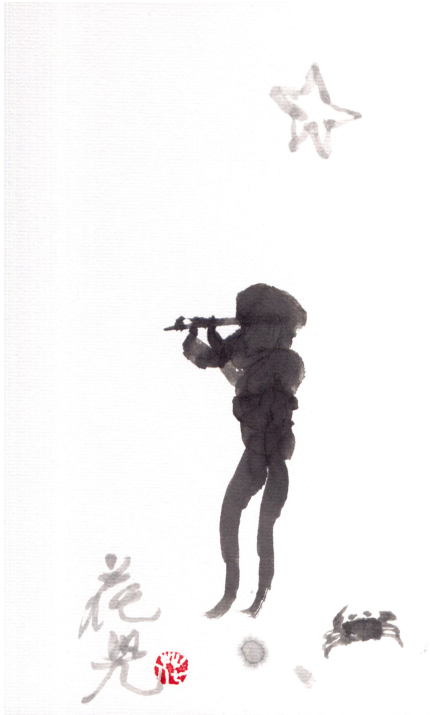


Etchings in Moonlight



Interview with Kaji Aso
taken by Amtul Hanan of the East West Journal 1980

Etchings in Moonlight



EWJ: Could you begin by telling us about your early background: when and where were you born, your upbringing and so forth?

KA: I'm not telling the year I was born.

EWJ: Why is that your philosophy?

KA: It is not my philosophy.

EWJ: What is it?

KA: Common sense. The reason some people are still gaining knowledge from Shakespeare is because he never gave any preconceptions. Preconceptions misdirect all knowledge. No one knows the exact day when Shakespeare was born or how he was brought up, but he left us the essence of knowledge and that is really wonderful. I forgot when he was born.

EWJ: When did you first feel that you were going to be an artist?

KA: I think with all children; first you recognize your own existence, then you

recognize the existence of nature which is a really tricky period. As soon as that happens you start to wonder, "Why am I here? What is all around me?" Your existence is so small and has no meaning. I think everyone has to pass through that.

At twelve I decided to become an artist. Before that I had to go to elementary school, and all the time I was wondering, "Why do I have to be here? Why do I have to do exactly the same things? Also school doesn't fit my body." It made me feel unbalanced and diminished. So I was all the time struggling, struggling. For example, looking at the sky, and the sky is endless, or looking at a star, and you never know where it is or what exists beyond that. Every night I was thinking about this. Also, stepping on the ground. I couldn't believe this existence of ground or earth.

"Why am I standing on it, and is it reliable or not?" I was very bored, not just in class but with my life. I didn't know what to do or the meaning of life, then one day when I was twelve, I was looking out the window during school and it was raining gently, during early spring. The air was dark and gloomy, then suddenly something caught my eye, something sparkling out from a tiny tree, which was a tiny bud. Almost as I was watching it, it was growing there. So that was when I discovered myself. I thought, "Here is something, here is beauty." My life is boring, but I could live with this beauty. Since it affected my eyes, I decided to become a painter

EWJ: Tell us more about your early childhood.

KA: When I was four I became very sick and had to stay in bed a long time. Actually, that was the time that I built up the foundation of my personality. Because I could not move my body I had to live with my imagination. Fortunately my grandfather was an art collector and the room where I was staying was filled with paintings, mostly from the Edo period. That was another important foundation. Also, my ear

was getting very sensitive, listening to all the birds and all the sounds of nature.

EWJ: How did your parents react to your desire to become an artist?

KA: My parents tried to discourage me from being an artist. They wanted me to be a doctor or lawyer. In Japan, at that time, those professions were respected and occupied a very high position in society. I didn't want to go to college; however, since my parents asked me to go and it gave me a chance to paint, I did finish. I started painting at twelve—three or four paintings a day—at that time my technical ability was being built up. However, after fifteen I began to question what I was doing, what painting is, so I was struggling, struggling, struggling. Then I really began to paint after college.

EWJ: Which artist inspired you

KA: The Impressionists inspired me at first, especially Sisley. He was the first artist I recognized. Until they became trapped by analysis of their work, the Impressionists were very human and natural. Later I became acquainted with Turner and was strongly moved by him. Among all Western artists he was most able to capture the essence of nature. If you are familiar with the Oriental concept of *ki*, you will understand what I mean. Turner was the only one able to transform *ki* to the canvas. I am not sure whether he was influenced by Oriental art or not, but that is not the point. The important thing is that he reached to the *ki* of nature. Although the word *ki* originated in the East, it is a universal concept which holds within it all other potential concepts.

