

***Wabi-Sabi*²⁵:**

A Suite of Transient Moments

Reflection Statement

Word Count: 1500

²⁵ the Japanese aesthetic philosophy of finding beauty in imperfections, profundity in nature and accepting the natural cycle of growth, decay, and death.

When the Japanese mend broken objects... they believe that when something's suffered damage and has history it becomes more beautiful.

– Barbara Bloom

My suite of short stories mediated through the Japanese philosophy of Wabi-Sabi and its seven principles, questions traditional philosophies of perfection, celebrates human imperfection and challenges classical Eastern aesthetics of beauty. The structure of seven stories reflect the seven principles of the aesthetic Wabi-Sabi in finding beauty in imperfections. Through the contrasting aesthetic and contextual frameworks of these seven stories, I mirror the broken nature of orthodox Japanese perfection anchored within the conventions of Wabi-Sabi. Through a constructivist perspective, I explore the contextual fluidity of perfection. Focusing on the classical quest for perfection, displaced by the contemporary embrace of human insufficiency due to 21st post-war disenchantment and the ontological struggle to retain pre-war Confucianism in a westernised modernity, I celebrate the illusion of 'perfection'.

The combination of micro-fiction and short stories of various length highlight the fluidity of perfection from its traditional origins to its contemporary hybrid, mirroring the brevity of human thought and its susceptibility to change. This is supported by my research on Wabi-Sabi credo, particularly Juniper's ideology of Wabi-Sabi encompassing a "combination of the aesthetic beauty of breakage²⁶." The shift from impeccable Western beauty to the multifarious Wabi-Sabi idea, an "Eastern beauty

²⁶ Juniper, A., 2003. *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*. Vermont: Tuttle Publishing.

of desolateness²⁷”, mirrors the fragmented nature of my suite and multifaceted appreciation of imperfections varied in each story. The manipulation of traditional form rooted within historical Eastern values mediates contemporary ideals and presents a naturalistic portrait of the 21st zeitgeist adapting to the evolution of perfection. The lingering trauma of war yielded a disillusioned reconstruction of perfection which was philosophically incomprehensible in a rapidly changing society that alienated those who refused to move forward. Thus, my suite observes the redefinition of perfection, specifically the shift away from conventional ideals surmised from the post-war inability to reconcile with pre-war tradition.

This project was born from my interest of Japanese culture, which led me to read Pinball, 1973²⁸ and Flash Fiction International²⁹ and other works of micro-fiction including Raymond Queneau’s Exercises in Style³⁰ and the works of Ernest Hemingway. I discovered that micro-fiction and short stories “create a unified impression”³¹ of modern ‘perfection’ through fragmentation, leaving a “brief sensation” of Wabi-Sabi’s ephemerality. The choice to include micro-fiction stories in my suite was to subvert the traditional monolithic perspective embodied within a traditional short story with the multifaceted representation of the human condition which I hope to express. Micro-fiction stems from the notion of conveying a bona fide story in extreme brevity, where “paradoxically it makes fiction feel expansive³²”, articulating the ineffable depth of 21st century existentialism. The transience of Wabi-

²⁷ Richardson, J., 2017. *Tofugu*. [Online]

²⁸ Murakami, H., 1980. *Pinball, 1973*, Japan: Kodansha International.

²⁹ Thomas, J., Shapard, R. & Merrill, C., n.d. *Flash Fiction International*, London: W. W. Norton and Company.

³⁰ Queneau, R., 1958. *Exercises in Style*, London: Gallimard.

³¹ Menrath, J., 2003. *Definition of the Short Story*.

³² Galef, D., 2016. *Brevity: A Flash Fiction Handbook*. Columbia: Columbia University Press.

Sabi emulates the subjectivity of human experience and can be conveyed through the fluid boundaries of micro-fiction.

My work targets a universal contemporary 21st century audience by examining the existentialism common to human experience, born from the incomprehension of perfection and ontological dissonances between past and present values. Thus, I consider my work to reach an audience without cultural constrictions, as the historical framework of post-WWII Japan mediates a representation of a universal malaise towards conventional perfection. I believe 'The Matador Review', an online literature quarterly, is ideal as it is a self-proclaimed 'alternative magazine'³³ that promotes unconventional works or Australian journals such as 'Wet Ink'. Both publish stories differing from the normative story-telling method, mirroring the unorthodox nature of my work with the uncommon appreciation of imperfections and form of micro-fiction.

