

Long Lines of Dancing Letters

The Japanese Drawings of Patricia Forsberg

Rick Newby

“We struggle to locate ourselves in a tangle of histories. . . . There are more things in modernity than are dreamed of by our economics and sociology.”

—James Clifford, *On the Edges of Anthropology*, 2003

“[O]ne’s sight changes: you see things with an eye more Japanese, you feel colour differently. The Japanese draw quickly, very quickly, like a lightning flash, because their nerves are finer, their feeling simpler.”

—Vincent Van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, Arles, June 5, 1888

Browsing a stack of books I own but haven’t read, I come upon this quotation from *A Guide to the Gardens of Kyoto*: “It is not the materials in isolation that form a garden but the fragments in relation. . . .” Montana artist Patricia Forsberg’s Japanese drawings, or more properly, her mixed-media works—crafted out of ink and gouache and fragments of splendid Japanese



Patricia Forsberg, *Heart Twisting in the Wind*, 2006, gouache, ink and collage on paper, 4.375 x 5.75 inches. © 2006 Patricia Forsberg. Photograph by Chris Autio.

papers—resonate with this characterization of classic Japanese gardens (and by extension, Japanese design in general). Like Van Gogh, who found his Japan in the south of France, and like the French theorist Roland Barthes, who saw in Japan a paradigmatic Empire of Signs (“The author has never, in any sense, photographed Japan,” writes Barthes; rather, “Japan has starred him with any number of ‘flashes;’ or better still . . . a situation of writing”), Patricia Forsberg finds in Japanese culture a kind of aesthetic paradise



Patricia Forsberg, **Holding You in Me Still**, 2006, gouache, ink and collage on paper, 4.375 x 5.75 inches © 2006 Patricia Forsberg. Photograph by Chris Autio.

where, ideally at least, the literary and visual arts meld into daily life in ways that are meaningful, spiritually resonant, and quite simply lovely.

Perhaps more so than their compatriots elsewhere, given their proximity to the Pacific, artists in the American West have long been drawn to Asia

and its arts. Think of the Pacific Northwest abstractionists Morris Graves and Mark Tobey, and their adoption of elements from Chinese and Japanese painting. Or of the profound impact on western ceramic artists of such Japanese potters and thinkers as Shoji Hamada and Soetsu Yanagi (especially their visits in 1952 to the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles and Montana's Archie Bray Foundation).

In Montana, of course, Townsend ranch kid (and Columbia University art instructor) Henry Meloy painted T'ang Dynasty horses on his brother Peter's pots, and Rudy Autio looked as much to

Japanese sources (Hamada, Yanagi, and especially the printmaker Shiko Munakata) as he did to Matisse and the Greek figure vase tradition. Beth Lo has explored both the ceramic traditions of her Chinese heritage and the rich contradictions that surround her experience as a Chinese-American. Richard Notkin, Richard Swanson, Eric Van Eimeren, and other Montana ceramists have embraced aspects of the Yixing teapot aesthetic, rendering their own improvisations upon this wonderfully expressive Chinese tradition. Artist and

scholar Marvin Sweet has named Helena the epicenter in the U.S. of what he calls the “Yixing Effect” (see Sweet’s book by the same name, published by Beijing’s Foreign Languages Press and serving as the catalog to a major 2006 exhibition—mounted by Helena’s Holter Museum of Art—of both traditional Chinese and contemporary American “Yixing” pots).

All of which is to say that Patricia Forsberg is not alone in her explorations of Asian aesthetic principles, cultural values, and spiritual traditions. At the same time, her series of drawings, created over more than ten years and numbering in excess of 300 intimate works, stands as one of the most engaging, masterful, and achingly lyrical engagements by an artist of the West with a specifically Asian culture. Just as Provence became Van Gogh’s Japan (“it is a beautiful Japanese dream,” he wrote of the Provençal countryside), Patricia has found her Japan within the confines of an artist’s studio.

Created in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Patricia’s elegantly sensual and often melancholy



Patricia Forsberg, Sounds of Weeping, 2006, gouache, ink and collage on paper, 4.75 x 6.25 inches. © 2006 Patricia Forsberg. Photograph by Chris Autio.

