

Binaries, Buddhism and the Art of Reminders in the Work of Jacob Hashimoto

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JACOB HASHIMOTO: Clouds and Chaos.
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AN EXHIBITION AT THE CROW Museum of Asian Art posits an intriguing binary in its title: *JACOB HASHIMOTO: Clouds and Chaos.* The exhibition statement characterizes clouds as historically offering many possibilities for aesthetic inspiration. Chaos, on the other hand, ought not be associated with disorder in this context (his work is anything but disorganized) but conceptualized within its related connotations of unpredictability, capriciousness, and changeability, signifying that here there are no fixed semantic referents in place. The exhibition, then, is about interpretation and possibility.

The twofold concepts of clouds and chaos therefore present the potential for an open and holistic understanding of the artist's work, framed amid the dualities inherent in the experience of his artwork.

Not simply closed systems of limited scope, binaries can be useful in exploring complicated matters of culture. Like binocular vision, they allow for a wider, three-dimensional view of the world. There is something musical about them, like alliteration and rhyme, which are literary devices that begin or end a thought with affective impact. The dialogue surrounding Hashimoto's art is replete with binary couplets such as "nature and technology," "painting and sculpture," "questions and answers," "natural and artificial."¹ Opposing contrasts such as these are used to help one fathom something elusive in his artwork, particularly his installations. In one sense,

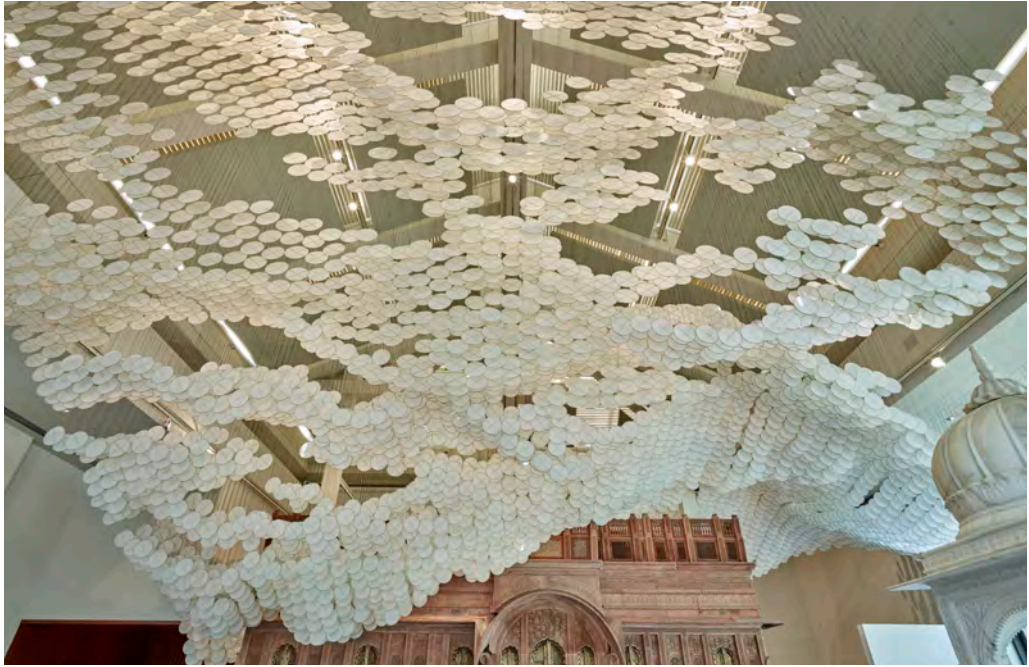


Figure 1 JACOB HASHIMOTO: *Clouds and Chaos*, Crow Museum of Asian Art, Dallas, Sept. 28, 2018 to Apr. 14, 2019. Installation view. Photo courtesy Crow Museum of Asian Art.

there is something straightforward about what Hashimoto does with his materials and the visions he produces. What you see is what you get: translucent geometric solids that aggregate into a meandering whole. Nevertheless, there is also a subtext worth exploring that permeates his artwork, something intangible but extant, exterior to its abstraction that requires the antagonism of dichotomy to flush out.

