

Manabu Ikeda on the beauty of the mismatch

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Photo by Eric Baillies, courtesy of the Chazen Museum of Art.

The Chazen's artist in residence talks with us about the vivid landscapes he constructs with pen and ink.

For the past two and half years, Manabu Ikeda has been diligently working in a basement studio at the Chazen Museum of Art. Two floors above him in the museum, his 2013 work “[Meltdown](#)” displays the artist’s reaction to the [2011 Great East Japan Earthquake](#) and resultant tsunami and Fukushima nuclear disaster. At the time of the earthquake, Ikeda was [working in Vancouver](#) through a grant from the Japanese Ministry of Culture, but the effect of such a large natural disaster on his home country awoke his consciousness to the reality of the potential of human impact on the natural world. Earlier works such as 2008’s “Foretoken” depicted destruction on a massive scale, but at the time such a scene had been fantastical, a product of Ikeda’s vivid imagination and attention to extreme detail.

Now, Ikeda’s sprawling landscapes of debris and chaos—while still fantastical, and even somewhat humorous—have an even stronger tone of warning, forcing the viewer to look closely and reflect on our small position in a large world. The piece he’s working on now in the Chazen emphasizes this scale and Ikeda’s exploration of the human/nature power balance (and how that balance shifts across different cultures). It’s split into four panels that form a 10-by-13-foot whole, and the outlines

of human beings that do appear are miniscule, dwarfed by the incredibly detailed surroundings. Visitors can [view him at work in the studio for a few hours each week](#).

The day I visited Ikeda in his studio last week, his dominant right arm was in a sling, the result of a skiing accident over the weekend. “It’s totally numb,” he told me, pinching his right fingers. The injury may cause his residency to extend beyond its projected end date in August 2016, but when I walked in he was practicing sketching left-handed. He took a break to talk with me about his life in Japan, his experiences in America, and how the power of nature reveals itself in his incredibly imaginative drawings.

Editor’s note: Some of the wording in Manabu’s portion of the conversation has been edited for clarity, as he is not fluent in English.

Tone Madison: Your drawings show the influence of master Japanese painters. I’ve read that you’re influenced by [Hokusai](#) and [Ito Jakuchu](#) along with modern styles—anime and artists like [Hayao Miyazaki](#). How did you develop your style of fusing those influences?

Manabu Ikeda: I like Jakuchu and Hokusai’s painting, but I’m not influenced by their works. Sometimes I look at their work, and it’s so interesting—their composition is very unique, redesigning the wave, or mountains. I want to add that kind of imagination in the work, especially in shapes of waves, shape of mountains, shape of trees. All the Japanese painters are very good painters of detail work, so I sometimes look to their expression. But I don’t copy. I choose some points, some techniques, and I mix their technique and my technique in my mind and on the page.

And I love Hayao Miyazaki. Since I was a child, I used to watch his movies, and I grew up with his movies. But not only me—most of my generation, my Japanese generation, is influenced by his movies. It’s very, super popular. And I like his artwork, not as much as the story. It’s the artwork I like. His artwork is full of imagination. My favorite movie of his is *Spirited Away*. The most impressive scene is [the train running in the ocean](#). I see it and I’m so moved. [Miyazaki] connects, he incorporates two things that mismatch: train and ocean. I usually am thinking about two things that are mismatching, and I want to incorporate them. So [gesturing to a panel of his current work in progress], tree and train. Or a rice field on the branch of a tree. Flowers that are canoes. I don’t want to express just flower, or just train.

Tone Madison: Or in *My Neighbor Totoro*, I like the cat that’s a bus.

Manabu Ikeda: Yes! [Laughs.] I like that imagination.

Tone Madison: A lot of your work is about the human connection with the natural world, and with the environment. But in your own life you moved from Taku, in the Saga prefecture, which appears to be a smaller city, to Tokyo. How did that transition and your experience living in Tokyo affect your perception of our human connection to the natural world?

Manabu Ikeda: When I was eighteen years old I moved to Tokyo to go to [Tokyo University of the Arts]. It was my first time to live alone, so everything was a first experience. My city [Taku] is very small, so small in the countryside. And on the other hand, Tokyo is huge. Everything was different, the language, different culture, different people—well—the people are same, Japanese, but it’s different. But I was young and I hoped to go to university, so everybody worried about me because I was young, and it was the first time to have a single life in Tokyo. But I must adjust myself to Tokyo.

When I lived in Taku, nature was common, it was everywhere. I desired to live in Tokyo because the

city was exciting and stimulating. So, the first 10 years in Tokyo was very exciting and I hated the countryside, it was very boring, not fresh or stimulating. I didn't want to go back to Taku. But after ten years, I gradually missed nature and mountains and green. Because in Tokyo, it's almost all gray. Everything. Building, roads, trains, people. There are less parks, less forest, less river, ocean. Every ocean, river, or nature [in Tokyo] was not beautiful. So I sometimes went back to Taku and Saga.

I started my professional career drawing when I was twenty-six years old. And so I wanted to draw nature, because I missed Taku or Saga or countryside, and during my time in the university, I belonged to a mountain climbing club. Of course I stayed in Tokyo, but I saw a lot of artificial buildings or artwork, so I wanted to mix human nature, human beings and nature in my work. And I started to draw my ideal imagination in the work.