It's funny, being Japanese I had many opportunities to see traditional Japanese art but I never liked woodcut prints. To me they were so gloomy and artificial. I couldn't understand why our culture could have produced such unhealthy art. Maybe some people can receive a sense of security from it but that's because it reflects them. They don't have to be spontaneous then. For example, spontaneous *sumi* painting has universal knowledge but woodcut print does not. Of course the woodcut gave great inspiration to the

Impressionists, but when I think of its essence I don't think it has universal knowledge. They were so smug and optimistic about their domestic perspective. Once the perspective is set like that, there are no more possibilities. Not just the development of perspective, but all possibility of gaining knowledge from nature is lost. That's very important.

EWJ: How did you come to leave Japan and settle in America?

KA: About twelve years ago, someone from Boston invited me here. It was an accident as far as my staying here goes. At first I thought I had left Hell but soon afterwards I had to recognize that I had come to another Hell. I'm sorry to say that.

I left Japan because of the stupid atmosphere there, but when I came here and saw the same things. So where shall I go? No, I should not go any place. That is a very important reason of my own. It came from me, not from outside me.

There are two kinds of art. The first tries to identify the ideal conditions of human beings. The other is entertainment, when art comes down to your level, so you can feel secure – but that of course is not true security. For example, I saw a spontaneity and life in *sumi* painting. Most painters in Japan however just adopt a particular pattern of art, so their work is very boring, especially the art adopted from China. Some painters are coming from Zen activity – not Zen temple but Zen mind – are very spontaneous, very free. Any knowledge when it is born, basically fits only its own environment. However, some of this knowledge has more universal dimension.

EWJ: When did your studio begin?

KA: One summer, after the school semester was over, people wanted to continue studying with me, so I opened my apartment and hired a model once a week. Then I went to Japan for two months, yet they continued to use my apartment. But somehow I wasn't expecting them to continue; even at that time I knew what American people are like. So when I came back I was surprised to find that the members had doubled and they asked me to rent a room. That was the

beginning. We moved to the present building seven years ago. At first we had only one floor but eventually we began to rent the whole building.

Although this is Kaji Aso Studio, at the same time we have another name, Gallery Nature and Temptation, which reminds us that we have to pay attention to nature. That should be the source of our art. Temptation doesn't necessarily mean temptation in a sexual or material sense. Healthy temptation comes from nature, from life.



EWJ: Did you have a vision or dream about the studio?

KA: No, It just happened. As far as I can, I do things which I have to do. That's all. However, even in the beginning I recognized the value and meaning of these activities. When we started, the commercial art of Newbury Street in Boston and Madison Avenue in New York was completely stupid, very chaotic. It was conceptual art and all sort of junk, but I still respected painting, but I still had to defend the sanity of painting. Without sanity painting doesn't exist.

EWJ: How did the Museum School react to the founding of your studio?

KA: I'm a very neutral person, like a jelly fish. If they were upset or angry with me, there was no way for it to reach my body. I don't hurt them. Both activities are important: teaching at the Museum School and also at the studio, because I have to keep in contact with society on several different levels.

EWJ: How do you account for people

staying here for six or seven years?

KA: Well, they are completely healthy about it, not at all religious. Also, they have intelligence and clear perspective. But to keep this central balance is not an easy thing. The question with human beings is, "Should we go someplace?" No we should not. We should think of growing, instead of going. If you keep moving you never know if you are growing or not. If you stay in one place then any phenomenon – either positive or negative – becomes something you can recognize. My student independent but still they understand this philosophy of staying and growing. They know they are the substance of the studio. Also, I love them.

EWJ: How do you feel about your jogging?

KA: My daily life is very constructive because of painting and education, so running is my self-indulgence. Afterwards I can enjoy that nice fatigue. It's a very simple satisfaction.

My purpose is self-accomplishment, so naturally when I run slowly it's much harder and when I run fast, it's easier. What is done inside of me is much more when I run slow. It's a great accomplishment. Also, I never give up. I know the limit of my body, so I don't kill myself, but as far as my head can keep up I challenge myself until the last moment.

The meaning of running is not to run fast but whether these two weak legs can carry a human being – how far, how fast? Animals can run faster. A human being is inferior to animals if you talk only about running. Running doesn't have any value, but when a human being is running, running is wonderful or when a human being is swimming, swimming is wonderful.

Running is constructive but it can be decadent too. Running is a natural thing; it's cooperating dynamically with nature. But if your mind is too much preoccupied with running then you become awfully artificial. Art is a completely civilized act and running is very primitive. It's such a good thing for a human being to have a double character.