Binary perceptions are also consistent with the artist's heritage. Jacob Hashimoto is a contemporary American artist of Japanese and Irish ancestry who inhabits the space between east and west. Even here the idea of openness and holism is present. Jacqueline Chao, senior curator of Asian Art at the museum, defines Asian art in a more expansive manner than is usually the case. Asia is not a fixed destination or an ossified racial demographic, but something closer to

a worldview or an awareness.² A generative and inclusive conception of Asian art obtains with the installation of Hashimoto's central work *Nuvole* (2006-2018; *Italian*, "clouds"; Figure 1) and his latest intaglio and woodblock wall pieces. Although the artist retains a Japanese heritage, he does not appear wedded to exploiting its aesthetic lineage. That said, one cannot help but find an oriental overtone in his work, particularly with the use of bamboo and translucent paper or silk when creating his small kites, or the Zen-like quietude that saturates his artwork's ambiance. Hence his appearance at the Crow Museum.

In discussions of the artist's work, the terms "interaction," "experience," and "environment" proliferate. These words reference integration, unity, totality, a blending of space and substance, or a harmonizing of disparate parts. The cultural



Figure 2 Jacob Hashimoto, *The Dark Isn't The Thing to Worry About*, 2018. Resin, UV prints, bamboo, wood, acrylic and Spectra. Dimensions variable. Photo: Eric Swanson Photography, Courtesy of SITE Santa Fe.

designations of east and west are both real and constructed, yet his meticulously formulated structures paradoxically collapse these antipodes. The result is a unified aesthetic ecosystem that appropriately approaches the conceptual idyllic of an atmosphere. But how? What is happening here in the broadest terms? His art seems to ask for such universal thinking. This essay takes the occasion of the Crow exhibition to accept the tacit challenge of Hashimoto's artwork, to see how its dualistic undercurrents communicate an elusive holism within his imaginative schema.

Reminders

There is an old simile that states that artworks are like people: the more you put into them, the more you get out. However, the medium of installation often subverts

this dictum. Indeed, for those with conventional expectations of art, Hashimoto's work—although undeniably elegant—can still be difficult to personally engage with. The same might even be said of those familiar with contemporary art. If true, then this is ironic, for the works are explicitly created to engage people *as* people: "I was interested in shifting the responsibility for establishing a viewpoint to the audience instead of dictating what people were seeing. I wanted to give them a more substantial experience than standing before a painting at a fixed point—telling them that these are the things the artist wants you to see, how you're supposed to read them, and that these are things that optimize your experience."³ Artworks such as his *The Dark Isn't The Thing To Worry About* (2017-18; Figure 2) recently shown at SITE Santa Fe, at times drop down almost to the floor, confronting



the viewer face-to-face. But this directness does not guarantee intimacy, or understanding. Having worked in a corporation with a large contemporary art collection, I have first-hand experience with the incredulous reactions people can have to such abstract art installations. The artist might want his audience to have a say in what they see, but the danger is that people simply may just not know what they are looking at or why.

Yet, one way to come to grips with an experience that you have never had is to consider what it reminds you of. In this way, the interpretation of a given artwork can have a legitimate claim that its meaning is both subjectively and objectively true so long as one is being honest. If Hashimoto's work has trouble on an interpersonal level, then the opposite is the case with reminding—with causing a person to think of something. Reminding is a way of knowing suffused in openness and potentiality. What something reminds one of depends upon a person's viewpoint. For example, art critics naturally see other artists in Hashimoto's work, and have compared his wall pieces in relation to "Marcel Broodthaers's panels of eggs, or of the many media of Joe Zucker, or of El Anatsui's glamorously shimmering tapestries of liquor-bottle caps."⁴ In a quite obscure observation, *Skyfarm Fortress* (2014) has reminded David Frankel of Loren Madsen's *For Next* (1986), although Lego blocks come more to mind with his use of primary color and rectilinear shapes. Other installations at times recall stalactites (*Silence Still Governs Our Consciousness*, 2010) or Jenga towers (*My Own Lost Romance*, 2017).

Figure 3 Jacob Hashimoto, *Superabundant Atmosphere*, 2014. Silk, bamboo and cotton. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of Bildmuseet, Umeå University, Sweden.