“Japanese” works echo the ancient tradition—in both Chinese and Japanese cultures—of the seamless bringing together of painting and poetry. And Patricia’s drawings/collages honor (and borrow from) the blossoming of the first truly homegrown Japanese culture, more than one thousand years ago, created primarily by women artists, and especially by women writers.

Behind all of Forsberg's Japanese works hovers the extraordinary world of Japan's Heian era (794–1185 AD). At least since Arthur Waley translated Lady Murasaki's six-volume *The Tale of Genji* (published ca. 1015 AD and considered to be the first psychological novel in world literature) in 1921–1923, women artists in the West have looked to the period and especially to the Japanese court's exceptionally talented female writers as models and inspirations.

Virginia Woolf famously reviewed the first volume of Waley's translation of *Genji* in 1925 and expressed her envy of a time and circumstance when, instead of focusing on war and politics, a culture could dwell almost entirely within the aesthetic dimension. While Europeans of the Dark Ages “burst rudely and hoarsely into crude spasms of song,” Woolf wrote, “the Lady Murasaki was looking out into her garden, and noticing how ‘among the leaves were white flowers with petals half unfolded like lips of people smiling at their own thoughts.’” Of course, this era of relative tranquility and luxurious introspection was temporary, only to be followed by centuries of civil war and brutal rule by warlords.

In the grand tradition of American self-invention, Patricia Forsberg has seized upon the aestheticism of the Heian court as a part of her own cultural ancestry. Kakuzo Okakura has written in his *Book of Tea* that this is not “aestheticism in the ordinary



Patricia Forsberg, *The Geisha's Pose*, 2006, gouache, ink and collage on paper, 6.25 x 4.75 inches. © 2006 Patricia Forsberg. Photograph by Chris Autio.

acceptance of the term, for it expresses conjointly with ethics and religion our [the Japanese] whole point of view about man and nature.” As Ivan Morris writes in his classic study, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan*, the Heian era

will always be remembered for the way in which its people pursued that cult of beauty in art and in nature which has played so important a part in Japan’s cultural history. . . . The “rule of taste” applied not only to the formal arts but to nearly every aspect of the lives of the upper classes in the capital. It was central to Heian Buddhism, making . . . religion into an art and art into a religion. . . .

The immense leisure enjoyed by members of the upper class allowed them to indulge in a minute cultivation of taste. Their sophisticated aesthetic code applied even to the smallest details, such as the exact shade of the blossom to which one attached a letter or the precise nuance of scent that one would use for a particular occasion.

Morris adds, “Finally, the aesthetic cult . . . provided the framework in which the ‘good people’ not only expressed but even experienced their emotions. . . . Even when Murasaki’s characters are plunged into the

most agonizing grief . . . they express their emotions in elegantly-turned poems of thirty-one syllables.”

Freed by servants of all domestic duties, the women of the court, imperial consorts and ladies-in-waiting, lived together in the palace, where they whiled away their leisure playing games, reading, practicing calligraphy and music, entertaining male visitors, and in many cases, writing poems, tales, and memoirs. While Japanese men of the time wrote their works in Chinese (the official language of the time, just as Latin was in the West), the women were free to write in the Japanese vernacular. Using the *kana* phonetic script, they could, in Ivan Morris’s words, “record the native Japanese language, the language that was actually spoken, in a direct, simple fashion that was impossible in . . . pure Chinese.”

Because of their leisure, their access to this strong, vivid language, and their genius, the women of the Heian court have left us an unparalleled record. Among the important works are Lady Murasaki’s diary and her masterpiece, *The Tale of Genji*, Sei Shonagon’s witty and richly observed *Pillow Book*, Lady Sarashina’s melancholy *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams*, and the poems of Ono no Komachi and Izumi Shikibu, available in English in *The Ink Dark Moon*, beautifully translated by poet Jane Hirshfield with Mariko Aratani. (Many of the titles of Patricia’s drawings are drawn from Komachi’s and Shikibu’s verses, and when she



Patricia Forsberg, Today Sake-sake, Tomorrow Sake-sake,
2006, gouache, ink and collage on paper, 4.75 x 6.25 inches.
© 2006 Patricia Forsberg. Photograph by Chris Autio.

exhibits the work, she couples each drawing with the complete poem that has lent it its title.) As Hirshfield writes in her introduction, these “court attendants must surely have been the most illustrious company of women writers ever to share a set of roofs.”

