



The Japan Society Review is Back! After a hiatus of one year since our celebration of the 100th issue of the publication, *The Japan Society Review* returns full of energy and great content, featuring books on Japanese design, gardens and traditions, as well as literary fiction and contemporary music made in Japan.

The first review of this issue presents a survey of Japanese design as seen through the lens of Japan's traditional colour palette. Rossella Menegazzo's *Iro: The Essence of Colour in Japanese Design* provides a unique route to a deeper appreciation of the complex jigsaw of Japanese culture, colour and design cleverly contextualising the relationship of Japanese people with colour.

The following two reviews also focus on design and traditional culture, but approach them from very different perspectives. With instructive drawings and step-by-step techniques, *Inside Your Japanese Garden* by Sadao Yasumoro and Joseph Cali, walks us through designing and creating our very own Japanese garden. Using traditional

photographic methods, *Umui: A Journey Across Okinawa* by Everett Kennedy Brown takes readers on an immersive exploration of Okinawa, capturing the resilient spirit of its people and unveiling the unseen world that animates the culture of the islands.

This issue also includes reviews of two fictional works recently translated into English, *Dragon Palace* by Kawakami Hiromi, a collection of short stories by the celebrated author of *Strange Weather in Tokyo*, and *Finger Bone* a war novel by award-winning author Takahashi Hiroki.

We close this 101st issue with a review of the live performance of singer Yoshioka Nao at The Jazz Cafe in London in July 2023. Known for her expressive voice and charismatic stage presence, Yoshioka has been making waves in the music industry, recently releasing her latest single "Stuck Wit U".

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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Editor

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

Reviewers

Cameron Bassindale, Katie Croft, Laurence Green, Jasmin Lau, Renae Lucas-Hall and David Tonge.

Image from *Inside Your Japanese Garden*.

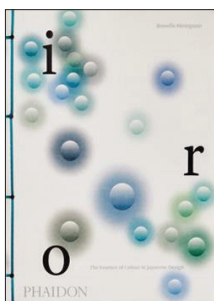
Iro. The essence of Colour in Japanese Design

by Rossella Menegazzo

Phaidon (2022)

ISBN-13: 978-183866533

Review by David Tonge



Rossella Menegazzo, the co-author of the best seller *Wa. The Essence of Japanese Design*, starts this book by asking us a simple question:

‘What colour is Japan. Is it red like the prominent circle of the Japanese flag, or the outlined lips and eyes of a geisha against her white foundation, the dramatic lines painted on a kabuki actors face, or the wood lacquers and pavilions in Japanese shrines?’

Simple questions often have complex and nuanced answers and as Menegazzo points out, when it comes to colour we all have an individual emotional response. For example, I am personally drawn to the deep indigo blue of Japanese dyes used in fabrics of all kinds and, if we are not being too picky about tones and hues, also in the prints of Hokusai. For many people however, it’s the muted monotone colours of Muji and the polished concrete greys of Ando Tadao’s buildings that do it for them. No doubt you will have your own favourites, a reminder of your connection with Japan.

From this insightful first chapter – ‘Chasing Ghosts, Traditional Japanese colours, from nature to design’ (pp. 5-9), we are taken on a fascinating journey of colour in the context of Japanese culture and history. Menegazzo explains how, as with many aspects of Japanese culture, the natural world is of fundamental importance to the creation, use and meaning of colour. How the kanji for colour – *iro* 色 – like many kanji has expanded its meaning beyond describing the colour itself, to include facial expressions, landscapes and aspects of sexuality and eroticism. And, how in the epic Heian period (794-1185) novel *Genji Monogatari* (*Tale of Genji*, c.1008) by Murasaki Shikibu, colour and nature were used in the names and nicknames of key characters.

It won’t be surprising to those who study Japanese culture to learn that complex rules were applied to the use of colour, as Menegazzo observes (p. 5):

‘No curtain, screen, ribbon, fan or piece of writing paper was chosen and used without considering the sophisticated and complex rules – inspired by nature – that defined its shape, material and colours..’