Conceptually my work was informed by my studies in Module A in English Advanced, specifically in F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby³⁴. The excessive opulence of modernist symbolism that led to the abstraction of meaning reflecting the inability to represent past ideals and a disillusionment perpetuated by idealism instigated my interest. Specifically, the impact of changes in context inherently leading to shifts in values is mirrored in my concept, the incredulity at pre-war perceptions of 'perfect success' against the Wabi-Sabi admiration of flaws.

³³ Lachausse, J., 2016. *The Matador Review*. [Online]

³⁴ Fitzgerald, F. S., 1950. *The Great Gatsby*. America: Charles Scribner's Sons.

My related text in English Extension One *After the Bomb* Elective, Takahata's semi-autobiographical film Grave of the Fireflies³⁵, expanded my knowledge of post-war disillusionment triggered from the verisimilitude of truth. This existentialist irresolution from a demolished reality prompted a collapse of 'perfect' traditional Japanese values. Takahata's film emphasises Japan's repression of war history and subsequent ontological atrophy of 'perfect' values such as religious faith prompting me to investigate the segregation of religion and state in Japan's post-war constitution within my last story in my suite, the humanisation of a Shinto God demeaned to a mortal during the capitalist 1980's economic boom conveying the degradation of religion post-war.

Inspired by Takahata's cinematic synthesis of the realism of war violence against the surreal incomprehension of brutality, I developed my concept and style through novelist Haruki Murakami's magic realist story Sputnik Sweetheart³⁶. The realistic portrayal of the world against a mystical chimera led to my fourth short story, A Lone Devotee's Guide to Creating Senbazuru³⁷, being written with the essence of a fable. Takahata's surrealist depictions of human incomprehension mirrors Murakami's form of magic realism through blurring liminality by using the post-modern technique of temporal distortion. The combination of film and literature and experimentation of temporal distortion merges the historical narrative with contemporary social implications to reveal a reality of declining traditionalism and 'perfect values'. This

³⁵ *Grave of the Fireflies*. 1988. [Film] Directed by Isao Takahata. Japan: Studio Ghibli.

³⁶ Murakami, H., 1999. *Sputnik Sweetheart*, Japan: Kodansha.

³⁷ A thousand paper cranes, believed to grant a wish from the Gods when created

distortion is discerned in my story Tokyo's Best Pub for the Fushinsha³⁸, wherein Hachiman is a post-modern appropriation of the Shinto 'God of war' restrained in the physical anatomy of a human. reflecting the disenchantment of religious faith and post-war secularism. The metonymic war imagery of kamikaze³⁹ and euphemistic mediation of war tragedy through a nonsensical game, represents the flawed incomprehension of humanity in attempt to disconnect with the traumatic past.

"Well it wouldn't be very believable, would it? I've never seen a typhoon rip the ground from earth's core like they proclaim in the legends."⁴⁰

Using the English courses as a foundation, I developed my concept and knowledge of short stories facilitated by micro-fiction's near limitless potential for textual diversity. I was inspired to mimic a similar indefinite essence of perfection that works in tandem with "optical illusion of social harmony"⁴¹ distinct in magic realist novels like Kenzaburo Oe's The Game of Contemporaneity⁴². Featuring a composite healer/trickster merged into one entity, this supports the paradoxical nature of perfection – holding both the good and bad – the bane and the beauty. I highlighted this by reinterpreting the Japanese 'perfect woman' as an imperfect being in a modern context. Through the re-appropriation of traditional femininity, the illusory façade of beauty is reinterpreted as a woman's endurance over time and resolution

³⁸ A non-believer of religious faith

³⁹ Powerful typhoons summoned by Hachiman in Shintoism belief, also suicide planes used by Japan during the war

⁴⁰ Major Work [Short Story], 2018. *Tokyo's Best Pub for the Fushinsha*.

⁴¹ Chilton, M., 2009. *Realist Magic and the Invented Tokyos of Murakami Haruki and Yoshimoto Banana*, s.l.: Journal of Narrative Theory.

⁴² Oe, K., 1979. *The Game of Contemporaneity*.

against historical repression. Evident in my suite's short story, Yamato Nadeshiko's Mirror, the series of contrasting haiku's exemplify the traditional patriarchal connotations of a 'Yamato Nadeshiko'⁴⁵ against the contemporary glass ceiling.

