

Stuart Kandell, Ph.D.

The Older Artists of Sendai



A Selection of Six Profiles

Older Artists of Japan Study

During May 2017 American researcher, Stuart Kandell, Ph.D., studied a selection of 18 older artists in the Sendai region of Japan. They ranged in age from 60 - 88. Half were men, half women. They were evenly divided between professional artists (who had been practicing their art all their lives) and amateurs (who had begun practicing their art at retirement age). Most of the arts were represented: painters, calligraphers, ceramicists, actors, directors, playwrights, traditional dancers, musicians, and singers.

Kandell is studying the impact of arts participation in the lives of older adults thanks to a Fulbright Global Scholar Award. He chose Japan because of its "super ageing" population and ancient cultural arts traditions. He is studying the impact that the arts have (making a painting, playing an instrument, acting in a play) on the health, well being, social connections and cultural legacy of older artists.

The artists were observed creating, rehearsing, and performing. They were then interviewed for one - two hours on videotape and Kandell was assisted by translators. His research was supported by Tohoku University IDAC "Smart Ageing" program:

Motoaki Sugiura, MD, Ph.D., Professor

Beomjin Cheon, Ph.D., graduate student

Tokiko Oyama, 88

“I will dance until I die”



Tokiko Oyama is barely 5' tall and appears frail. That is, until she moves, speaks and sings. She is an internationally reknown Butoh dancer who has been dancing for 85 years. She began dancing at age 3.

“I could not stop dancing when I hear the music or Taiko. As a child I was thinking if I die as a dancer that would be fine. My mother and father were also Kabuki actors.” She went on to become one of the original students of Kazuo Ohno, credited with creating what is now regarded as Butoh.

“When I am dancing I transform into someone that I don't even know. That is the best part. I perform in America, Germany, Italy, Korea, China. In the different countries I met musicians and we did performances together and that was the best thing. At that time I felt happiest.” As recently as 2013 she toured to America to honor the victims of the tsunami and quake.

“The performance I did when I was young is totally different from the performance I do now. Physically it's down. Mentally, it's never changed. When my teacher passed away I couldn't use my legs and had to use a wheelchair. My teacher taught me that this table is the boundary from death and life. When I touch this table, I try to connect with someone in the death world. . . I will dance until I die. There is a reason why I continue dancing. That is because as I get older, I can dance as I am.”

Singer Seiji Kayamoya is from Okinawa. He owns a popular Okinawan restaurant on a busy street in Sendai, with four or five long wooden tables and benches, a wooden bar and posters of himself playing shamisen on the walls. Seiji does everything: he shops, cooks, and plays shamisen music for customers. He introduces Okinawan culture to people of all ages.

“It's been 32 years since I came here. I started a book on folklore. It is the history, culture of the island.” It sold out in his initial run of 1,000 and he is revising it. “Now I am compiling a dictionary of the old words. Some words I cannot translate into Japanese. I want to leave the language of the island.”

“I have a music class that I teach to Japanese, not young generation because they have a different culture. Mostly people my age. The people come here because they are longing for the old culture. In Okinawa there is still the old culture.”

“There are a lot of traditional events now in Japan and it is important to continue them. This is not only in Japan but all over the world. It is important to maintain the old culture. It is really important to connect the young generation and the older generation.”

Seiji Kayamoya, 66

Longing for the old culture



Shuji Ohno, 74

Waiting 50 years to paint



Housewife and mother, Shuji Ohno, had to wait half a century to paint. “At that time I was 58 years old. I found that after the children got married I had nothing to do. I decided to go to an art class in Sendai because I loved drawing since I was a little child. . . For fifty years I kept drawing as a memory book. But at 58, I learned the proper way to draw.” At first, she found it difficult. “Some people were in the class for more than twenty or thirty years and I was a beginner. . . The instructor was supportive. He said to me, You are really a brave person because I expressed my real feeling.” Now, almost twenty years later, she has “reinvented” her life as a painter. Her home is filled with her large acrylics and she regularly exhibits her work.