Through a whistle stop tour of the great periods of Japanese history – from Nara (710-794) up to modern day, we learn how each period had its own set of aesthetic rules applied to the appropriate use of colour as influenced by the prevailing cultural, political and social issues of the day. These, as in Western cultures, were led and practiced by those in courtly life and leadership. But we also learn how the practice of Zen philosophy and its focus on austerity, modesty and simplicity grew to become an alternative strand of aesthetics, ultimately leading to the tea ceremony and the practice of *wabi sabi* we hear much of today. This strand promoted the creation of colours such as the muted shades of green, brown and ash we might associate with the more urbane Japanese fashion brands of today.

From a designer view point, what I love about this book is that it puts Japanese people and their relationship with colour into sharp focus. For example, I have often wondered why Japanese companies use, from a Western market view point, what appear to be weak and often layered and gradated colours. Menegazzo perfectly explains this cultural phenomenon by pointing out the Heian period court practice of layering items of clothing to create a specific hue or gradation of colours connected social status, occasion, or season. These might be made of just two robes but could be up to 18 robes for a formal event. Quite apart from – how do you walk in that? – we can see 1000 years later the legacy of this practice in the use of coloured gradients used in modern day Japanese packaging, posters, products, and clothing.

Before we luxuriate in the beautiful photography and curated objects chosen to express the 200 carefully selected colours (pp. 10-273), Menegazzo leaves us with a handy and poetic shorthand for understanding the meaning and categorisation of Japanese colours – abundance and absence. Abundance are the colours which characterise the rich layering of colours, dyes and pigments as expressed through Japan’s rich history of the arts. And absence are the colours we might most associate with modern day Japanese design including neutral tones and black & white.

Its impossible to pick up this book without marvelling at the attention to detail, design and production quality that even the famously hard to please Japanese would be proud to own. Published by Phaidon and designed by Julia Hastings, *Iro* is a flexibound book with Watoji-style stitching and a fabric embossed cover. The French fold pages are printed edge to edge with a coloured gradient to

represent the colour being explained. The choice of folded pages becomes evident as you turn and look at the edge of the book when the spectrum of colours from *koubaiiro* (plum safflower red) to *koiro* (dark purple) and everything in-between is revealed to you. This, at least for me, acts as a key to where I might want to look next.

They say you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but in this case you absolutely can. It is part reference,

part coffee table book and part colour chip book – Menegazzo has even given us a spot colour index for each colour (pp. 274-283), in case you want to try it home!

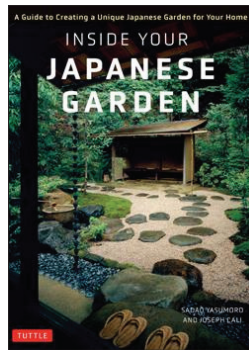
If you are interested in the complex jigsaw of Japanese culture, colour and design this book will be a great addition to your collection. §

Inside Your Japanese Garden: A Guide to Creating a Unique Japanese Garden for your Home

by Sadao Yasumoro and Joseph Cali

Tuttle Publishing (2021)
ISBN-13: 978-4805316146

Review by Katie Croft



I was introduced to Sadao Yasumoro in Tokyo a few months ago, when he gave me this book. On that day, he was directing work at the site of a new garden project in Naka-Meguro, before taking a group of us to visit some of his completed garden projects (two of which are featured in this book). Despite being in his 80s and with reduced mobility, he maintained enthusiasm, energy and a surprisingly wicked sense of humour throughout the day. Although I didn't mention it to him then, I was so struck by Yasumoro san's energy, passion and talent that I immediately decided to review the book for the Japan Society.

Sadao Yasumoro has been building gardens in the Kanto region for over 60 years, where he is a well-respected garden designer. *Inside Your Japanese Garden* was co-written with Joseph Cali, who is a graphic designer and author of works including *The New Zen Garden*. It is part instruction manual and part retrospective of Yasumoro's work, primarily written for private homeowners who may be looking to create their own Japanese-style garden, or for those who have an amateur interest in Japanese gardens. Cali's introduction includes an overview of key design and philosophical elements of the Japanese garden and gives some general advice on the approach to garden making. The book is thereafter divided into four sections. The first three sections illustrate gardens that Yasumoro has built, each case study analysed to explain different aspects of garden making: the garden

entrance; medium sized gardens; small gardens. The final section gives advice on construction of elements including various types of walls, paths, fences and stone arrangement. There are also detailed construction notes for making various features including *koshikake machiai* (a covered waiting bench), *dobashira* (earthen bridge) and *amigasa mon* (straw hat style gate).