<i>Societies mask,</i>		<i>Ideals choke her mute,</i>
<i>perfect domestic matrix,</i>		<i>gold ornaments truss her limbs,</i>
<i>blissful utopia.</i>		<i>their marionette.</i> ⁴⁶

I further analysed micro-fiction, Hisham Bustani's The Perception of Meaning⁵¹, with the idea of history as another hegemony that magic realism contests and negates. This connected my understanding between Wabi-Sabi and its complement 'Mono-No-Aware'⁵² as they're both rooted in aesthetic principles that present reality as phantasmagorical and transitory. I chose to frame each story in this aesthetic construct with magical abstractions and truncated sentences echoing the fleeting reality inherent to 'Mono-No-Aware'. Evident in my second short story, Shadow's Flash, it explores the occult notion of shadow imprints of humans left behind after the flash of bombs, emphasising the horrid reality within societies reverie of war.

⁴⁵ The idyllic Japanese women, lives for many things but very rarely for romance and thought to make an excellent wife

⁴⁶ Major Work [Short Story], 2018. *Yamato Nadeshiko's mirror* | *rorrim s'okihseN otamaY.*

⁵¹ Bustani, H., 2015. *The Perception of Meaning*, New York: Syracuse University Press.

⁵² 'the pathos of things', a melancholic appreciation of the transiency of existence

*There was a flash, but we remained as shadows.*⁵³

Through my research into form, I encountered literary theorists whose viewpoints paralleled those expressed in the philosophical inspirations and hybrid modernity of my work. By fusing magic realism and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory in 'heteroglossia'⁵⁴, "two belief systems that intersect in a hybrid... having two contradictory meanings"⁵⁵, I found it was similar to Banana Yoshimoto's Lizard⁵⁶ that presented "Tokyo as a hyper-rationalisation of life... abstracting away from the messy reality... where things aren't possible"⁵⁷. I employed both as a subversive tool in mirroring a duality of values in my work evident in my compositional choices to represent Wabi-Sabi. The synthesis of magic realism and heteroglossia in my suite emphasises a dual interpretation of a reality and fantasy, presented in my third story Sakurafubuki which evokes the poignant struggles of 'perfection'. Evidently, the double interpretation of the Kanji supported by phantasmal verse on the left against truncated sentences on the right mirrors the multiplicity of truth and reality inhabited by individuals in a post-war context as meaning becomes fluid. This bricolage conflation of multiple writing styles unveils the hybridity of appreciation towards imperfection, where individual subjectivity of 'perfection' celebrates Wabi-Sabi.

⁵³ Major Work [Short Story], 2018. *Shadow's Flash*.

⁵⁴ Bakhtin, M., 1934. *Discourse in the Novel* [Report].

⁵⁵ Dentith, S., 1994. *Bakhtinian Thought : Intro Read*. New York: Taylor & Francis.

⁵⁶ Yoshimoto, B., 1995. *Lizard*, Japan: Shinchosha.

⁵⁷ Chilton, M., 2009. *Realist Magic and the Invented Tokyos of Murakami Haruki and Yoshimoto Banana*, s.l.: Journal of Narrative Theory.



Japanese Kanji created to emulate a tree, thus becoming the “root or origin of something”

...

Snap.

The breeze that hits like a projectile in the quaint aerosphere

...

A sudden cheer of kanpai erupts, the chatter rises as she sips her juice in the sea of sloshed juice.⁵⁸

This awareness of heteroglossia prompted me to experiment with page layout to physically manifest and embody it thematically, as seen in the use of a ‘split-screen’ text in my work emulated from J. M. Coetzee’s Diary of a Bad Year⁵⁹ in my fifth story.

⁵⁸ Major Work [Short Story], 2018. *Sakurafubuki*.

⁵⁹ Coetzee, J. M., 2007. *Diary of a Bad Year*. Melbourne: Text Publishing.

This is evidenced in my experimentation with varying character perspectives to mirror the multi-faceted nature of perfection being imperfect in its evolution.

Noriko Ono, 9, Aspiring Superhero

I told her I want to save her today, I want to be the most dazzling sun she would touch so she could see the colours like me even if she is in the dark.

*But mummy said sunlight decomposes everything.*⁶⁰

The creation of my major work has strengthened my admiration towards the evolving appreciation of imperfections in our contemporary society. From the amalgamation of my interests in the human condition, Japanese culture and creative writing, I hope to deconstruct the enigma of 'perfection'. Through the lens of Wabi-Sabi I have learnt to appreciate 'breakage and repair becoming part of the history of the object rather than something to disguise'⁶¹. Although initially tentative, this course has helped me establish greater confidence in my ability as a writer.

⁶⁰ Major Work [Short Story], 2018. *The Unspoken Truth*.

⁶¹ Team, M. M., 2017. *My Modern Met*. [Online]

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