However, these facile comparisons fail to capture the full depth of the artist's work. Murtaza Vali is one of Hashimoto's most sensitive readers. Vali's analysis supports the use of binaries to unpack Hashimoto's artwork. The artist states that he is less interested in space than how viewers interact with his work, but this claim appears misplaced.⁵ Vali sees what many others see, that "Hashimoto is continually negotiating a tricky balance between the part and the whole," but also sees the successful results of this negotiation: complexity, potential, and space:

*He is interested in vibrations not movements, in change of microscopic amplitudes. He materializes the calm before a storm, its particular charge. He mimics the rhythm of the breathing, beating body. Vibrancy of this sort animates those areas of the temporal and spatial scale that lie beyond human perception. It characterizes the subatomic and microscopic to the geological and cosmological.*⁶

Vali's contemplative analysis is not overstated. In general, installation art uses the phenomenological power of scale and the revelatory glory of intuition to make its statements. *Superabundant Atmosphere* (2005; **Figure 3**) and *The Eclipse* (2017; **Figure 4**) are prime examples of this, but it is true of Hashimoto's work as a whole.

Considering such metaphysical speculations, is it possible to find wisdom or philosophy in Hashimoto's artwork? Such spatial binaries immediately remind me of Deleuze and Guattari's book *A Thousand Plateaus*. Vali finds a humanistic connection to Hashimoto's work that I have argued is tenuous. But Vali's connection is a somatic and mimetic one, which ultimately does not seem to point to any feeling that would foster a sense of tangible humanity. Still, Vali reminds us of something human that Deleuze and Guattari critically insist upon, which is that "The human being is a segmentary animal. Segmentarity is



Figure 4 Jacob Hashimoto, *The Eclipse*, 2017-2018. Bamboo, paper, screenprints, and cotton thread. Dimensions variable. Photo: Timothy Schenck Photography, Courtesy of The Trust for Governors Island.



Figure 5 JACOB HASHIMOTO: *Clouds and Chaos*, Crow Museum of Asian Art, Dallas, Sept. 28, 2018 to Apr. 14, 2019. Installation view. Photo courtesy Crow Museum of Asian Art.



Figure 6 Xu Daoning, Chinese (ca. 970-1051/1052). *Fishermen's Evening Song*, Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). Handscroll; ink and slight color on silk, 19 x 82 1/2 inches (48.3 x 209.6 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 33-1559. Photo courtesy Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Media Services / John Lambertson.

inherent to all the strata composing us. Dwelling, getting around, working, playing: life is spatially and socially segmented.”⁷ *A Thousand Plateaus* is a complicated work of philosophy, but its overall message advances a number of models to conceptualize how space can be binary and integral simultaneously. Space can be smooth or striated (open or segmented), molar or molecular, nomadic or crystallized like a political State, rhizomatic or arboreal (horizontal or vertical), but the distinctions are not separations. Each suggests and entails the other. Hashimoto’s individuated kites are arranged into large-scale homogenous masses as if to broadcast this fact. These articulations have epistemological implications for Deleuze and Guattari. Similarly, if there is a deeper philosophical message in Hashimoto’s artworks, then it most likely found not in their monumentality as such, but in how they bring to mind other realms of thought, or similes of experience.

Space and Time

Roughly ten years ago (around 2009 in my estimation), Hashimoto began adding evocative titles to his art: “At some point, I started putting these really long baroque titles on things, mostly as a foil for people’s expectations.”⁸ The artist did not want fixed preconceptions biasing the viewer’s

experience. One sympathizes. Titles such as *The Dark Isn’t The Thing To Worry About* or *Silence Still Governs Our Consciousness* have a lyrical quality consistent with Hashimoto’s visual formulations, but are nevertheless *non sequiturs* in the end. An important point. For describing his art in words is as challenging as trying to verbalize the subjective effect of color or music. Something is always missing when interpreting one medium with another, like a syllogism that is missing a premise. As one cannot rely on logic, imagination is the only recourse. He states, “If you come to this thing that’s beautiful and poetic and bucolic, it almost feels like a celebration of impossibility.”⁹ Accordingly, his titles are imaginative, meant to open the closed binary of object and referent. Their meaning is dependent on one’s own inspiration, memory, and perceptions. Only then can a transliteration between media yield something useful.