Their literary works have clearly served as

sources and inspirations in Patricia’s re-imagining and transfiguration of Heian culture, but it is more difficult to trace her influences from Japanese visual arts. Certainly her drawings partake of the “Japanese genius,” in the words of art historian Jack Hillier, “for the expressive line, for pattern and design, the representation of natural objects as a means to an end, not an end in itself.” For Japanese printmakers and painters, the making of art, “like poetry,” notes Hillier, was “the ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ and took its origin from ‘emotion recollected in tranquility’”

(echoing Wordsworth).

This quality of restraint, which yet contains undercurrents of intense emotion, is evident in Patricia’s drawings, where we find ourselves in the midst of moments of repose colored by melancholy, outright grief, fleeting joy, and occasionally an antic humor. Some event has just transpired or is anticipated: the arrival or departure of a loved one, the change of seasons, an ongoing solitude for which there is no respite (“Call It Loneliness, That Deep, Beautiful Color,” as one of her drawings is titled).

Perhaps the closest source for Patricia's drawings might be woodcuts created in the 1600s to illustrate a later edition of *The Tale of Genji* (examples can be seen in Edward Seidensticker's 1976 translation of the novel). These marvelous prints depict life within the palace, a world made ever more interior by screens within screens behind fences within walls. Even when these men and women venture outside, the omnipresent fog seems to tame and contain them; this is a profoundly inward-looking universe. As Sei Shonagon wrote in her *Pillow Book*,

[W]e women generally stay hidden behind our screens or curtains. It is delightfully quiet there. . . . In the winter one sometimes catches the sound of a woman gently stirring the embers in her brazier. . . . On other occasions one may hear several voices reciting Chinese or Japanese poems. . . . Bright green bamboo blinds are a delight, especially when beneath them one can make out the many layers of a woman's clothes emerging from under brilliantly coloured curtains of state.

The sense of enclosure so central to Patricia's Japanese works resonates with these words, and the women we see in her drawings might be said to be, if not delighted, at least content within the comforting

embrace of a familiar room. Some appear to be truly insouciant, happy to nap for a lazy moment or a long afternoon; others curl into themselves, radiating grief; some confront the viewer frankly, with their sexuality or their boredom; still others huddle against cold or loss. Although a few appear to be Japanese, most of these women seem ancestrally European and profoundly modern in spirit. Their sheer nakedness would have marked them as *other* in the Heian world. Lady Murasaki and her cohorts wore clothing that was, in Ivan Morris's words,

immensely elaborate and cumbersome, consisting *inter alia* of a heavy outer costume and a set of unlined silk robes (twelve was the standard number). . . . So that their fastidious blending of patterns and colours might be properly admired, women wore the robes in such a way that each sleeve was longer as it came closer to the skin.

And in fact, the naked female form was considered anything but beautiful in Heian culture. Lady Murasaki, at the sight of a pair of maids whose clothes had been stolen during the night, wrote: "Unforgettably horrible is the naked body. It really does not have the slightest charm."

Female experience has long been central to



*Patricia Forsberg, **Unfinished Dream**, 2007, gouache, ink and collage on paper, 5.75 x 4.375 inches. © 2007 Patricia Forsberg. Photograph by Chris Autio.*

Patricia Forsberg’s artistic enterprise, and so too has her affectionate and insightful exploration/appropriation of other cultures. Witness, for example, her works of the 1980s, when she immersed herself in another culture obsessed with beauty, that of Renaissance Italy. For those who know her Renaissance-inspired paintings, with their wild patterns, vivid colors, and madcap humor, Patricia’s Japanese drawings seem models of restraint and calm. But her concerns remain much the same; in 1985, she spoke of the essential elements with which she sought to imbue her work. Her paintings would be “patterned, symbolic, private and masked, humorous, dramatic, energetic, and alive.” The Renaissance paintings were, for the most part, interiors (like the Japanese drawings)—and in 1985, she wrote of the tension in that earlier work between the “pursuit of freedom, choice, and space” and the “inevitable taming and containment of the environment, animals, and our lives.”

