

MORIMURA Yasumasa: Questioning the Cross-Cultural Mirror

Rosemary WRIGHT*

(Accepted May 22, 2000)

Key words : phenomenology, interdisciplinary, creative process, self-portrait, imagery

Abstract

The visual and verbal imagery of MORIMURA Yasumasa, a contemporary Japanese artist living in Osaka, Japan, is firmly based in selected aspects of the traditional aesthetics of Japan while, superficially, appearing to have assimilated Western canons. A brief overview of Morimura's life, thought and works reveals major points in his sensibility and demonstrates his seminal importance in the history the visual arts of Japan, as the first to explore the character of Japanese self-identity in terms of the genre of the self-portrait.

MORIMURA Yasumasa is a prominent Japanese artist whose work is recognized internationally and represented in major museums in Japan, America and Europe. Morimura's approach to creative expression is interdisciplinary. He couches his work primarily in the photography medium as well as computer-assisted photo-collage. To set up his images, Morimura deals with the three dimensional in the form of sculpture, often evolving into *tableaux* and he does performance, as well, for film and video.

The references in his content are even broader and, for adequate appreciation, require a search into cross-cultural creation myths; the character of the male actress and the female actor in the East and West. Morimura also writes in a variety of forms including autobiography, the fable, personal mythology and aesthetics.

The range of form employed is symptomatic of his exhaustive search into the phenomenology of the 'self', making him the first artist in the long history of Japanese art to focus on the development of the genre of the self-portrait, *jiga-zo*.

Morimura was born in 1951 and grew up in Osaka, Japan. He still lives in the family home in the Tennoji-ku area of East central Osaka. Within a two or three minute walk from the family home, one can be at his two-story *atelier*, very near the Tsuruhashi Station.

The Tennoji-ku area of Osaka was largely destroyed during the Allied bombing of Japan and one often hears the story of how the area was reoccupied by Korean residents as the borders of properties were difficult to reestablish and ownership impossible to prove since most official records had been lost in fires.

It so happened that the Morimura family property survived. For generations, the family had been respected tea merchants in this area and they remain so today. The family home is upstairs of a two-story, traditional Japanese wooden edifice, built after the war, with the ground floor business area facing directly onto a busy commercial street. Because the family had been well established in this area before and after

* Department of Medical Social Work, Faculty of Medical Welfare
Kawasaki University of Medical Welfare
Kurashiki, Okayama, 701-0193, Japan

the war, when cheap commercial spaces underneath the nearby elevated J.R. train tracks became available by lottery, the Morimura family was eligible for the draw. They won a space and so Morimura enjoys a cheap, large studio space — so large and so cheap by Japanese real estate standards that one can ignore the fact that the busy commuter trains circling Osaka run directly overhead, rattling the studio and canceling all other sound as they pass.

Morimura is an only child, born during a time when Japanese families were typically large. He describes himself as short and skinny; painfully shy; not especially attractive and not good at sports; a loner. As his neighborhood classmates enjoyed the routine of walking home from school together, every day following the same route, Morimura-*kun* would strike off on his own, looking for a different way home every day. He says he wasn't good at much of anything in particular and that he believes his classmates would never have predicted him for the level of success that he now enjoys. He does admit to being a good student and passing the exams for a top high school in Osaka. He read constantly and widely and seems to do so yet, despite his daunting exhibition schedule.

When it came time to apply for college, Morimura was torn between his interests in the visual arts and creative writing. He took both exams, scored highest on the art exam and so studied design for four years at the Kyoto City University of Arts, graduating in 1978. Morimura tells of his first job with a design firm after graduation. He reports that his shyness around people was so deep and painful that he could not engage other employees nor clients appropriately, so he left the position after a few months. He had wanted to be a teacher, but says that the thought of standing in front of a classroom with all those eyes on him was too terrifying to consider.[1]

Teaching at Kyoto City University of Arts was Ernest SATO, an outstanding photographer whom Morimura cites as giving him his strongest inspiration.[2] One can tell much about Morimura himself by reading his account of his relationship with this pivotal person, Sato *sensei*. Born in Japan in 1927, Sato's father was Japanese and his mother an Irish/Polish American. Morimura describes him as a very complex personality: "...the Irish temper, the Japanese emotion and the American puritanism...He would go through drastic changes of emotion...I think he was a born artist".[3] Sato was raised in Japan and graduated from Waseda University in Tokyo. Shortly after, WW II began and his mixed ancestry became problematic, he went to the States and entered Oklahoma University to study music and art. Sato also studied art history at Columbia University and remained in New York after graduation where he flourished in the heady atmosphere of artistic freedom of that time.