Although this book is suitable for someone without any prior knowledge of Japanese gardens, it has not been oversimplified or dumbed-down. In fact, it includes a great deal of terminology and design features specific to Japanese gardens, and explains a few historical aspects in detail, such as the relation between the garden and the tea ceremony. Cali and Yasumoro admirably try to cover almost everything a person might need to know to build their own Japanese garden. However, it should be noted that detailed information about planting design and onward maintenance of gardens are not included, so if you want to read about pruning etc, this is not the book for you. On the other hand, if you are considering creating a new garden, or you want to understand more about the design approach of a leading Japanese garden maker, you are likely to find the information in here valuable. As Yasumoro is a garden builder, he includes a large quantity of practical information, which is one of the main strengths of this book. Although I can't claim to have read every book on Japanese gardens, many published in English tend to focus on explaining concepts or history over practicalities. Of course, depending on their interests, I expect that some readers would pore over the detailed construction diagrams for hours, whilst others would find them tedious and skip them immediately.

Throughout the book, the advice is solid but lightly given, without any labouring of 'rules' that must be adhered to, or pressure to hone particular skills in advance. In fact, Yasumoro's encouraging tone assumes that the reader is both willing and able to build their own garden, regardless of experience. As a

result, this book is accessible and light-hearted as well as inspirational. Despite the relaxed tone, there is a lot of information packed in from Yasumoro's decades of experience; and so whilst the reader can gain a lot in a few a lines if they are reading carefully, I have a feeling it would be easy to miss some of the nuance. Yasumoro doesn't always spell out specific design techniques and doesn't always explain the rationale behind his design choices. This may be frustrating to serious students of design but is in line with the traditional method of teaching through demonstration and observation,

with the expectation that you will find your own path by following the form. And actually, it makes for a more pleasant read. Finally, it should also be noted that some of the practical advice would be difficult to follow for those living in the UK where Japanese materials (such as volcanic soil, kawara roof tiles and fresh bamboo) are not readily available. However, as the first line of this book is: 'don't follow this manual,' I expect that Yasumoro and Cali would be as pleased to see their advice ignored as they would be to see it followed. §

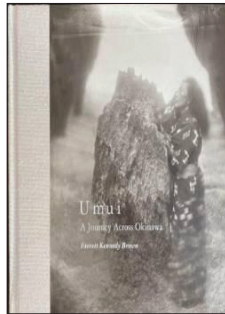
Umui: A Journey Across Okinawa

by Everett Kennedy Brown

Salone Fontana (2022)

ISBN-13: 978-4909860538

Review by Renae Lucas-Hall



'Umui is the soul of the Okinawan people. It is born from the ocean, land and sky and nourished in their music, dance and daily life.' (P. 2)

Everett Kennedy Brown is an American photographic artist, writer, and film producer and long term resident of Japan. His work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *Le Monde*, on CNN, NHK and is in permanent collections in Japan, Europe, and the United States. He has also been awarded the Japanese Government's Cultural Affairs Agency Commissioner's Award in recognition of his creative activities and his book was nominated and shortlisted for the Tadahiko Hayashi Award.

He uses the wet-collodion process to capture landscapes and cultural aspects of Japan. The collodion wet plate process was invented in 1851 by an Englishman, Frederick Scott Archer. It is a complicated method of photography which uses a large format camera on a tripod and a portable dark black room tent. The exposures are long, meaning the camera lens stays open much longer than an instant and the subject needs to pose perfectly still for several seconds or more so as not to distort the outcome. Brown can only take one photo at a time and he makes a glass negative on site using a highly flammable liquid gel. The results are extraordinary. He uses Japanese pottery and ink brush techniques to add his own personal touches to the glass plates (cut at the end) to create fascinating images which look like they were produced in a bygone era.

In this book, titled *Umui*, emphasis is on the unseen world that animates Okinawa. Brown's first

photograph on the front cover is an Okinawan woman in traditional dress leaning into a protuberant holy rock. She is standing with her eyes closed, deep in thought or prayer. This natural stone mass proudly sits in a cove at a sacred utaki a place where the *noro* (female shamans) come to pray.