Hashimoto’s *Nuvole* hangs in the Grand Gallery of the Crow Museum above an architectural façade and a white marble *chhatra* pavilion from Northern India (Mughal Period, 1526-1857; Figure 5). Its placement amid these Asian artifacts places the contemporary American artwork within the binary of east and west. In my view, its winding sinusoidal evocations are reminiscent of certain Chinese literati landscapes, such as the sweeping majesty of

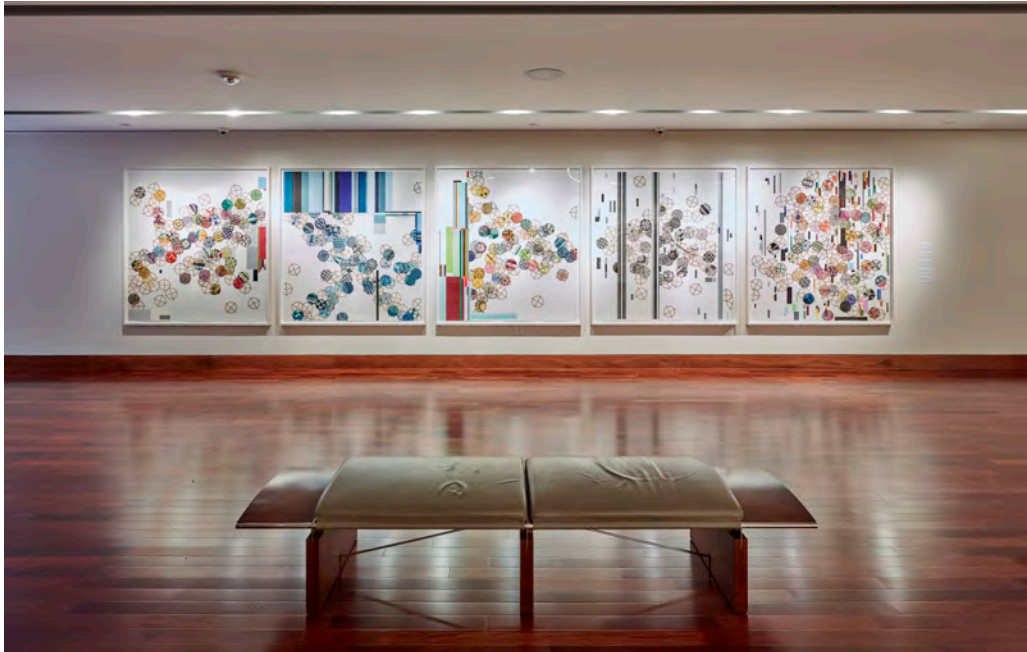


Figure 7 JACOB HASHIMOTO: *Clouds and Chaos*, Crow Museum of Asian Art, Dallas, Sept. 28, 2018 to Apr. 14, 2019. Installation view. Photo courtesy Crow Museum of Asian Art.

Xu Daoning's handscroll *Fishermen's Evening Song* (Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, c. 1049; Figure 6).¹⁰ Like *Nuvole*, which moves around different parts of the room, one views a handscroll image in segmented parts, and ideally never sees the image in its totality. Also like *Nuvole*, Xu's painting is nomadic, a transience of parts, a facsimile of the natural world, primarily created for contemplation by those outside of nature (officials living in a bustling city). The painting has thus both Buddhist and Daoist connotations. Arguably *Nuvole* does as well.

Hashimoto's large-scale work is reminiscent of another instance where the east and west have blended into an artistic statement. Sofia Coppola's film *Lost in Translation* (2003) is, in many ways, akin to the ambient stillness of his installations. For Coppola, time and space are as transient as any Buddhist conception of the world

one can articulate. Set in Tokyo, two archetypes of western life grapple with deep life problems amid the landscape of techno modern Japan. The environment itself reminds one of how ancient eastern wisdom can exist simultaneously with the light of contemporary western life. The heart of her vision is when the main character sings Roxy Music's "More Than This," whose lyrics (by Bryan Ferry) evoke the indeterminacy of temporal experience using the poetic imagery of ocean tides and fallen leaves blowing in the nighttime wind.