Joining the staff of *Life* magazine, Sato became well known for his photo of Nikita Krushchev pounding the heel of his shoe on the table at the United Nations. In 1963, Sato returned to Japan as staff photographer for *Life* magazine. While on assignment in Japan, he was staying in one of the oldest, most traditional and famous *ryokan* in Kyoto, "*Tawaraya*"[4]. Sato fell in love and married a beautiful woman from conservative Kyoto society, the third daughter of the family owning the *ryokan*. The couple was planning to return to New York when the young woman's father died suddenly. She inherited the *ryokan* and was obliged to continue the traditional family business, so Sato settled into Kyoto life.

Morimura sees Sato's life as cool, stylish, and dramatic. Sato himself was very fashionable at a time when Japan was not fashion-oriented. A dandy noted for his wardrobe, he was given to blazers with emblems, turtleneck sweaters, loafers, trenchcoats, carrying a cane and a Leica camera. Being a faithful Christian, he wore a cross as well as a gold necklace with a charm the shape of an apple. And on his wrist, he wore a thick gold chain. He parted his hair on the side, smoked foreign cigarettes, or occasionally an expensive domestic brand called '*Fuji*', and he spoke a number of foreign languages. "He was seen as something of a Humphrey Bogart or Cary Grant...even a little like Albert Camus..."[5] His professional visits around Japan were held in high regard and early articles were thought of as very trendy, featuring conversations

between himself and OE Kenzaburo[6], for example. Curiously, although Sato had been born and raised in Japan, he was referred to as that "...blue-eyed foreigner taking pictures of Japan..."[7] Although in the vanguard in many aspects of his public *persona*, Morimura describes Sato's more private photo images as having the subtle visual quality and sensibility of traditional *sumi-e* and *nihonga*.[8]

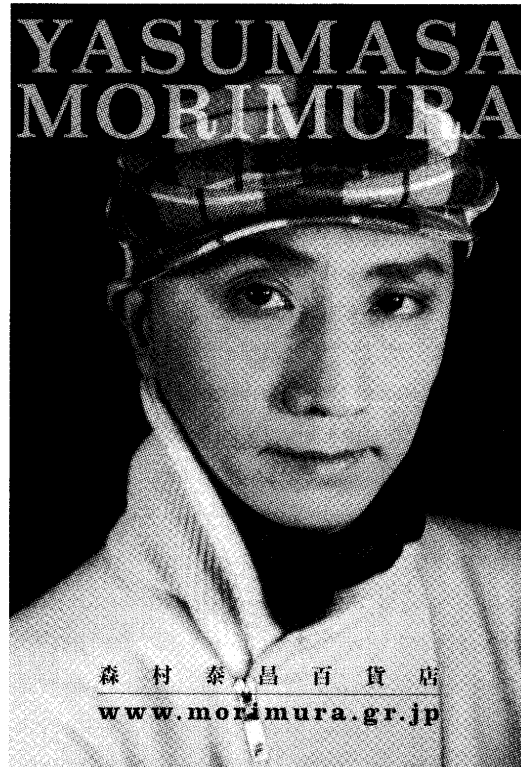
After deciding to live in Kyoto, Sato turned his interests toward art education and became a professor at Kyoto City University of Arts in the late 1960s, at the peak of that decade's student demonstrations. Because of the social unrest occurring, the curriculum was in upheaval. The vertical structure of the school, *tatewari*, was in open conflict with reformists supporting a more open, horizontal organization, more flexibility in school policy, and more interdisciplinary courses. A few more were, in fact, opened. Sato was active in this philosophical dialogue and convinced the university to open a film class. The film class offered by Sato was open to anyone in the university but he had a very small classroom which limited the number of students. People were on waiting lists for years. Morimura counts himself as very lucky to have gotten in and admits to going into culture shock, hearing Sato's modernist philosophy as an approach to photography. At that time, Morimura says that Japan had absorbed Western art only up to the 19th century. Sato's preaching of 'Modernism'[9] was like the arrival of another 'Black Ship'[10] but Morimura certainly absorbed Sato's admonition that one "...must love art to the bone!"[11]

In 1980, the university moved to a new location and Sato was given a much larger classroom because of his continuing influence at the school. After Morimura graduated, he became Sato's apprentice and assistant for eight years. During his lectures, Sato *sensei* typically held a vodka or a rum in his left hand and a cigarette in his right. It was Morimura's job to run to the store for his supply before each class.[12] Morimura recounts his memories of the lectures on Cartier-Bresson[13] given by Sato which emphasized the themes of duality, pairs and twin images as they occur in abundance in Cartier-Bresson's photos. He quotes Sato as asserting that "...Cartier-Bresson tells the truth, you just don't see it".[14]