From here, Brown makes his way to Kudaka, the most sacred of the Okinawan islands. According to legend this is the gateway to Niruyakanaya, the heavenly kingdom beyond the horizon. The shadows and contrasts in the photo taken here draw the eye towards this vanishing point where the sea blends with the sky. The ocean looks settled and inviting as if it is guiding the onlooker towards the home of the gods.

A wonderful example of Brown's ability to take a contemporary picture that looks like it is one hundred years old is the photo of the traditional Okinawan lady on page 12. She is dressed to perform a sacred dance but she is sitting beside the trunk of a twisted pine tree with flowers in her hair. Her face is composed and a feather-like shadow, caused by a chemical stain, is escaping from her gentle hands as if she were awakened by a celestial nymph guiding her towards an enlightened state. A similar smoky silhouette extends from the conch shell horns blown by two local men in the photo opposite. After this picture was developed, there was another mysterious chemical stain that looks like a dragon's tail.

'If there is no *umui*, then beauty is empty... without *umui*, all knowledge is contrived and meaningless.' (p. 14)

Brown was impressed by the essence of the Okinawan people. He would look deeply into their eyes as he photographed them. He was always in search of that enigmatic *umui* quality only the Okinawan people seem to truly understand.

'Umui is often understood as "thoughts" but the meaning is closer to the prayers and emotions that

well up in the heart... The women had explained to me that when they go into prayer, they enter a kind of heightened awareness, not unlike the Aboriginal Dreamtime, where they come into contact with their ancestors from the past and have glimpses of the future.' (p. 14 & 18).

The photographs of the five ladies on the beach in white robes on pages 21, 23 and 90 are marvellous. It feels as though one is hiding behind a tree watching a secret ritual not open to the public. They are in a trance-like state, completely unaware of the present. These photos capture the fine line between this world and the spirit land.

The next photo of Brown's friend in the sea is slightly different to all of the others. He accompanied his Japanese companion to the southern end of the island to a place called Yamakawa Utaki where the goddess of creation, Amamikyo, arrived after her first landing at Kudaka Island. When Brown took a photo of his friend in the shallows, he accidentally dropped the glass plate, smashing one part into small pieces. But he decided to salvage the broken image. The cracks in this photo are the reason it is unique and a wonderful example of the Japanese concept of *mono no aware* or the fragility of life. The resurrection of this piece is similar to the way a potter uses *kintsugi* or golden joinery to repair a broken ceramic. The philosophies are the same. There is beauty in the broken. One must embrace the transience in life, or *wabi-sabi*. After that bathing ritual, the two men head into a dark forest to a *utaki* where legend says Amamikyo set up temporary residence. It is a place Brown felt an inordinate sense of peace and tranquillity and the true presence of *umui*.

History and culture are evident throughout this book. Brown explains on page 44 how the *noro* shaman in Okinawa were considered superior and more powerful than any military force. These *noro* used to pray at an old castle called Katsuren-jo. The Okinawans believe the supremacy of the *noro* allowed them to welcome envoys here from other countries and parts of Japan with open arms, fine food, music, and dance. Brown's photo of the stairs leading up to this place of worship is transcendental. The crack in the middle suggests caution but the clouds above seem so alluring.

For Brown, Okinawan faces are cosmopolitan. Through the centuries, people as far away as India, Europe, and South-East Asia have made their way to Okinawa and stayed. The face of the true Okinawan is now a hybrid or combination of many lands. The photo of the Okinawa man on page 51 is a blend of various cultures with wise but amicable characteristics.

Brown's photographic journal is also a wonderful commentary on Japanese traditions. Like the rest of Japan, the Obon festival is a yearly celebration of the dead which takes place between August and September. In Okinawa, dances are performed with masks which are jovial and friendly, reminding the islanders of their ancestors. Brown's photos of these masked performers on pages 62 and 63 are mystical and enchanting.

Past traditions which have lapsed over time are now being revived in Okinawa and it is encouraging to see this photographer documenting this resurgence in cultural identification. Brown shows his appreciation for young artisans who are creating new fabrics using traditional banana fibre cloth. He also mentions and photographs an entertainer known as Kyotaro who dresses in outlandish clothes. He can be seen at their festivals and funerals chanting Buddhist prayers. The photo of Kyotaro on page 71 is utterly charming. Brown has captured his infectious smile and twinkling eyes with an evolved sense of sincerity.