The civilized part is just our dream.

We try to make it real but still it's our dream. When we recognize the other side of our existence then this becomes really important and probably this is the way we can make it real. Dangers exist today but life is generally safe, so people are burying themselves in culture. Then they don't see themselves, they forget where they came from. So running keeps contact with the primitive side of our existence.

EWJ: What do you think an artist can do for our society?

KA: If you are just painting to impress people for fame or money, there is no hope. Society has no values, so how can your painting exist without a foundation? An artist cannot perform art for society, because if he did it would just be entertainment. The relationship between an artist and society must be upside down. The function of an artist is to be "a priority"; he must always be far ahead of society. To have an advanced vision without society's approval or negative limitation is very important. If you are truly painting, here is life and here is hope. Maybe this painting won't help anyone in society, but the philosophy or attitude of this painting—the fact that I paint, I do exist – if this attitude is perceived by a large number of people, then there is hope and more life. That is actually what I'm doing.

EWJ: You mentioned to me that Beethoven is highly regarded in Japan. Can you say more about that?

KA: I'll tell you a story that I read about many years ago, in a Japanese art magazine, in which a conductor was reminiscing about his youth. Apparently he was whistling Beethoven's Ninth Symphony when someone suddenly knocked him on the ear. Of course, he was quite angry, but it turned out to be his own brother. Both of them had studied music and according to his brother's opinion he was being very disrespectful to whistle Beethoven's music. This is an example of Japanese education not working out so well. To respect our teachers is very important but before you respect your teacher you have to be sure who you are.



Unfortunately, Japan, being so newly exposed to Western culture, accepted too many things too quickly. You may think that Japanese society is only receiving Western technology, but in fact they are also accepting many aspects of Western culture. In the areas of law and music, for example, they copied and adopted much from the Germans.

If they really understood the spirit behind Western art then this kind of strange thing would not have happened. It's no problem when they continue with their own customs, but when they adopt other people's traditions sometimes funny things happen. For example, I graduated from Tokyo University of Art which includes Fine Arts and Music, and outside there are two gates facing each other. Each time that I had to look at the music side, I had to look at an ugly, funny statue of a composer.

EWJ: Beethoven?

KA: Yes. You see, before they imported the actual art they imported all these statues. The same kind of thing happens here with Eastern culture, for example, Lao Tzu; people don't really know who he is, but they are familiar with his name. So I think before the Japanese heard Beethoven's music, they saw his statue. So whenever you go to a music school, first you have to meet a person who is neither the dean, nor the janitor, nor a professor but that funny, angry-looking man with uncombed hair. I don't understand why young, pure music

students to meet this man first. Even if Beethoven is great, this is an awfully religious way of looking at him.

When I was a small child we had a Victrola and our house had a large collection of Western music records; fortunately or unfortunately, the first name I knew among Western composers was Beethoven. I was told several times how great he was and that he represented the highest spirit of Western civilization. No other composers could be compared to him. In Japan everyone believed that. I kept listening to him but even in my childhood heart I remember preferring beautiful Spanish music or Mendelssohn's piano pieces. Also Tchaikovsky and Dvorak gave me a strong impression of Slavic culture and Northern countries. Because of their music I could imagine the big sky and all the human passions taking place there. However, Beethoven's music hardly caught my heart. For example, the "Bagatelle", a long piece by him, is constantly repeating the same things. Some music continues a real development of theme; one of them connects to another until there is a dynamic unity. However, listening to "Bagatelle", is like looking at a box from all possible angles. It's complete repetition. It can't even be compared to African peoples' tom-tom drums because they developed their cultural identity through repetition, but his repetition was simply mechanical.

However, lately I've been thinking differently about Beethoven. I just heard his Fifth Symphony translated into rock music which caused me to think that probably my way of listening had not been right. I had been told he was a really superior spirit, so when I couldn't find that, I was deeply disappointed. The rock version of Beethoven directly touched my body; understanding that, I again listened to his "Moonlight Sonata" and received a completely different reaction. I believe his music is on the same level as sports, but if you try to receive it as a high spiritual experience it becomes really dangerous. He uses complete emotional manipulation; therefore, it gives you a very strong physical reaction. So far as you

understand that you are receiving his musical as physical entertainment or sport, there is no harm done.

EWJ: It seems that his music is an indication of his deep frustration, and since people today are deeply frustrated, it's no wonder they're attracted to it.

KA: Indeed. If you say his face is a healthy man's face, I would say that you are being stupid. It is an angry man's face, and why should people have to love and respect it?