She grew up in Fukushima and her daughter was living there during the earthquake. “I wanted to express how terrible that earthquake was and Fukushima. I wanted to tell my opinion that I opposed the nuclear power plant. I want to tell that through my artwork. I was afraid if I didn't draw about the accident, many people will forget. That is why I decide to paint this topic.”

Three years ago, at age 71 she had her first commission, to draw a picture of students at a nearby school. “The children know me and I know them and we smile together. And that is a secret joy. I feel really happy because my artwork gave the children happiness.” She is now regularly invited to school celebrations and recognized by the students.

Theatre director Miki Kowa quit his job as a designer of Honda cars when he was in his thirties. "I decided I wanted to do something by myself that I could control. Creative and expressive things." He began to teach young people and eventually create musical plays, even though he had no experience in theatre or music. "In Hokkaido we did a play with the students. I was forty." Even though he had no experience, he believed in the student's potential and that it was "really important."

"When I was fifty years old I started to make music because the people who were supposed to do the music were ill, so I had to do it. I cannot play the piano or read music. I am writing the lyrics and record my humming. Because I am writing the lines and lyrics I have a vivid image of the music in my head, that's why I can do it. The people who can write the music help me."

Recently he fulfilled a dream of building a studio/performance space above his house. "The stage is open for all kind of people. It is not necessary to have special abilities. Everyone has the potential to be an actor or actress. And that stage is a kind of special place to be a hero or heroine."

Currently, he travels hours to rehearse a play about the tsunami with residents in a town that suffered greatly; teaches design at Tohoku University; and comes home to a "new" family with a one month old baby. At 65.

Miki Kowa, 65

Renaissance Man



Yasuko Sato, 66

“I want to have my own world.”



Like most women of her generation, Yasuko Sato had little time for personal endeavors while raising four children. As a 46 year old housewife she decided to take a class in Kabuki dance. “I had experience with dance in my childhood and I wanted to do it again.” Now, almost twenty years later she is performing for thousands of people.

“To learn traditional dance was beautiful and a fresh discovery. The shape of beauty is developed taking many years in this style. Japanese dance has a pattern, so we practice to reach the pattern. It is good exercise. Hard to make the beautiful shape. Hard physically. I feel pain somewhere. But you get used to it. Difficult to achieve.”

“I practice twice a week. After finishing it is a very good feeling. I have to use my brain to remember the order. I write the pattern at first to learn it. When I come back to my house I practice it immediately. If I don't do it the same day, I forget. The training is very hard. To perform you must take care of your body. No accident at all. Many people praised me. It is unbelievable! I didn't expect other people's praise.”

“My children were glad that I went back to dance. Because I have my own world. They wish that I have my own world. I still do my household jobs and chores and dance and my husband is very busy so he doesn't do anything at home. It is the traditional way of Japanese women. I am patient. It is good for happiness, for peace in the house.”

Atobe Kohsen has been painting most of his life. His paintings are everywhere in his house and studio, featured in exhibitions and in books about Japanese art. Though he no longer paints 40 hours a week, he still works in his studio and teaches at the University.

“I paint when I am touched or impressed. I create my emotion, passion or sensation into a painting. I never paint to please other people. It is not my purpose. I just paint with my inspiration and see if people feel anything from my work.”

“Beauty exists everywhere in the world. But you need to have sense of beauty to find, respect and enjoy it.”

“I paint because I love painting.”

“I always face a white canvas in my mind. I rarely draw my image on a sketchbook or on a piece of paper. Sometimes I sketch before I start painting on a canvas. But most of the time the white canvas is a sketchbook for me.”

“The most beautiful thing is the moment of sharing my feeling or emotion with a person I communicate. “I understand him.” “He understands me.”

“When I feel that, I am very touched. That moment is very beautiful to me.”

Atobe Kohsen, 81

Creating Beauty