That tension between freedom and containment, this modernity of spirit—the absolute nakedness of the work—is what takes Patricia Forsberg’s Japanese drawings far beyond mere imitation or even heartfelt tribute. In their exploration of the interior life of women today, these drawings are, quite simply, marvelous expressions of one artist’s allusive imagination, speaking across centuries and cultures with restrained feeling, quiet power, and a riveting sense of beauty all their own.

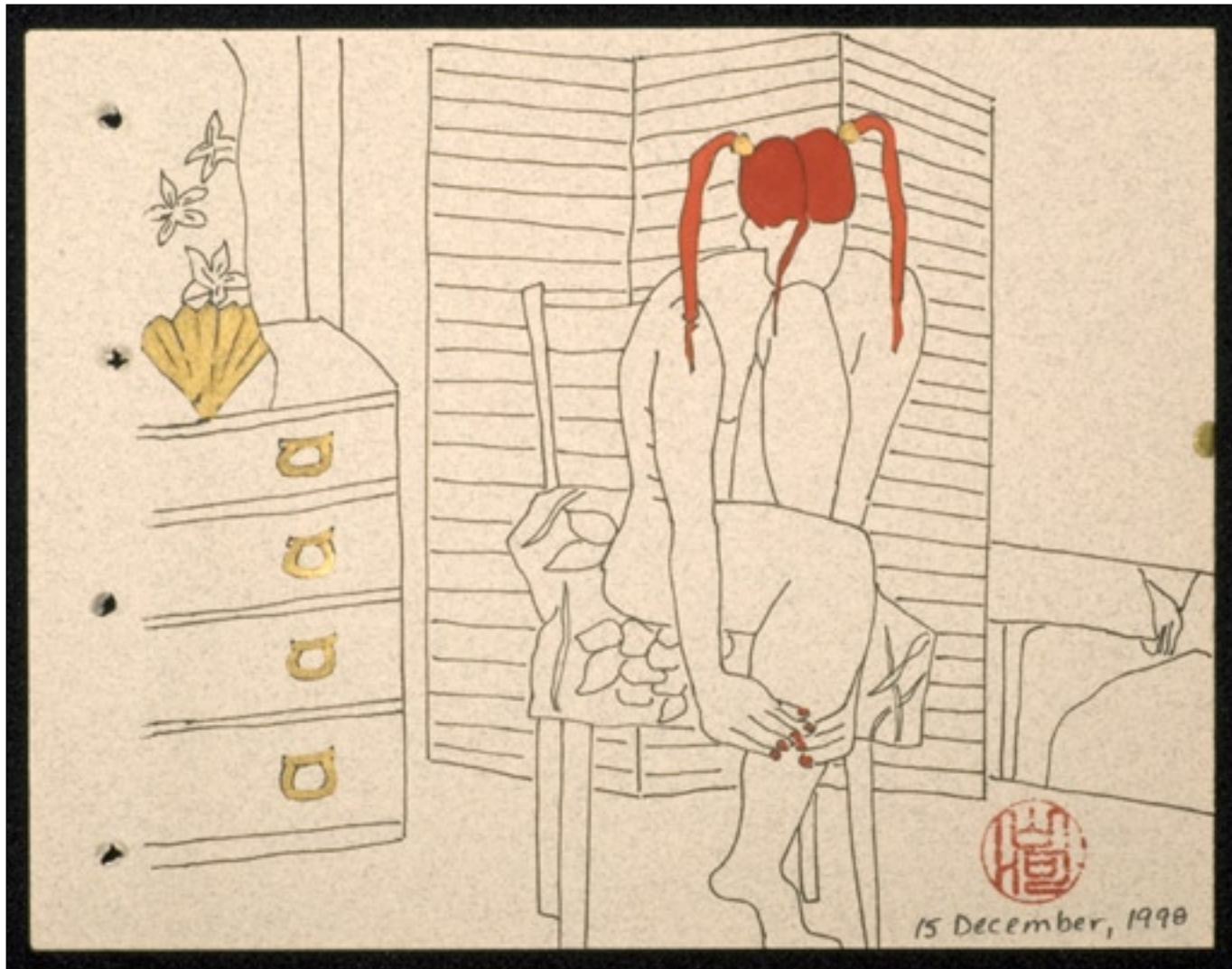


Patricia Forsberg, **We Part in Tears**, 1998, gouache, ink and collage on paper, 5.5 x 7.5 inches. © 1998 Patricia Forsberg.
Photograph by Chris Autio.



Patricia Forsberg, **Love-soaked, Rain-soaked**, 1998, gouache and ink on paper, 5 x 7 inches. © 1998 Patricia Forsberg.

Photograph by Guy duVon.



Patricia Forsberg, **My Mountain Cuckoo**, 1998, gouache and ink on paper, 4.25 x 5.5 inches. © 1998 Patricia Forsberg.
Photograph by Chris Autio.



Patricia Forsberg, Call It Loneliness, That Deep, Beautiful Color, 1998, gouache, ink and collage on paper. 9.25 x 9.5 inches. © 1998 Patricia Forsberg. Photograph by Guy duVon.



*Patricia Forsberg, **This Heart, Longing for You**, 1999, gouache, ink and collage on paper, 4.5 x 9.5 inches. © 1999 Patricia Forsberg. Photograph by Guy duVon.*



*Patricia Forsberg, **Alone as the Autumn Deepens**, 2002, gouache, ink and collage on paper, 3.5 x 5 inches. © 2002 Patricia Forsberg. Photograph by Chris Autio.*



Patricia Forsberg, Long Lines of Dancing Letters, 1999, gouache, ink and collage on paper, 5.5 x 5.5 inches. © 1999 Patricia Forsberg. Photograph by Guy duVon.