To be fond of that kind of mad face shows that there is a dangerous aspect within human beings. The most important point is not to confuse emotion with passion. Passion contains humanity within it, but emotion is too much an animal-level reaction. Beethoven's music is on an emotional level, and it gives superficial appreciation. So I say if you're listening to Beethoven instead of smoking dope that's all right, but please understand what you're doing.

We are surrounded by distortion. We have to open our eyes and discover true values by ourselves.

EWJ: I understand you have done a lot of etching. What brought you to do that?

KA: Etching is a good learning process because you have to be very conscious of what you are doing. It's a rational process. You have to be very consistent; first you see the beauty and then you must hold it until your plate is finished. I love etching because once I was in a slump, where I almost went blind until etching saved me. I was gazing and gazing, trying to catch the object but I couldn't. The harder I tried, the more the object eluded me, so I began etching. What I was doing was upside down, completely opposite, but then etching brought me back.

It's a negative process, but for me it created a positive vision. As I scratched the plate, the negative became positive. At that time I was trying to catch trees in a grove, but I couldn't. When I went back later in the evening, I saw moonlight and through that I saw the trees. In the daytime trees have strong volume, but at night there is no volume but moonlight is strong then, so that is when I discovered my vision. You see, I

was trying to paint the tree, but the truth was to paint around the tree. To not paint the dot but the space around the dot. You must paint the tree through space. The tree is an element of space. It's much easier to see the tree through the tree but then you see nothing. Etching taught me all those things. EWJ: Do you think it's important to make a lot of money?

KA: When someone becomes rich it means that money is staying at one place, and so what? It's so stupid. Someone is working awfully hard to stay in one place. That's my definition.

EWJ: Do you think it's an advantage or a disadvantage for an artist, male or female, to have a family?

KA: The condition of your art comes out of the condition of your life. If you haven't suffered how can you have sympathy for others? It reminds me of Basho's poem:

*First autumn rain
Looking for the straw raincoat
A monkey too*

Basho himself felt cold, miserable, sad and needed a straw coat. When he saw the monkey, he felt sympathy for him. So here is a poem. Actually, Basho himself was the monkey. That's life. People believe that art is just technology, but that's not true. Art comes from life. To transform your life into a certain object such as canvas or words, you need some technology but basically you need maximum human contact.

Art is a life environment; in the art people can grow, people can live. For example, in *haiku* we squeeze out short verses and it becomes the essence of the human spirit. That means getting from a lot of things. And that means everyday life.

EWJ: What about your own life?

KA: In my case being alone always reminds me of the real condition of life. Even if you are married or in love, you are basically alone. In my life one side is Paradise, a flower garden, and the other side is a deep valley. The reality is both. If I miss a step I fall. That is life. Being an artist is not really

a question of whether you have talent or not but to see this basic human vulnerability and transform it. That involves more heart than mind.

It is really strange, in spite of the fact that nature is always moving, people deny it. Moving is the most primary condition of nature, yet people pretend to emulate the stillness of eternity. All these aspects come to support preconceived types of art. If you look at it, this tree is related to all other parts of nature. And without having other aspects this tree could not be here. To show the freshness of a tree or the life of it you must relate it to the rest of nature. The moonlight, rain, wind, everything is the essence of the tree. Technically we call it the focus point, when all essence is concentrated on that point, everything radiates from there. Because two trees make one tree, two trees make each other. They both exist together, that is the principle of nature. Of course, when I mean nature I'm not talking about going on a picnic.

Everything starts from one dot. The one dot is your first attention and awareness of any situation or environment. It is the same with a painting. First there is chaos, then comes form. The biggest mistake is that students try to get order first, which is completely wrong because chaos comes first. Order, such as perspective, anatomy or the idea of balance – all those concepts you can use, but you can never start your painting from order. Order is a goal. Start from chaos then reach order.

My instruction is simply pay attention, open eyes and see what nature is doing. What happens on the canvas is a process of your recognition of nature. It depends on the stage and condition of your life. Painting naturally shows your life process. And there is no doubt you are there. You don't have to make up anything like a trademark.

EWJ: Coming from Japan, what's your impression in American interest in more healthful food?

KA: Most Americans don't care anything about food. They treat themselves as cars, so that the food becomes fuel for them like

gasoline, but cars don't taste gasoline at all. Taste is very important because it informs us of good food. However, some people really appreciate the taste of junk food and other people seem to know what good food is. Whenever I meet such people, who know what good food is, they seem to be very sensitive and basically intelligent. I'm an extreme example as I'm overly taste conscious, plus a bit of a hedonist. Americans just sit for five minutes, grab things and throw food in their stomachs without taking the time to taste it.