Sato had become ill in 1970 and by 1980, he was in and out of the hospital. At the end, he was so weak, he leaned on the young Morimura to go up and down stairs. Morimura tells about one day when Sato opened the top of his cane to a little compartment and took some strong painkillers from it. Then, he remarked offhandedly to a passing student that he was quite tired and asked her if she knew what was happening in Eastern Europe. He told her that he was a Jew who was escaping. The girl looked very serious and asked what country he was escaping from. But Sato just walked on, vaguely, so Morimura smoothed things over by telling the student that he was only kidding.[15]

Sato, in his last years, had begun to talk a lot about his favorite place, Venice. He saw Venice as very alive, saying that it was born from the ocean and is a haven for people who have lost their country. St. Michael's, a famous cemetery there, has the graves of displaced artists like Daigieliev, Stravinsky and Vivaldi. According to Sato, the souls of those artists who have lost their country go to the waters around Venice to begin again. Observing that the ocean is where life started, Morimura wonders if Sato hoped that all the world's refugees could collect in Venice where there would be no race. Sato died in May of 1990 at the age of 62 and is buried in a beautiful grave at the Daitoku-ji Temple in Kyoto.[16]

This writer, on visiting Morimura's studio for interviews, was always softly taken by a photograph of Morimura which hung just at the top of the stairs as they ascend to the second floor balcony area from the ground floor studio. About 2' x 2 1/2', framed and matted, this black and white portrait of a college-age Morimura presents a handsome young man (despite his characterization of himself), a *bishonen*, beautiful boy. We see him from the shoulders up in a white dress shirt, open at the collar. Thick black hair, short and well cut, is casually tossed in soft waves. Out of a shallow misty space behind Morimura, two hands appear, resting softly on his shoulders. A guardian? Morimura's eyes are cast down, as though in contemplation while a blessing is being bestowed. After reading Morimura's account of his photography



teacher, and reflecting, the writer recalled a number of times remarking on the image, hoping for more information, but none was forthcoming. It looks like a private image and it apparently is. It remains a mystery. That portrait of Morimura is the only thing in the studio that seemed to stay in the same place, visit to visit. In fact, it is hung in a location that would be a traditionally appropriate site for a *kami-dana*.^[17]

The writer's impression of Morimura's studio is of a very clean, well-lit, freshly refurbished and white-painted space which is clearstory for half of the second floor. The total area may be around 2000 square feet. It would be difficult to exaggerate an estimate of the numbers of objects occupying this space which, nevertheless, appear absolutely in order. Large two dimensional pieces not circulating on exhibition are stored on the ground floor as well as parts of sets, *tableau*, mannequins, racks of costumes and scores of large plastic stackable containers full of clothes, accessories and props.

Most of Morimura's work itself seems to be done on the second floor. There one sees the rigs for lights, backdrop paper, photo and video equipment. There is also an abundance of things stored around all the walls of that floor. Amazing, given the treachery of the narrow staircase, on which more stuff is stashed and which one is obliged to ascend on all fours, pushing or dragging objects along.

A windowless, metal studio door opens directly onto the street. The entryway, in the absence of any transitional space, not even a sidewalk, feels abrupt. One leaves the teeming train station exit, walking a few meters along the footpaths in a congestion of Korean signs, lights and decorations. The cooking smells of garlic and Korean barbecue envelop. Busy sounds of an old, intimate, ethnic neighborhood buoy one along to the studio door but once inside, there is absolute quiet. In between trains, that is. The silence is felt.

Morimura does not keep a telephone in the studio. His business calls are taken by his mother in the family home, a few minutes away. There was never any staff present during our interviews. No office is there: an outstanding curiosity, given the evidence, at every hand, of extraordinary activity. Questions jump to mind. Who keeps all this paraphernalia sorted, stacked, hung, folded, filed, labeled, cleaned and repaired?

There was no darkroom on the premises, no evidence of painting nor carpentry going on, no technicians present. Who keeps his schedule? Who does the accounting? Who frames his work? Who attends to the shipping? Morimura is prolific and maintains a daunting schedule of appearances and exhibitions all over the world. In time, the writer learned that Morimura has a gallery in Nara which shows his work exclusively and does his sales, accounting, shipping and much of his schedule and promotions. Additionally, Morimura has a large network of professionals, such as wardrobe designers, computer specialists, editors, designers and a multi-lingual agent in Tokyo who handles all his international business. He collaborates with many other kinds of technicians in Japan and the United States with expertise as needed, on a case by case basis.