Indeed, the words are sung almost exactly at the middle point of the movie to highlight their importance (much as the main figure in a painting is placed in the center of its pictorial field). Coppola's film links together various vignettes and visions to create a holistic conception that is reinforced by the song: *life is fleeting, transient, incapable of*



Figure 8 JACOB HASHIMOTO: *Clouds and Chaos*, Crow Museum of Asian Art, Dallas, Sept. 28, 2018 to Apr. 14, 2019. Installation view. Photo courtesy Crow Museum of Asian Art.

being grasped in a single moment, but when the moments conjoin as a pluralistic entity then something solid and monumental emerges. Wind is a metaphor for spirit, invisible but alive with movement. On top of us but also within us. Like *Nuvole*, a handscroll, or a movie, it cannot be grasped as a singular, static experience. It is futile to try. For Buddhists, durability in things—in life—is an illusion. One must understand the self as empty of anything permanent. In this way, knowledge of the world simply means knowing that things change, that every moment is a world in itself. Hashimoto's kites, as motile catchers of wind or spirit, take on an utterly different significance when framed within this context. They are like Coppola's filmic moments, stitched together forms that denote movement. In the song, we are the leaves in the night. As Ferry's lyrics state of wind and time and knowledge

and life, *there is nothing more than this*. It is a spiritual message latent in much of Hashimoto's work.

An art history professor once told me that *Fishermen's Evening Song* should be experienced like classical music, with peaks and valleys that guide one's emotions and thoughts through time and space. This aural simile has some merit. Indeed, the term "song" is in the painting's title. Music has been called the language of spirit because it can harness emotion on its own terms *viz.* movement (*e-motion*), while Xu Daoning's fishermen are floating down a river, an archetypal metaphor of temporal flow. Hashimoto himself listens to classical music, which seems to have a tangential relationship to his work: "Symphonic music is actually much more integrated and it's more part of the fabric of life."¹¹ *Nuvole* crests and falls with some frequency as it moves throughout



Figure 9 Katsushika Hokusai, *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* (*Kanagawa oki nami ura*), also known as *The Great Wave*, from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (*Fugaku sanjūrokkei*), c. 1830–32. Polychrome woodblock print; ink and color on paper. 10 1/8 x 14 15/16 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Public domain: Open Access image.

the museum like a river. If the artwork can be understood sonically, then electronic music actually offers the best way to do so. New Order's *Blue Monday* comes to mind in this regard. Released in 1983, its emergence coincided with the transition from analog to digital life that increasingly took place during that decade. This transition has played a large part in Hashimoto's life and career (Figures 7 and 8).²² *Blue Monday's* serial progressions of both electronic sequenced notes and text are simply audio versions of the digital realm we live within today. Crow curator Jacqueline Chao noticed this digital aspect of the artist's work the instant she first saw his installations years ago: "I felt as though I had stepped into some sort of pixelated dream. I never forgot about this experience..." Here again, Hashimoto's kites fit well into a hermeneutic idiom, as they act like modular bits of electro-aesthetic

sound whose tone creates the enveloping movement for an entire space. This connection between the solid state and the atmospheric is more than an analogy. The song repeatedly poses an open-ended question to the listener: *How does it feel? Tell me now, how should I feel?* Its rhythm is laconic. The answer is undetermined, as is the subjective reaction to Hashimoto's spatial phenomenology.