Brown's glass plate images in this book leave a profound impression of what it means to be Okinawan and his text draws attention to the values and beliefs that influence their lives. When he meets an old potter in the traditional pottery district of Yachimun in downtown Naha, Brown is reminded of the Okinawan phrase "*nuchi du takara*" which tells us that life is more important than material possessions. Brown's photo of this potter drinking *awamori*, the local rice spirit, and sitting with his family on page 75 prompts us to appreciate life and to consider its brevity.

Brown's final image on page 79 evokes feelings of intimacy and a tender appreciation of nature. A rock wall in the shape of a love heart at a *utaki* at the southern end of the island appears like another gateway to the heavens. There is a little swirl of a chemical stain in the top right-hand corner of the image which looks like the gods are in the distance observing us but they're not too far away to touch our souls.

During his interview with Japanology Plus which aired on NHK, Brown said 'Japan for me is a long, ongoing and ever-deepening love affair. This country has offered me so much beauty, so many wonderful aesthetic experiences, and this journey is just forever continuing'. Brown's photos are stunning, timeless, and ethereal. One can only hope his words ring true so we can carry on our appreciation of his unique photographic process with more collections which capture a country offering us so much in return. §

Finger Bone

by Takahashi Hiroki
translated by Nieda Takami

Honford Star (2023)
ISBN-13: 978-1739822590

Review by Laurence Green



1942, Papua New Guinea, and the balance of World War 2 in the East is on the turn. The Japanese have been forced into a fighting retreat, and amidst this chaos, a nameless, wounded member of the Imperial army is left to languish in a field hospital. As those around him succumb one by one, the army doctor cuts off the index finger of their hand, in preparation to send the bone back home to Japan to the deceased's loved ones. And thus, from this grim moment, *Finger Bone* finds its name.

Winning the Shincho Prize for New Writers in 2014, before going on to win the esteemed Akutagawa Prize in 2018, Takahashi Hiroki emerges in this slim novella as an immensely promising talent within Japan's current literary generation, and is capably translated here by Nieda Takami, who conveys the prose with an elegant matter-of-factness that cuts to the heart of the novel's unwavering look at the futility of armed conflict.

Finger Bone mines a similar vein to much applauded classics of Japanese war fiction - Ooka Shohei's *Fires on the Plain*, in both its book and multiple film incarnations, immediately springs to mind. More broadly, the bleak cynicism and unrelenting realism of Takahashi's style also recalls *All Quiet on the Western Front*, so recently brought to the fore of public consciousness again in an Oscar-winning movie treatment. In all these envisionings of war, the authorial lens remains unerring in its ability to lock on to the brutal realism of conflict, both literal and internal.

Finger Bone is a war novel, certainly, but it is also a story of an individual man, and the lives of those that pass fleetingly around him in the worst of all possible circumstances. Takahashi's skill is to present the real with unflinching detail, but to offer just enough of our unnamed narrator's mind that we feel invested in a

character that could have otherwise felt too abstract to latch onto.

Much of this comes down to the tone of the piece - there is a cynicism in the unrelenting bleakness of it all, never overt, but always there just beneath the surface. To question the war would be unthinkable for these mere cogs in the Imperial machine, but even as the novella moves towards its final inevitable conclusion, we are presented odd vignettes of quasi-surreal weirdness that come to deliver the hardest emotional punches. It's there in the comparison of maggots to pieces of long-grain rice, the almost microscopic anatomical analysis of an eyeball hanging from a corpse - *Finger Bone* is a dark circus of torments, and certainly not one for the squeamish reader.

For a war novel though, there is surprisingly little actual 'fighting'. The violence offered is instead of a quieter, more unsettled kind; the Allied soldiers remain largely faceless, at a remove, replaced by the real antagonists of creeping disease, festering wounds and starvation. Our narrator's comrades depart from life - each death bringing with it an end to short dialogues that remind us that what we see here are only fractions of an individual; culled in war, any vestige of a life beyond the conflict lost beyond what they are able to tell us in the time Takahashi allows them to speak to us. They are merely puppets, both in the hands of the author, and the machinations of the Imperial machine.