Patricia Forsberg, Heart of One Who Feeds the Fire, 2000, gouache, ink and collage on paper, 4.5 x 8.25 inches.

© 2000 Patricia Forsberg. Photograph by Chris Autio.



*Patricia Forsberg, **Listening to the Rustle of Bamboo Leaves**, 2000, gouache, ink and collage on paper, 2.625 x 6.75 inches.*

© 2000 Patricia Forsberg. Photograph by Chris Autio.



Patricia Forsberg, A Thousand Tangled Thoughts, 1999, gouache, ink and collage on paper, 7.5 x 10 inches. © 1999 Patricia Forsberg. Photograph by Guy duVon.



*Patricia Forsberg, **Sake Stains**, 2000, gouache, ink and collage on paper, 9 x 6 inches. © 2000 Patricia Forsberg. Photograph by Chris Autio.*



*Patricia Forsberg, **Tears Taken for White Beads**, 2000, gouache, ink and collage on paper, 12.25 x 5 inches. © 2000 Patricia Forsberg. Photograph by Chris Autio.*



*Patricia Forsberg, Tonight, with
No One to Wait For, 1999,
gouache, ink and collage on paper, 11
x 4 inches. © 1999 Patricia Forsberg.
Photograph by Guy duVon.*



Patricia Forsberg, Flower of the Evening Faces, 2008, gouache, ink and collage on paper, 5 x 12 inches. © 2008 Patricia Forsberg. Photograph by Chris Autio.



Patricia Forsberg, Night Dark as a Leopard Flower, 2008, gouache and collage on paper, 7 x 10.25 inches. © 2008 Patricia Forsberg. Photograph by Chris Autio.



Patricia Forsberg,
Color of the Night,
*2008, gouache and
collage on paper, 10.25
x 7 inches. © 2008
Patricia Forsberg.
Photograph by
Chris Autio.*



*Patricia Forsberg, A Slice of Silence, 2006, gouache, ink and collage on paper, 4.75 x 6.25 inches. © 2006 Patricia Forsberg.
Photograph by Chris Autio.*