EWJ: And they often look grey.

KA: So you know why? Food gives you great entertainment, great rest, great comfort, and at least the opportunity of meditation. While you are enjoying good food, then naturally you are using all your senses and are functioning completely as yourself. This is a basic thing.

For example, when you're hungry you get impatient. You see, the history of human beings is very long but our history of being an animal is much longer. The experience or instinct from that period still remains inside of us. If you look at an animal, a lion for example, when its stomach is full it never attacks other animals because it is calm and sweet. What American people are missing is exactly that – to know how to relax with food. Because they don't get this relaxation from food they must depend on an artificial approach, such as marijuana or other such drugs. Instead, I say if they eat good food they absolutely don't need drugs. And naturally they'd function better.

The reason for natural food being well received is because of the human desire for real taste. Here bread has no taste, it's like chewing cotton. There's another dangerous approach; however, in this returning to better food, it is my observation of this culture that people love to save; with you, it is a much stronger instinct than with Eastern people. For example, the can was invented here. Also, the idea of banks, of strong brick houses. American people love to save money and although the Japanese people are interested in economics, their interest is in the pleasure of work. You see

saving means life is indirect. In any act there is life, and although most people are working for some purpose it is indirect. The rational approach to eating well comes from this saving mentality, and then it becomes basically self-righteous.

Even my painting is inseparable from my sense of food. I don't want to lose any original quality or value of nature. People have been surprised at my qualities of listening and smell. For example, if someone is behind me and the wind is blowing in that direction, I can tell who it is. When a really misty rain is starting I hear it, and even before the rain comes my skin senses it.

EWJ: Perhaps at one time all people had that ability.

KA: That's right. I don't want to lose it, and in fact, I try to develop it more.

EWJ: How?

KA: I go on river trips. Dipping my body into the river brings me back, back to my instinct. One advantage of being a human being rather than an animal is that I can see my instinct as another aspect of my experience. When we realize our similarities to animals, it can help to create more humanism and on a higher level.

EWJ: How do you teach people who have grown-up in this rational culture about their humanity/

KA: They need love, and at the same time they have hunger. If they have suffered, it's a good sign because they know what they want, it's like food; if you're hungry you don't have to be told. You know, because it's an essential part of a human being. If you want to be lazy, you can be lazy; if you want to die, you can die. If you look around, you see many people are "being in death."

You see, when you have suffered you know what you need, so what you need you should give to others. Of course, all this sort of thing was said in the Bible. I'm not Christian, but if you just rip off the front page of the Bible and eliminate all preconceptions of Christ, then the rest is fine.

EWJ: How do you deal with problem

students?

KA: This studio is like my family. If there's a problem here, even before something happens I step back because I sense it. And I let them discover it. If I find some poison on a certain person, I bring another person with a matching poison and bring them together. They see each other, recognize it and draw it out, without hurting anyone. Sometimes you do it gently but you also give a little pain. I think a little pain works very well to concentrate their mind. When you touch a snail, for example, it suddenly shrinks, contracts, concentrates. Today in this country people are all stretched out, expanded; they're too soft; they don't function, because they've lost their spring. When a human being is dead they've lost a spring in their mind, their essence; therefore, to give a little stimulation, a little hurt; sometimes works to give them back their sense.

EWJ: You have the ability to say something to a class which touches everyone on a deeply personal level. To what do you attribute that?

KA: I think it's simply that no fragmentation had been going on inside of me, which means that I'm not specializing in any one thing. Any knowledge that comes from me comes from my simple life.

For example, you can never start painting from painting. A painting has to come from living. Music also comes from an entirely unified experience of life. Music is nothing unless it unifies all your life experience; then music makes sense. When people hear music they think it's there, so why can't you start from there? Music school is only one example of that; if you like music you're supposed to go there.

Art teachers chase a reproduction so the student becomes the third reproduction – but by the time they're able to paint it, the fashion is gone! I don't even know what their fashion is now, because I'm not interested in commercial art. It's a paradox. If you are chasing after commercial art, you yourself will never become a successful commercial artist.

EWJ: Because you have to keep on changing yourself artificially?

KA: Right. Even if you are able to manipulate a current fashion, once you've gotten there, it's too late. You have to paint from your place, which will take you any place. What is your own place? I teach the most basic knowledge of painting, then a student can go anywhere. I give them the universal value.