Morimura's working process typically involves private research and experimentation with a pre-existing image — it might be a painting, a sculpture or photograph. The image selected will most usually be very well known, easily recognizable in the modern world.[18] When a formal approach to an intervention into the appropriated image is found, Morimura's crew of photographers, make-up artists, costume specialists and props managers appear for a two or three day shoot — usually on the weekend and none but the staff are permitted in the studio at that time. The shoot will begin with Morimura acting out his previously developed ideas for the camera. After that, the crew, most of whom know his work well, are free to offer suggestions for further exploration of the scene at hand. Hundreds of negatives may be shot as a kind of performance unfolds at the direction of the crew. Morimura says that, often, he can see little of the scene, being in the middle of it and depends on his crew for suggestions and extensions of the themes present.

After the shoot, members of the crew, as well as other professionals participate in the editing of the images for exhibition or other purposes. So many images result from this process that they are used for other purposes, holiday greeting cards, personal gifts, and in one case, recycled into a *manga* (comic book) style publication called *Kisekae Ningen Daiichigo*, 1994 (*Number One Dress-up Doll*, 1994). His working method combines his own sense of direction with the feedback from others in an open, collaborative style of creative decision making.

The studio space, during the interviews, was serene, Morimura relaxed and engaging. There was always a playful arrangement of small objects and a fresh flower on the small, round, wood table we used for the interviews. He unfailingly offered presents of his publications, articles, videotapes and signed photos. On the first visit, the writer brought Morimura a number of *omiyage*, souvenirs, from New York City, among them a softball sized gold candle, having previously noted in his imagery his fondness for metallic spheres.

At that first meeting, with the casual elegance of a practiced tea master, Morimura offered that he wanted to make tea for me and excused himself to the rear of the second floor space where he has a small kitchenette. Reappearing, he presented me with a *chawan*, tea bowl which he said that he had made himself and he remarked that it was a bit unusual. I appreciated it for a moment before drinking the tea. It was small, with a beautiful, mottled strawberry glaze, a very classic shape with straight sides and a small foot.

Taking down the *matcha*, green tea, in grateful drafts, I became aware of a rounded, pinkish object emerging through the frothy green tea. A wayward steamed shrimp? Panic. Should I just swill this unknown, foreign object down to avoid humiliation for my host on this first visit? Risking all, I tipped the bowl for a secret gulp but the object was stuck to the bottom. Glancing at Morimura, I thought I caught a glint of the imp in his eyes. There was nothing to do but have a good look into the bowl at my lips. There, inches from my own, was a perfect ceramic replica of Morimura's own notable nose.[19] Smiling, he said, in English, "At last, we are face to face."

The subject of the contemporary dance form, *butoh*, came up during that interview. Noting the writer's great interest, Morimura sent information about the April 22nd, 1995, performance of "*Ugetsu*"[20] in

Osaka. This piece was a recent collaborative version of an earlier piece by MARO Akaji and his *butoh* troupe called “*Dai Rakuda Kan*”, “Great Camel Battleship”. Making his entrance onstage, Morimura, in the guise of a curly blonde Marlene Dietrich, rode a sidecar beside MARO Akaji on a huge, black, Harley-Davidson. Akaji,[21] a big man, was in the traditional all-over white make-up of *Kabuki*, *Noh* and *butoh*. He was wearing a strapless, dusty blue ballgown of uncertain vintage and a huge black wig, possibly inhabited, of tragic color and texture. Posed serenely sidesaddle on the top of the sidecar, Morimura wore a shiny black elastic teddy, white collar and cuffs, black tie, top hat and fishnet stockings with silver strap high heels complimenting excellent legs. Akaji, in a slow ritual, circled the stage on the rumbling Harley while Morimura held out, in his right hand, the gold candle from New York. It was lit and trailing a light smoke through a frantic movement being done by the *corps* of dancers, which otherwise seemed oblivious of the motorized duo. The interviewer asked Morimura why he had had interest in collaborating with MARO Akaji. He replied that he did it hoping to get closer to the unique character of Akaji’s creative thought processes.[22]

Morimura has done extensive investigations into the sensibilities of a number of other artists such as Diego Velazquez (1559-1660), Edouard Manet (1832-83), Vincent van Gogh (1853-90) and Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), but none as thoroughly as Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-69). Morimura notes that the self-portrait emerges most strongly at the time of the Renaissance and that few seem to exist before that time. Referring to da Vinci’s self-portrait of 1512, he observes that this unflattering (in his opinion) self-portrait started the whole *genre* of the self-portrait and that subsequently, a variety of concepts evolved. It may seem that many artists have done self-portraits but that is not true, Morimura avers. According to Morimura, they have been relatively rare. Actually, he says, 99.9% of the world of images has been in the form of landscape, portraits of others, or abstractions. The self-portrait has been the ‘black sheep’ of painting.[23]

