isms. It's a culture showing twenty years of rapid globalization in industry, arts, and entertainment and still working through post-1960s experiments with equal rights and new definitions of self in society. Still digesting the first western attempts to integrate Zen and Buddhist approaches into daily life, and still part of another time, working through 1950s militarism and feminism, and influenced by each of the decades before that and before that, past the earliest of the 1930s transnational aesthetic experiments with Art Deco, Art Nouveau, and fading into the histories of beyond the beyond, beyond the first to tenth to hundredth cultural contact where Japanese paper-making and printmaking techniques like chine colle influenced European and American visual culture."*

Is Asama OG an example of eating the other? Is this an example of a dominant culture eating a primitive culture for short-term gain, only to throw away the primitive culture after a short period of digestion? What is it to adopt the iconography of another culture? What is the minority culture? What is the dominant culture between the line of culture that runs from Detroit to Texas to California to Tokyo and London? Which is the dominant culture in this heavily mixed geography? What defines the line between cultural appropriation and cultural assimilation? What part does George Lipsitz's "strategic anti-essentialism" play in explaining the use of Japanese art forms by transplanted Midwesterner to resist a dominant culture of unease about Japan, Inc?

As a first step, the iconography used in Asama OG is unpacked. Details that identify or describe, and interpretation of the images and compositions are presented below in the hopes of teasing out more meaning and firmly fixing a purpose.

Asama OG plates are made of some, all, or none of the following three ingredients: a black ink layer that embraces the center, a dimensional "deboss" layer that avoids the center, and a "dirty" plate that integrates the two with a color of blue, orange, or pink. These plates are then strung together in variable-size grid compositions, picked by the viewer by easily moving around individual plates to pleasing spots in the supporting grid.

The black layer incorporates two distinct kinds of influence in composition: the general genre of the zen garden as portrayed in western traditions of the landscape, and the zen practice of enso drawing.

The first black layer is a photomontage scene composed of stone sculptures from the Nezu Museum tea house garden. The garden sculpture sampled in this way include one Buddhist sculpture, seated with left hand palm up in his lap, right hand thumb and forefinger touching but the other fingers outstretched. This hand iconography, or mudra, seems like a combination of learning and exposition (thumb and forefinger) and charity (hand relative locations) iconography. This Buddha sculpture is arranged at the top of a circle, as if sitting on a globe, with some lion entry sentinels, and a cluster of scholar statues spread around the outside of the top hemisphere of the center circle. Other plates have lantern or tōrō iconography: ikekomi-gata, or buried lanterns, mixed with tachi-gata pedestal lanterns. The last iconography sampled consists of elaborate cornerstone roofing tiles, carefully excised from their position joining two or more roof surfaces and combined into radially-symmetric stone patterns.

Do the sampled stone sculptures in this composition mis-represent the Japanese culture? The genre of iconography sampled includes a religious component from the Buddhist sculpture and lanterns. The seated buddha sculpture, modulo mudra specifics, has a specific meaning in the context of Japanese culture as a reminder to mindfulness. The lanterns were originally used to illuminate the path to the temple, and can be

seen as a wayfaring mark. The cornerstone quoted in these compositions can represent the joining of two opposing forces, the highest point on a surface, or can be seen as pointing upwards.

The sculptures are cut from the original foliage background of the tea house and re-positioned anew, around the outside of a circle as if one were drawing a Zen enso but instead of drawing in ink with a traditional brush on a flat surface, the ink and brush have been replaced with the stone statue imagery. The meditative experience of brush on paper, one breath and one complete brush stroke imparting a unique representation of the present moment has been retained, along with the form of a circle. But the conceptual basis has shifted from the traditional brush technique to a computerized, photography-based brush.

Does this conceptual enso mis-represent Japanese culture, and defame the tradition of enso drawing? Or is this a new way to directly point at the present across three cultures, to show imperfection, offering a flawed impression of global culture flows and a transnational state of consciousness that attempts to assimilate aspects of London, Tokyo, and contemporary Californian visual culture? Traditional enso are not iconographic, although the history of enso drawing includes enso-zo portraiture of zen masters inscribed within a circle halo, round insets within a larger composition. The Asama OG compositions are not enso-zo forms, but a new statement of non-zen master iconography featured on outside the circle, keeping the center of the composition as an empty void that attempts to train the globalized mind.

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Asama OG is meant to be unfixed in composition, an unorthodox position that confronts the viewer with a temporary assemblage of Asama OG components, reflecting the whims of the last active viewer. Instead of one fixed composition, the piece should be considered a revolving subset of 63 specific plates, an idea of combination, recombination, combinatorics, and not one fixed idea or gaze.

If certain iconography is not desired or problematic, it is excluded. Similarly with specific colors. There is no fixed form, only site-specific installations. There is no temporary form, or waiting for a given work to be finished. It's done! Or not done, as you wish. Asama OG refuses to be pinned down, and will only instantiate the latest request made of it.

The full set of prints is a kind of grid enso, a way to take a standard form like the circle or the four plates in Asama OG, and make something that represents the immediate present. Now, writ large and transformed from a simple circle of ink on one piece of paper to a mass of stone ensos, printed on paper.

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Meaning is still being discovered and examined in specific Asama OG compositions and in the arrangement of particular plates alongside each other to form larger groupings. This is an ongoing affair, where I learn more about the original cultural significance of both the Japanese iconography and methods of composition, and the London influences of color and dimensionality.

The Japanese art object and art forms used to create Asama OG are not examples of the primitive. The stone sculptures featured in the compositions are taken from the Nezu Museum as specific examples of master craftsmanship, on public exhibition as elite art objects by a known cultural authority. The enso drawing technique is centuries old and exemplary of refined aesthetic and spiritual history. The printing technique used is photogravure, an early form of photographic printing that is a well-established subgenre of high-art etching and intaglio printing. Instead, Asama OG is the juxtaposition of elite world cultures placed at the same height on the transnational aesthetic hierarchy.

Neither the Japanese art aesthetics nor London printmaking history referenced is used in a sexualized manner. The desire expressed is not physical, but of a meditative and inner quality. By making the composition unfixed, creating no recognizable final form, the artist invites any viewer into a conversation

with mutual looking, where the viewer can assist the artist in deciding the nature of Asama OG, to examine the transnational aesthetic choices and provoke commentary.