Perhaps there is something to be found in the universality of the human condition in the face of war that draws authors to it time and time again. In *Finger Bone's* closing pages, and in its riveting cover art, a soldier weeps - and it is indeed impossible not to be moved by the unrelenting bleakness of it all. Tales of the War in the East are countless, but Takahashi's skill in his take is in stripping back his prose to the very essence of the human condition, cleanly and clinically delivering the descent of one man into mortal oblivion: what remains of life itself - the soul, even - when submersed into the full ugliness and pointlessness of war? §

Dragon Palace

by Kawakami Hiromi
translated by Ted Goossen

Stone Bridge Press (2023)
ISBN-13: 978-1737625353

Review by Cameron Bassindale



At the outset, I must confess to being a philistine when it came to Kawakami Hiromi, before I read *Dragon*

Palace. As an author she wasn't totally alien to me; I had read one of her works, *Strange Weather in Tokyo*. In that novel, Kawakami charts an unlikely romance between a former student and teacher in the bustling metropolis. It is one of several of Kawakami's works to be translated into English, being published almost exactly 10 years ago. I found it well-written, charming, light but it didn't quite satisfy my thirst. Thirst for what, exactly, I can't say. Being accustomed to the darker and

more cerebral aspects of Japanese fiction, I enjoyed reading Kawakami's smash-hit bestseller but had little desire to read her other works.

So then, when presented the opportunity to review *Dragon Palace*, I immediately began to imagine what kind of book it would be; tender and full of personal connection, love and loss. Well, I am pleased to report my expectations were thoroughly subverted. *Dragon Palace* is a collection of eight short stories, set in wildly different times and settings, which upon first reading have no discernible thread running through them save seemingly for the authors desire to unsettle and unnerve. As with any collection of short stories there are natural peaks and troughs, hits and misses, but overall *Dragon Palace* moves swiftly through one satisfyingly strange story to the next.

The first story starts on a timeless beach, our nameless narrator explaining in agonising detail the minutiae of his depressing life. His sorry situation is taken as a matter of course; without exception, the narrators in *Dragon Palace* have at the very least a core of loneliness and misunderstanding of the world they've been placed in. Then, this character meets a shape-shifting octopus. If reading that felt abrupt, then you will have some idea of how Kawakami melds the mundane and banal with the surreal and fantastic, to good effect.

This primes the reader for the second story, *Dragon Palace*, the most challenging of the volume. The translator, Ted Goossen, deserves a lot of credit for this story in particular. Phrases like "Oto-sama. We implore you. Please quell your anger" really capture the sense of Japanese folklore that Kawakami was aiming for. Without giving too much away, this particular tale concerns the sex-crazed ghost of the narrator's ancestor regaling her with bemusing and deeply depressing tales. While this may seem absurd, this is one of the most naturalistic stories in the book, in the sense that it doesn't feature form-shifting animals, as most of the other stories do.

More prudish readers may find Kawakami's preoccupation with sex in all its forms a little off-

putting, and truthfully this novel is not for them. Coupled with Kawakami's insistence on inserting animals into human skin, some stories are really not for the faint of heart. The following story, reminiscent of *Strange Weather in Tokyo*, explores ideas of sex, attraction and love between an elderly man-turned-fox and a much younger woman. As the story goes on, the sexual overtures only become more explicit and off-putting to some.

This too may not be the book for readers looking for neat, satisfying conclusions. Most of the narratives throughout *Dragon Palace* start and end quite abruptly, with a melange of fantastically strange scenarios in between. The more cynical reader with expectations of a more traditional narrative structure may feel a little short-changed with this book; Kawakami opts instead for narrow slices-of-life which admittedly is not for everyone. Those looking for a collection of short stories with a (semi) coherent narrative and a quintessential Japanese-ness might instead prefer *Revenge* by Kawakami's fellow female literary behemoth, Ogawa Yoko.

While this review has spent a fair deal of time describing those who this book isn't for, that is in no way to say that *Dragon Palace* isn't worthy of your time. Quite the opposite, this translation will be of interest to anyone with a desire to read something exceedingly unique. *Dragon Palace* is a challenging, dark, unsettling read; this has been well established. But it is also surprisingly deep and introspective. What on the first reading may seem contrived to shock the reader will on the second reading touch on essential human questions: "what is it to desire something", "what is it to be human?"