It was Rembrandt who was most invested in the idiom and Morimura reflected deeply on the changing and tragic conditions of his life through a study of his self-portraits. But Morimura offers that another among Rembrandt’s works stands out in significance for him: “Dr. Tulp’s Dissection Lecture” 1632. He writes:

Dr. Tulp is dissecting a corpse with onlookers. Today we might think this strange but during Rembrandt’s time, dissection was a medical breakthrough...I find the thoughts of this time interesting. Inside the body was a black mystery. Dissection involved putting a knife into the black mystery to bring it into the light...the purpose of dissection is to bring light to the inside of the body. The purpose of the self-portrait is to bring light to the dark mystery of human thoughts and cause them to appear on the paintings, described by the light...Dissection involves the body but the self-portrait involves the mind. In dissection, a knife is used on another but in the self-portrait, one dissects ones own thoughts. Rembrandt left many copper prints...he used himself as a model...[for] research in human expression...useful for his later portrait work...at this [earlier] time in his life he was shining a light on a corpse and revealing a human body...the body that was in front of the surgeon, Rembrandt, was just a body, no individuality.

The copper print series is showing the side of Rembrandt that is expressive — the actor. He put himself on the dissecting table, aimed a light and cut a little deeper. Many artists try a self-portrait but they go on with a separate style and do not return. They have gone as far as they can go. But Rembrandt went farther and it was very dangerous. One can be damaged. The more one is cut open, the blood one once thought was beautiful now gushes. You can find the root, the sickness inside oneself when one cuts deeper.[24]

Morimura describes his approach to image-making as “...open self-portraiture” which seems to suggest a fundamental difference from the portraiture of Rembrandt. He has said that “Individualism for [Western] people is a natural phenomenon...It is not for the Japanese...I also think about Japanese identity... I don’t know what identity is. It’s very complicated”.^[25]

Morimura sees the strong emergence of the self-portrait during the last half of the 20th century and, especially, the popularity of the genre during the last two decades, as curious and ventures that we may be just at the beginning of the self-portrait era. “I haven’t met the person yet who could tell me enough about the reason for this phenomenon”.^[26] He reflects on the history of the artist’s encounter with the mirror:

There was one artist in the studio...looking at the canvas, painting a picture. On the other side of the canvas, there was a model. Where the painter is, it is quite dark. There is a lot of light near the model. The artist constantly looks at the model. The model is constantly watched by the artist...But every now and then, in a dark corner of the studio, there is something that shines, it glistens. The painter looks into the corner and he finds another person in that dark corner of the studio. He is stunned...He thought of himself as the person who was hiding in the dark corner, but somebody else was peeking at HIM! The painter becomes curious about who this might be and takes a closer look. He is then stunned to find himself in the mirror because his face is so unbearably ugly. He had been hiding in a safe shadow, being protected from others. His image of himself was sullied and muted because he had too much desire to watch somebody else and avoid being watched, himself. Therefore, he saw himself for the first time. Most painters would think of this as an aberration and cover the mirror with a cloth. Another artist with a curious mind might sketch himself a bit, or he might change his appearance to look better, to change the ugliness in the mirror. That would usually be the end of it. If the artist does more, it destabilizes the balance of the watcher and the one watched. It destroys that security. Alternatively, the position of the painter might change. There was always a mirror in the studio, always, but the painter ignored it historically...The mirror is an evil spirit, a devil. Once you get hooked, it will drag you down. You cannot convince the mirror by making yourself look good on the outside, it’s not convincing. It emphasizes all the pores, the little defects you are not confident about. No matter how confident you look on the outside, it magnifies negative details and waits for your reaction...Mirror, mirror on the wall, you were right, all along. I have been telling you that you were wrong, but you were right. Mirror, mirror, I would never disagree. I will accept all your opinions.^[27]

Morimura offers that he is doing something a little different than Rembrandt. “...the world has changed so the shapes and forms I use will be different than they were in Rembrandt’s day...I am taking over from Rembrandt in doing another kind of self-portrait that people can see”.^[28]

