

Self-Making: Returning and Remaining

Written by Lynn Cornberg

“Precisely because I could not see them, they seemed to become transformed into something else, another type of existence which was speaking to me of many things. These calls from the night [from owl from moose] seemed to communicate directly something of the obscure mystery of life itself.”

(Michio Hoshino on a moose hunt with Catherine and Steven Attla, Athabaskan Indians living in Alaska's Interior)

I meet Michio Hoshino over a pancake breakfast at Sam's Café in Fairbanks - Alaska's second largest city. He's quiet and soulful. He smiles often and softly. His face shows happiness and surprise. He's an artist and wildlife photographer from Japan who makes himself, his art in Alaska. An Athabaskan fiddler, Walter Newman from Arctic Village introduces us. Walter and Michio have an idea for a book about Athabaskan Fiddle players in mind.

Michio lives in Alaska for many years with his camera and travels deeply the spirits of the people, the animals, tundra, taiga, rivers, lakes, ocean and mountains. He comes from another country where his mother and father saw him onto his first adventurous crossing of the Pacific at a young age. They trusted his life's work and way and they missed him. Michio loves living in nature beyond walls and through doorways.

He loves his warm tent and sleeping bag where he returns his tired lump of clay-body to re-fire his limbs and mindseye, to rest in the warmth of remaking himself, hardening again his form gone soft in order to crawl out of the tent once again. His perceptions and openness to the energy of the land, animals and people see him through the final doorway of life and death in the jaws of a grizzly bear. In 1996 a bear pulls Michio from his tent, mauls the limp clay of Michio's body and returns Michio to nature, in nature. Michio's remains are in

Japan and Alaska. His gifts of family, his life's work of photography - the maps drawn with words and light - remain with us. Michio's books and his images remain for our own meaning and connection.

In May of 1991, Alaska Magazine prints a story about Michio in which he offers, "We all die and go back to nature eventually. When we are in the city we tend to forget - we don't really think about it. But nature reminds us...It's not a sad thing. It gives us energy. Nature has a kind of power to encourage you to live because Nature teaches - you are going to die."

The other day in Taipei, having crossed the Pacific in the opposite direction from my birth family's home place in Fairbanks, I discover I have time to go eat a bowl of noodles in a neighborhood shop behind the University. I walk through narrow alleys toward the place I'm going until I come to a corner. I stop. I know I have been here before. I look to my right and think, "If I am where I think I am then the place I've been before is right over there through the trees." Sure enough, I discover I'm on the edge of the park where on the opposite corner is my favorite restaurant that I discovered long ago and haven't been back to in a long time. I walk to the restaurant's door knowing this is exactly where I want to be. The name of the place is Hui Liu and the English means "to return, to remain." The old pictographic character is a square-ish-spirial, a combination of an opening, moving square/ circle that comes apart and comes around itself always in a new place.

The owner are a married couple - Evan and Hsiao-Chen from New York and Tai Chung. Evan sounds Dutch, he's been in Taiwan for so long. He looks like a cross between a mountain climber, surfer and bodhisattva. Hsiao-Chen looks like a cross between a beautiful Tibetan Sherpa and my idea of a strong princess from the Tien Shan mountain range once upon a time. Evan is a potter. Hsiao Chen helps feed the kiln fire. I step in the door read his statement describing his work and process. He writes about the "nature of beauty and the

value of impermanence.”

I interview Evan. I want to talk to the artist, to the person creating and living his works. He means the flow between return and remain when we sit together talking about the name of the place where we are - Hui Liu. He describes his third rest day after firing the kiln for eight days and nights straight. He rests the first day going to hot springs; he rests the second day cleaning the house and now the third day he's seeing if there's anything to bake at the restaurant/tea house. He can't stay away from fire while he waits two days to open a cooling kiln. After 192 hours of his and Hsiao-Chen's attention and waking to feed the fire, he finds it difficult to wait. On the fourth day he opens the kiln to see what has happened.

Before firing twice a year, Evan goes to the earth and digs clay, mixes water, handshapes the mix into cups, bowls, plates and pots. He places the pieces in a wood fired kiln, in a transforming vessel that hardens, forms and paints color using both accident and control. Evan knows and values impermanence. He knows and values the remains of his efforts. Eight days of firing is like an endurance long distance race that requires grueling efforts to feed the fire every 6 minutes with a precisely weighed amount of wood. The chunked wood disappears instantly when thrown into the 1300°C degree fire. The potter, the wood tender, feeds the fire controlling what he can and letting go after that knowing that all can never be controlled. Like a woman who labors through pregnancy and birth for months, for hours, he knows not exactly what is there until the door letting light is opened.

A couple of weeks after he opens that kiln door, I return to Hui Liu to ask about the opening. Evan matter of factly tells me, “Well, there were disappointments...and there were some surprise...” He grins and finishes, “Just like life.” He presents both disappointments and surprises as the fruits of human effort. He cannot talk long. He heads downstairs to bake for he has a trip to Japan he is leaving for in the morning. I finish my lunch and say goodbye to him at the oven. I think of Michio's tent door. I think of these two artists and I

am thankful to meet others who live a soulful life learning naturally to live and let go.