The final stories, 'Shimazaki' and 'Sea Horse', are a most satisfying pay-off for slogging through some of the earlier stories. Kawakami comes into her stride by the end of the collection, and finally strikes a balance which will resonate with the thoughtful reader. If you can dig through the rough patches of *Dragon Palace*, you will surely find what you are looking for within it. **S**

Yoshioka Nao Live Performance

at The Jazz Cafe
Saturday 1 July 2023

Review by Jasmin Lau

London is a city that suffers from a wonderful problem: too much choice - festivals and concerts abound, competing with the latest theatres, eateries and more.

Even then, The Jazz Cafe in Camden is the place for live music, seven nights a week. On 1st July, jazz enthusiasts gathered to witness a highly anticipated performance by the talented Yoshioka Nao. Known for her soulful voice and captivating stage presence, Yoshioka has been making waves in the music industry, recently releasing her latest single "Stuck Wit U".



The Jazz Cafe itself set the perfect backdrop for the night, with its intimate layout and cosy ambiance, creating an atmosphere that was both inviting and conducive to an enjoyable musical experience. With both standing space in front of the stage and dual layered balcony seating on the next floor, all guests were able to experience the music at its best, creating an intimate connection between artist and audience.

Before diving into Yoshioka's performance, it's worth mentioning the opening act by Allysha Joy. Joy's soul-infused melodies instantly captivated the audience, warming us admirably for the next act. Her smooth vocals, accompanied by a saxophonist, set the stage for what was to come. Her mellow energy and skill as a performer were evident, and it served as an excellent introduction to the night's main event.

As Yoshioka entered the stage, the crowd erupted with excitement, eager to experience her unique brand of music. Technical issues meant that there were a few moments of confused silence before the performance began, and the audience happily cheered again as Nao restarted, swooping off then sailing stylishly onstage.

The technical issues continued during the early part of the performance, causing some hiccups in the otherwise seamless production. Once resolved, Yoshioka truly shone. Her vibrant and charismatic stage presence breathed life into each song, making it hard for anyone in the audience to remain still. Nao's connection with her music and lyrics was evident,

as she effortlessly conveyed emotions through her powerful vocals. Her ability to switch between soulful ballads and up-tempo tracks was a testament to her versatility as an artist.

What truly set Yoshioka's performance apart was her embodiment of the music and engagement with her lively audience. She moved and grooved with such fluidity, captivating the audience with her energetic dance moves. It was clear that she was not merely performing but fully immersing herself in the music, creating an infectious energy that spread throughout the venue. Her enthusiasm was contagious, and the crowd responded in kind, dancing and swaying to the rhythm of her soulful tunes.

She continued to engage the audience through the night, dividing up sopranos and bass singers to create a funky singalong and get everyone grooving to the same beat. Between most songs, she chatted to the crowd, explaining her inspiration and intent behind the lyrics. A recurring theme was reaching out to those who feel alone and giving people confidence to do things their own way. Her band also all had time to shine during individual solos, giving the audience an opportunity to appreciate each element of the performance.

One of the highlights of the evening was Nao's rendition of her new single, "Stuck Wit U", bringing on special guests Blue Love Beats. The song showcased her vocal range and control, leaving the audience spellbound. The accompanying band provided a solid foundation, effortlessly complementing Nao's vocals with their tight instrumentals. The chemistry between Nao and her band members was palpable, enhancing the overall musical experience and leaving the audience yearning for more.

As the night drew to a close, the atmosphere in The Jazz Cafe was electric. Yoshioka Nao had successfully delivered a performance that showcased her immense talent and left a lasting impression on those in attendance. Despite the initial technical hiccups, her vibrant and embodied performance, combined with the venue's cozy layout, made for an unforgettable night of soulful music.

In conclusion, Yoshioka Nao's latest performance at The Jazz Cafe had its ups and downs. The venue itself provided an ideal setting, with its intimate layout and warm acoustics. Nao's active and embodied performance, coupled with her powerful vocals, brought the music to life and left a lasting impact on the audience. Yoshioka's performance at The Jazz Cafe served as a testament to her musical prowess. §