Tone Madison: After the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, people saw your 2008 work “Foretoken” as a prophecy of those events. How did the earthquake, the tsunami and the Fukushima meltdown, along with the fact that people thought “Foretoken” was prophetic, affect how you thought about your own work?

Manabu Ikeda: This work [“Foretoken”] is composed of four panels. But at first I made this work with only three panels [the three quarters of the work on the right]. I wanted to express a snow and ice world. So I started [on the right side] and I drew a lot of scenes about snow and ice, and sometimes debris or something. But gradually my idea was changed. First of all, I wanted to make only snow and ice, but at some time my idea changed to white powder, white chemicals in a wave, all these things like snow and ice. And I mixed old civilization being swept into the wave, or ice is melting down and an old city is coming up again. Or, now, the culture is being destroyed in a huge type of wave, like a tsunami or something. And so when I finished this work, I looked at this at a distance. And I felt it's too tight, no good. So I decided to add one panel on the left. I drew a small wave, and I made balance.

I didn't think about Hokusai's Great Wave. It's a coincidence. I didn't think about tsunamis or earthquakes. I didn't think about natural disaster when I drew it. But after the tsunami happened, many people said, “Oh, this work is like a huge tsunami, or Fukushima,” and I thought, “Ohh-h...yes.” I didn't mean it, but I expressed [in “Foretoken”] about a lot of people died, a lot of destruction, a lot of debris, and I was enjoying drawing it, because a huge tsunami or earthquake was kind of a fantasy in my mind. I've never experienced that huge tsunami. Of course I experienced big earthquakes many times in Tokyo, but I haven't seen the huge tsunami, destroying everywhere. So after the tsunami, I didn't want it to look like my work, because I expressed every catastrophe or disaster.

One year after the tsunami, I stopped thinking about a destruction world, and I wanted to draw much more funny, or only beautiful forests or ocean or something. But gradually my idea was changed because not only Fukushima, but natural disaster and climate change is a very important issue around the world. In 2011, I lived in Vancouver, and of course here [in North America] there are less disaster, less earthquake, no tsunami. But my country is like, surrounded by a lot of natural disaster. Volcano, tsunami, flood, typhoon. And I wanted to explain my feeling about coexistence with human beings and natural disaster. How can I live with disaster or tragedy as Japanese people or American people, or the whole world?

Tone Madison: In your experience living in America and Japan, have you noticed a difference between how Japanese people and American people feel about our connection to the environment and the natural world?

Manabu Ikeda: Yes. Very different, I think. Japan is very small, an island, and so many people, and less nature. Especially in Tokyo. So everybody is concerned about how to protect small nature in Tokyo. So, try to not use vehicle, or recycle, or not buy so much things. But on the other hand, Canada and the United States is *everything*, too much for us. Too much food, too much...everything. For example, when I go to some burger shop, I order little fry. *Small* fry. But they served extra, extra! And a napkin—so in Japan, usually, only one napkin in a bag. But here, five or six...everything extra. Too much. And of course a Christmas sale or something, everybody buys a lot. And I was surprised about when I saw garbage containers, huge containers, huge garbage. And every morning, or some mornings, a truck, like... *[mimes the contents of a dumpster being flipped over into a garbage truck]*. So it's totally different amount of garbage between Japan and the states.

And in nature, here in the United States and Canada, is *huge*. Huge, massive nature, and less people. So completely opposite of Tokyo. When I lived in Tokyo, I thought, people are destroying nature. But here people are protected from nature, people have a very small existence, nature is huge, great, or strong. People are weak. But in Tokyo, it's that people are strong, and nature is small. I'm weighing which one is true. Usually, I'm thinking about balance, a power balance of nature and humans. When I lived in Tokyo, I usually think about environmental problems, but here, it's made it difficult to think about it because I'm surrounded by great nature here. I know my attention to nature is decreased day and day because I'm getting used to the Wisconsin life, the American style life. If I throw this [napkin] in a field in Madison, nobody knows, nobody notices this garbage. But in Tokyo, if I throw this [napkin] here, everybody would pay attention.

Tone Madison: Meaning there's more nature here, but we don't pay as much attention to it?

Manabu Ikeda: Yes, yes. And of course, there's no earthquake, no typhoon. I don't have to pay attention every night for an earthquake, I don't have to pay attention to some typhoon. It's very different.

Tone Madison: Do you get the feeling that viewers think your work is just about Japan, or Japan surviving these disasters, and you think this matters more to the whole world? Like, do you think people mostly connect your work to just Japan?

Manabu Ikeda: I think so. I'm drawing this work for not only Japan. It's around the world. Sometimes I incorporate Madison. I want to add some humor, but also I want Madison's people to think about if Madison was destroyed, in such a natural disaster or tsunami. So *[pointing to details in the drawing]* if Bucky Badger was broken, or the advertisement of Wisconsin Dells was broken. If your town was destroyed or something, what do you think? I incorporate a lot of things in Madison. I think many visitors [to the studio] are trying to connect Japan and the tsunami in this work. But it's about all of the world.