...Rembrandt had only one mirror in front of him. In my case, I use the Japanese triple mirror or the kaleidoscope; multiple mirrors with the reflections reflecting each other — very complicated, in my case. In Rembrandt’s case, he used one mirror and looked deeper and deeper inside it. He went deeper and deeper inside himself to analyze himself. I’m a little different. On the surface of the mirror, I can see the everyday Morimura but when I use the triple mirror, I see the side of my face, the top of my head and other points of view that I normally don’t see. Sometimes I have a great discovery about myself...and the stranger parts of myself, I gradually accept as part of me. That’s the kind of relationship I have with the mirror. I’m doing the

self-portrait to discover various parts of myself. It's not for looking at the surface of myself to see how I appear. By looking at all possible angles, I may find some other person that I can become. If Rembrandt's self-portrait intended to deeply analyze and understand himself, then my self-portrait is to discover the parts of me that can change, the changeable part. I want to find something I can change into. That's the kind of self-portrait I am doing.[29]

Morimura is well known for his unprepossessing presence as well as his kindness to his friends and the people who work for him.[30] He shares that public appearances are always difficult for him and that if he could communicate his ideas with words, he wouldn't be making pictures.[31] Indeed, the writer often finds Morimura's hands cold and clammy on greeting him at openings. He says he doesn't like being in public and his "...nervousness always wins." He doesn't like promoting himself, either.[32] His friends gathered for a gala opening at the Yokohama Museum of Fashion fondly remember one event when he was scheduled for an introduction and panel discussion during the opening. Morimura was absent while the other five artists in the exhibition were up front, promoting themselves outrageously for the media gathered. The museum staff spread out for a search and found Morimura sitting downstairs on the floor of his film/video installation, unconcerned, answering questions from some youngsters. The character and quality of communication is important to Morimura. He writes:

The traditional Japanese mode of communication is with the heart, not words. We say this is the world of *ah-unh*, wordless communication. It is not the world of vocabulary. One must be able to analyze the space between two words. One must know the difference between *ah* and *unh*. One must analyze the air to know what's happening.[33] When there are longer pauses between lines, there is silence. An enormous weight can be in this silence. For example: "I love you"; "I'm sad"; "I want to kill somebody"!...if the communication goes beyond words, it goes to telepathy. On the other hand, in the Western World, one must make up one's mind — white or black? Silence means 'uninterested' or 'unconcerned'. Silence does work in the same way in the Western world. One cannot use the 'silence spiderweb' to draw people's attention. It doesn't work. It becomes an absence of communication in the 'yes/no' world. I want to show you an example of the difference between the 'yes/no' world and the '*ah-unh*' world. It's an episode dealing with the world of 'beauty'. If you translate the Japanese word '*bi*', the dictionary will supply the word 'beauty', but that meaning is not always true. I learned a lesson by having the title of my 1996 show, "The Sickness Unto Beauty" translated into English. The first translation was "Fatal Disease Leading to Beauty". The American translator made the comment that this was a 'word for word' translation and offered, instead, to 'interpret' the title into "Suffering That Leads to Art". For me, the meaning of the word '*yamai*'[34] was more psychological. I was happier with the second interpretation except for the word '*bi*'. I didn't want the meaning normally accorded the word in art. I wanted a more common world like 'love' or 'life'. Everyone looking at a fully formed cherry blossom will say "It's beautiful!" Beauty comes not only from art but from the world of everyday life. If you translate the word '*bi*' into art, it stays in the world of art. That's not what I'm looking for and my American interpreter understood. But the word 'beauty' is not used in the same positive way in English.[35] For example, *utsukushii*, beauty, should be translated as 'artistic'. In English, the word 'beauty' is often linked to 'pretty' or some positive aspect of appearance — something outside, superficial. The translator also mentioned the word 'aesthetics' but that word is more academic, not belonging to the common world. Then I remembered a conversation with a Japanese scholar studying French culture. I was telling this scholar that I was interested in beauty. When he

heard the word 'beauty', he started to talk about Greek philosophy. Our conversation was going in opposite directions. In Japanese culture, the word 'beauty' can fit into aesthetics, art, and the experience of beauty in the everyday life. In the Western world there is a lot of difference between these three words and worlds. In the very simple aspect of Japanese culture that uses '*ah-unh*', people don't like definite boundaries separating or isolating anything. There is a big difference between this and the 'yes/no' world. How is it possible for a Japanese artist to communicate outside Japan? I believe that Japanese artists must learn to do it. The whole world wants to hear different concepts of art. The desire is global. At the end of the 20th century, the world has become smaller and closer. At the end of the 20th century, Western art became very influential. But the world has so many different people and places, many different kinds of art are being made. Whenever Western art lacks vitality, people realize that there are other arts in the world. Nowadays, artworks are not 'patented' in the Western world.[35]

