

**REBELLION  
AND  
REASON**



*Painting by Kaji Aso*

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## REBELLION AND REASON

## **PREFACE**

This conversation took place at Kaji Aso Institute of the Arts, during a weekly philosophical discussion group in 1996. The main speakers are philosopher Kaji Aso, Barry Maloney, Hiroyuki “Dojo” Ohtani, and Tony Lima. It was transcribed and edited by Barry Maloney.

**Dojo:** A man, J., who comes here, he says “Rebel against anything. It is a young man’s revolution, to create something new.” I told him “Rebel against anything is no good, because they need a reason to rebel against to be a rebel ... without thought or idea what they are against, or who they are against ...”

**Kaji Aso:** ...why they are against...

**Tony:** It is called “extremist conflict”. One who deals in extremes of value, and one who opposes the other extreme... unreasonably. This is a kind of neurosis. Unhappy people are like this. Although this is more respectable than the other type, who is aware of his unhappiness, but chooses not to do anything about it.

**Barry:** So does he says to rebel against “anything” or “everything”?

**Kaji Aso:** He says he will accept any level of rebellion from younger generation, because this is their process of growing, which is a very dangerous idea.

**Barry:** Perhaps there is something he really wishes to rebel against, but he isn’t sure what that is?

**Kaji Aso:** This is a way they spoil themselves, on top of being spoiled by others.

**Tony:** This is a very sad nature.

**Dojo:** I was at a concert and the pianist was sitting on music books during his performance. I was surprised that a professor from a conservatory was sitting on music (as it appears disrespectful).

**Kaji Aso:** This is different in western culture from eastern culture, where even handwriting is to be respected

**Dojo:** Some think Beethoven, Schubert and Chopin are all the same. I ask them why they think Beethoven is good. They say because he opened a new way to music, but I think he did what we have been talking about; rebel against everything.

**Kaji Aso:** Particularly against Mozart...70% of Beethoven is copy of Mozart, then he started going against Mozart, but everything is so technical, he tried to do opposite of Mozart... this doesn’t even come from his mind, just technically rebelling against Mozart.

**Dojo:** So this idea... rebel against anything... still exists now, in painting and sculpture, it is called conceptual art or installation.

**Barry:** How so?

**Dojo:** They just don't have patience. They don't even try to do something, they just want to pretend.

**Kaji Aso:** It is an important point... of course when someone does some real resistance, they have some reason, motivation, which means they are physically existing and some part of their mind is active, but, obviously it is not total. This is very important point of knowing what human being is. I had experience of teaching a student to work light to dark, but then found him working dark to light. I asked why and he said to rationalize why I teach this. Instead of just using his brain to understand an easy concept.

**Tony:** These are just mind games...

**Kaji Aso:** Barry, what do you think?

**Barry:** I think sometimes rebellion has been taken out of context. Let's say someone has been taught as a child that XYZ is true. Then he realizes he doesn't believe it is true and discards it. He has used a healthy form of rebellion to overcome this teaching, but then he might become suspicious of everything, and uses this tool of rebellion against all ideas. It is out of context. Instead of using it when it is healthy, and not when it is not.

**Kaji Aso:** Descartes has the idea of philosophy that to find out the truth you must doubt everything, and what is left is the truth. But this doesn't work...always doubting everything. Still, they teach this dumb idea at colleges, it is almost like a cartoon. This idea of conceptual art and rebellion, that in doing something "against" they can establish their position and prove their existence is totally nonsense. You never know, you are fighting huge monster, but huge monster could be just shadow of something else...if it was real thing that is something else. It is like Don Quixote and his windmill.

**Barry:** There is a positive and negative form to rebellion, but you can never learn if you just refuse everything.

**Kaji Aso:** Why did Descartes come up with such a dumb idea?

**Barry:** Maybe he only saw its positive implications.

**Kaji Aso:** But Descartes took such an important place in western thinking as very rational... a rational thinker. He was very good mathematician, algebra, very bright... but philosophically stupid. Rational is very important, but to be sensible we need

sense of dimension and direction. To him being rational meant doubting everything. I don't think he understood what rational means.

**Dojo:** The strength of Chopin was composition, Beethoven and Schubert were worst composers, they just mixed everything, they didn't think about meaning.

**Kaji Aso:** How do you think about Beethoven?

**Barry:** I don't pretend to know a lot about classical music. I find a lot of it... how to say this? – I can't listen to it. I'm pretty uneducated on classical music. Sometimes I listen and hear a beautiful song, and other times I listen and it just gives me a headache. But so far I haven't found a composer that I particularly like. I don't like the way so much of it gets so intricate. There is often so little melody that it becomes like math, and it knots up in my head. Like a lot of equations and not... it is complicated instead of straightforward.

**Kaji Aso:** Straightforward is like melody in fact, and ideas of harmony and sound, so music is not just sound, music is melody and sound.