Finally, an analysis of Hashimoto's work would be remiss if it did not address the overt subject matter of much of his art: clouds. As the Crow notes, these abstracted entities are intrinsic potentialities. If we think about *Nuvole's* potential within a Japanese aesthetic, then to what extent can *ukiyo-e* prints contribute to its understanding? Of course, these "floating world" images are Buddhist at their root, as they refer to the notion of impermanence. Hashimoto's floating



Figure 10 Jacob Hashimoto, *Armada*, 2011. Wood, stainless steel cable, steel, cotton. Dimensions variable. Photo: Michele Alberto Sereni. Courtesy of Studio la Città, Verona.

cloud-like forms therefore have a physical and thematic connection to Asian art. Probably the most famous *ukiyo-e* print is Katsushika Hokusai's *Under the Wave Off Kanagawa* (*Kanagawa oki nami ura*, c.1832; Figure 9). It is this woodblock that opens up the most poignant opportunity for comparison in terms of how Hashimoto deals with space. Indeed, *Nuvole's* wave-like forms recall a soundwave, but more so an ocean wave. Recall that in Bryan Ferry's song, it was the sea that offered us the truth of evanescent being. Deleuze and Guattari likewise claim that "The sea is a smooth space par excellence," by which they mean that its flowing substrate is one that defines what it means to move, to be nomadic, to be impermanent.¹⁴ Fishermen know this intrinsically. Life is made with water. It is a model of transient pliability. It is the essence of potentiality, the very genesis of clouds and

the paradox of vapor, which presents the ultimate binary as a billowing space created whole cloth, seemingly tactile yet temporary and ungraspable, chaotic, returning its liquidity as rain in an exchange that moves the atmosphere, harbinger of the winds, the eurhythmia of the sky.

The sea has called to people for time immemorial as a frontier. Hashimoto has long had a sense for this special space. *Armada* (1999/2011; Figure 10) consists of 724 wooden sailboats floating in the air by translucent threads. The vessels undulate vertically as if resting on the surface tension of some anonymous body of water. The sea is invisible here, as if to make its implicit connection to the sky that much more obvious. The non-specificity of place situates the installation's message on the plane of universal truth. The sailboats, like his kites, harness the wind—or capture the spirit—in

both the physical and metaphoric realms. Their monochromatic hue creates a continuum, which makes one feel a connection to everything in the room. This sense of connection is found in many of Hashimoto's installations. Likewise in Hokusai's print, the blue and white of the Great Wave are matched in color by Mount Fuji beyond and the people within the wooden boats, as if to demonstrate that everything shares the transient, impermanent, flowing nature of the sea. The humans in the boats hunker down. Do they feel the holistic connections that the artist presents? Perhaps that is what Hashimoto asks with his work as well. A

Endnotes

1. "Jacob Hashimoto: Selected Exhibitions," jacobhashimoto.com/selected-exhibitions, accessed February 15, 2019.
2. Telephone interview with Jacqueline Chao dated February 14, 2019.
3. Victor M. Cassidy, "Components of Human Folly: A Conversation with Jacob Hashimoto," *Sculpture* 37, no. 10 (December 2018), 21.
4. David Frankel, "Jacob Hashimoto," *Artforum International* 53, no. 5 (January 2015), 211.
5. Cassidy, "Components of Human Folly," 21.
6. Murtaza Vali, "Field Work/Cloud Study: The Art of Jacob Hashimoto," in *Jacob Hashimoto: The Eclipse* (Dubai: Leila Heller Publishing UAE, 2017), 12.
7. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 208.
8. Jacob Hashimoto, from an interview with Michael Abatemarco, "Don't Be Afraid of the Dark: Jacob Hashimoto," *Pasatiempo (Santa Fe New Mexican)*, October 5, 2018, www.santafenewmexican.com/pasatiempo/art/museum_shows/don-t-be-afraid-of-the-dark-jacob-hashimoto/article_b748d42e-3d85-5615-a540-7b77d1047daf.html.
9. Hashimoto, "Don't Be Afraid of the Dark."
10. See Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, art.nelson-atkins.org/objects/12243/fishermens-evening-song.
11. "Interview with Jacob Hashimoto," www.designboom.com/interviews/jacob-hashimoto-interview, accessed February 15, 2019.
12. Skye Sherwin. "Artist of the week 201: Jacob Hashimoto," *The Guardian*, August 2, 2012.
13. Natalie Gempel, "Go See *Jacob Hashimoto: Clouds and Chaos* at The Crow Museum of Asian Art," *D Magazine*, (October 2018). www.dmagazine.com/publications/d-magazine/2018/october/go-see-jacob-hashimoto-clouds-and-chaos-at-the-crow-museum-of-asian-art.
14. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 479.