Morimura, like all Japanese artists with formal study of the arts in higher education, is well versed in Western art forms. With regard to his remarks above concerning the difficulty of translation between Japanese and English, the writer notes that in the interview discussions, Morimura used '*ahto*', 'art', a Japanese-English word that has been put into service, appropriated, to serve as a reference to those practices that are based in Western values and sensibility. Those Western-based art forms in painting and sculpture are also referred to as '*Yoga*', while those based in the Japanese tradition are called '*Nihonga*', as explained elsewhere. The ideas and concepts characteristic of Western art do not have a satisfactory verbal parallel in the Japanese language, so, '*bijutsu*', 'the way of beauty', is sometimes mistranslated as 'art'. There being no English word to represent a parallel experience for '*bijutsu*',[36] the English language word has been appropriated but the foreign listener should note that the word '*ahto*' is not used as a blanket term for all art, as in the West.

The 'look' of Morimura's imagery would seem to place it in the *genre* of *Yoga*, a sensibility of Western origin. Indeed, the first time Morimura's work was noted in the United States was at a 1989 exhibition at New York University's Grey Gallery: "Against Nature: Japanese Art in the Eighties". As one moved through that show, one could often hear remarks from other viewers about how this contemporary Japanese work is only derivative of Western idioms. The writer offers that, without further education, one can only see no farther than their own cultural boundaries. It's like asking a fish about water.

Morimura does classify himself as a conceptual artist, a Western term, in his 1996 publication, *Bijutsu no Kaibo Gaku Kogi*, interpreted as The Anatomy of Art Lecture. [37] But he goes further to insist that his concept and his ideas are only one part of his creative process and that he "...is very Japanese." [38] He illustrates this using the model of the art student critique. The student, on presenting work to the faculty is expected to verbalize a goal, an idea, intention or concept supporting the imagery. He offers that this is a Western approach to teaching and that students are often stymied, silent, or worse, proffering remarks like "I don't know why...I just DID it!" Morimura notes that Japanese students, raised in a culture that values ambiguity, are not prepared for critical thinking. He muses further: "If one really had a definite concept, does one really need to make art? One often creates something to find out what one DOES think!"

Morimura thinks that the art critique should be changed in format. Rather than the confrontational student-teacher-artwork triangle, he offers that a round-table arrangement is best. The artwork should be in the middle with seating of students and teachers all around it in a circle. The artist, *sakusha*, would then be in the position of asking the others: "How does the work look from your direction?" One can imagine the responses. Student 'A' might say that the work looks 'whitish', but Student 'B' sees it as black. Student 'C' might assert that it is a circle, while Student 'D' observes a triangle. So, it is no longer

a ‘critique’, but a round-table discussion with multiple points of view offered. Morimura continues:

It’s not necessarily true that a work of art has only one meaning, and one cannot say that the artist’s concept is the only possible meaning...Art would look different to different people...To have everyone ‘brainstorm’, sharing different ideas about it is richer than just having the artist force his idea on everyone. In the art critique, the art is a message from the artist, based on the artist’s concept and carries a big weight. On the other hand, at the round table talk, it becomes a place and time where art brings conversation. The artist’s ideas and concepts are only a few of the elements to be discussed. Before comparing to see which might be better I want to say that I believe Japanese-born artists should not be forced to express as forcefully as the Western artist.[39] I wish the world was not set up like that. I also wish that the students would not be forced to be as aggressive as the Western artist.[40] My ideas and concepts, my art itself, is not made, not suitable for the art critique. I work more on the model of the ‘round table’...I am of a different type. I guess I am more traditional. I’m definitely Japanese.[41]

Morimura personal values are clear as he describes the process of making one 1995 exhibition of calligraphy works, *shodo*. He says that because it was *sho*, calligraphy, it was very traditional and very Japanese but that he only found out later how it happened to be traditional.[42] First collecting members who were interested in participating and in coming to the exhibition, he thought about them individually and made a *sho* for each person, rather like a personalized letter. Morimura says he wasn’t trying to define what *sho* should be, nothing fancy. He thought of it as a simple, traditional show.

But one of the members of the group, on hearing the plans for his *sho* exhibition, approached Morimura to do a special piece for her. Her mother had recently passed away and she was feeling an *on*, a burden, or a ‘leading’. Because of her *on*, Morimura said he was a bit tense while making her *sho*. But he says he did his best and she sent him a letter saying “You saved me!” Morimura says he felt like crying. “Maybe, with art, there is the possibility to help other people...I find this very motivating”.[43] He reflects:

A letter, part of everyday life, *sho*, the piece, and death-related feelings and thoughts which are religious experiences, are all put together. Daily life, art and religion — the border between these three is fuzzy...very different than in the West which makes a separation between each category. That’s what made the work very Japanese.