**Barry:** Melody speaks to me directly, everything else – all the equations – leave me cold.

**Dojo:** You said it is like math...

**Kaji Aso:** So this helps us understand why Beethoven is not good composer, but gives us a headache. Mozart wrote a simple song for children – simple song, entertainment. Beethoven borrowed this theme, and he added piano, and played variations off of it. Bauhaus did this. Professor gives original picture, and the class does endless variations on this, on and on. Naturally we have instinct to put things together, if it is just explore, explore, explore, your mind will be really either confused or fragmented. Painting is so different, hundred things we try to meet at one point, that's composition, not on and on with endless variation. Not variation from one pattern. So when on and on variation, we wait for something to tie it all together, but it never happens. That's why Beethoven would go on with variations and then just stop, every ten minutes, then bring another variation on and on. Like the Beatles, they have some very lovely compositions, like "Yesterday" and others, but if you listen they never really end, they too often just trail off at the end of the recording. Finishing is a big job. In fact, finishing is harder than starting. Now that is like Descartes, his logic of doubting, he just went on and on doubting and eventually came back full circle to where he started, because he couldn't finish.

**Dojo:** Chopins' composition is almost perfect composition.

**Kaji Aso:** It is like a Haiku.

**Dojo:** It is very short piece, but it concludes!

**Kaji Aso:** Endless variation is really waste, low level. It ends up fragmented. Analyzation and composition and creation, we compare these things and how they are different. We are doing a painting of this pot, we put this color and this color and this color on the paper, and this is this pot. So it works as a science report. I got this color from this pot, but you cannot present this color as a concept of this pot, so somehow you have to do some magic. You know all these colors after you've discovered them, now you place these colors in one place. Where? Actually where this pot is on the paper, so this, that's a painting. Somehow you have to show this. If you skillfully show all these distinctive colors, some part, some part, some part, then somehow in the viewers head, go through the eyes, and recompose and some new level of knowledge, experience happens. However, we have to really grab the tail of this sneaky guy... See, like a haiku is an example "Old pond, frog jumps into, sound of water." This wasn't written when Basho was walking around a pond. Surely, he had this experience, but this Haiku came out at a Renga party. Lots of friends were there, and everyone was writing poem on same topic... "Old pond, frog jump into red forsythia... like that "Old frog, jump into water, sky reflect" like this, hundreds of them, based on one scene, finally Basho came out with his, and this said it! But imagine, endless variation, if this went on and on, then you lose the mind, you lose the track You know, all of us, think we are always thinking, but that doesn't mean we have clear concept. Completed concept... and sometimes we can't really distinguish.

Sometimes when you are painting, this part seems wrong or that part, and you try to fix it but can't...you cannot fix, no matter what you cannot finish the painting, this is because when you started painting you did something wrong or you were missing something from the beginning. So you have to go back and do another painting. If you started you're painting when your concept isn't finished or completed. You understand?

But sometimes we don't realize when the mind switches to the mechanical condition. Historically, this mechanical mind of meaningless things just occupies large space of life, of living space.

**Barry:** Some peoples whole lives...

**Kaji Aso:** So I must say, we didn't come to this world to waste life. Sometimes we believe we are doing but really we are doing nothing, like a Merry-Go-Round. Like music for instance: Sound is coming out, so it looks like music is going on, but, if stupid repetition begins, we ask, "How long shall I repeat the same thing?" Unless this

variation meets at another point and creates another form, or another thing. So variation just means repeating exactly the same thing.

**Barry:** I think it's a human hazard, you can get caught up in the process and lose the substance, even if you start with substance, you can get caught up and build this process around it and lose the substance. This goes for art, music, and thinking. Some people get so caught up in these thinking processes, and seem to torture themselves with the way they think.

**Student:** Does this mean everything needs to have meaning or purpose?

**Kaji Aso:** Meaning or purpose is not final point, the fact that a concept is to be established there is the purpose. Purpose, meaning, very often in our creativity is only motivation.

**Student:** So when we start painting we have a purpose which is our motivation?

**Kaji Aso:** The important thing is to have concept, for uniform human thought to be realized... Yes?

**Dojo:** Once before, a friend of mine, a composer, told me he was going to the Art museum to pick up some ideas for musical composition. I thought it was strange, to get ideas from painting? The reason he went to museum was because he didn't have any ideas for composition, for inspiration. I told him you don't have to do this. If you feel something beautiful – inspirational; if you see a flower – beautiful, maybe you get inspiration for music.

**Kaji Aso:** But inspiration, doesn't really exist. The moment when we have ecstasy, when we work very hard unconsciously to compose, when we experience it, and we pick up right element and we compose finally, this composition is done in head. So somehow you feel that someone gave you this, but actually you are the one who got this. You made it up...this moment you feel moment of ecstasy, this moment generally called inspiration.

**Dojo:** So I told him, "If he doesn't have any idea to compose, he doesn't have to compose. He can just have life and enjoy."

**Tony:** It is interesting to elaborate clearly. Individual art that is recognized as ideal art by society and individual art which is not recognized as ideal art by society, which is only recognized as value to the individual. You might have things here that are so fantastic or absurd and they make sense only to you, not to the rest of the world...

**Kaji Aso:** Okay, lets think about the word reason... reason... see here is a cup. There is reason for this cup to be a cup, and as far as painting, painting of any subject, as long as there is reason, like reason for existence, reason is public, reason is always public. So, personal experience is completely unique, but as far as you transform personal experience into certain media, in dimensional body or dimensional surface, already it is public. But it has to be done to be a painting, to be a sculpture, to be whatever, so this reason is the point. Let's stop and think about it.

The End