It’s like the word *bi*, which cannot be translated into English. In the English *bi*, there is an ‘everyday’ beauty and the *bi* of *bijutsu*, which is art, and the philosophical *bi*, which is aesthetics. The idea of *bi* is compartmentalized into separate categories: ‘beauty’, ‘art’, and ‘aesthetics’ ...In Japanese, *bi* is fuzzy. I wonder if we are supposed to change this ambiguity. What’s so wrong with being vague? What’s wrong with being Japanese? [And] Can one really say that being traditional is not being fresh?[44]

References

- MORIMURA, Y. *Bijutsu no Kaibo Gaku Kogi*. Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1996.
- Roland, A. *In Search of Self in India and Japan: Toward a Cross-Cultural Psychology*. Princeton University Press, 1988.

Notes

1. Interview, February, 1995.
2. Morimura Y., 1996, p. 46 ff.
3. Ibid.
4. *Tawara* are the old fashioned straw bags made to hold rice. So, an English translation might be 'straw rice bag hotel', which does not convey the warm, homey charm of the Japanese. This *ryokan* is still among the most venerable in Kyoto.
5. Morimura Y., 1996, p. 69.
6. Japanese Nobel laureate in literature (1935-).
7. Ernest Sato did not have blue eyes. Morimura, 1996, p. 63.
8. Ibid. *Sumi-e*: Black ink and wash: *Nihonga*: Traditional Japanese style painting on *washi* (handmade mulberry paper) with natural, water-based pigments.
9. Term referring to the period in Western art up to 1960 dominated by an overarching European aesthetic and American formalism.
10. Morimura, 1996, p. 63 ff.
Referring to the arrival of Commodore Perry in Tokyo Bay in 1853, which began a period of great change in Japanese culture.
11. Op. Cit., p. 100.
12. Ibid.
13. Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908), French, founder of Magnum Photos in 1945, which was critical in establishing the medium of photography in its own right as a fine art form.
14. Morimura, 1996, p. 77.
15. Op. Cit., p. 65.
16. Ibid.
17. Traditional *Shinto* house altar.
18. Possibly the first example of an image appropriated by Morimura is the "Walking Man" by Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), as seen reflected in Morimura's pair of figures: "Portrait" (*L'Homme Qui Marche*) I and II, 1986-1990. Most of the images that Morimura appropriates have been European. A large number have been American and a minority, Japanese.
19. Morimura's *chawan* was on exhibition at his 1998 retrospective of works dealing with art history seen at the Tokyo Museum of Modern Art.
20. Translated as: "Tales of Moonlight and Rain", this is a *monogatari*, a collection of nine folktales of the supernatural written in Osaka by a monk, UEDA Akinari in 1776. This collection has been very generative for generations of Japanese artists, being the inspiration, at a minimum, for a number of *Noh* plays, two films and this *butoh* dance, which the writer counts among the five most awesome productions she has ever seen.
21. Famous artists, actors and writers in Japan are often called by their given names.
22. To the writer, interview, February, 1995.
23. Morimura, 1996, p. 195.
24. Ibid.
25. Morimura Yasumasa, "Meet the Artist" lecture and slide show, Hara Museum, Tokyo, December 3rd, 1990.
26. Morimura, 1996, p. 185.
27. Op. Cit., p. 216 ff.
28. Op. Cit., p. 224.
29. Ibid.

30. The writer has lectured at the Osaka College of Film and Photography where Morimura has taught from time to time. He has also hired students and professional from this school for various projects. The writer hears that he is respected and loved.
31. Morimura, 1996, p. 154.
32. Op. Cit., p. 167.
33. References the concept of *Ma*, a term used in Japanese aesthetics which is based in the Shinto concept of the dynamic potential of negative space.
34. *Yamai*: noun. A bad habit; a weakness; a passion; a long illness; an incurable illness; one's besetting sin.
35. Morimura, 1996, p. 145 ff.
36. Recalling Dr. Alan Roland's assertion that it may be that cultures separated by great cognitive distances do, in fact, live in different orders of empirical reality. Roland, 1988, p. XV.
37. Morimura, 1996, p. 168 ff.
38. Ibid.
39. The writer notes a contradiction here with the earlier assertion that Japanese artists showing abroad must learn how to express themselves as clearly and forcefully as the Western artist.
40. Op. Cit., p. 168.