

IMD 540 - Topics in Intermedia Theory/History

Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Aesthetic of Impermanence and Imperfection

Instructor: Nate Aldrich

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office hours: Thursday, 3:00 – 4:00 pm @ IMRC 126

Course materials are available for download at:

<http://nbaldrich.com/imd540-wabisabi.html>

The traditional Japanese notion of wabi sabi is both compelling and inscrutable for contemporary Western artists. In some ways oppositional to the Classical and, in particular, Modernist aesthetics, wabi sabi has provided a focal point for artists such as Andy Goldsworthy and Robert Smithson and for ideas from Arte Povera to sustainability and eco-art. This course will examine some tenets of wabi sabi and some of the currents it has helped inform today. Students can expect to explore these currents through readings, screenings, listening sessions and discussions. We will create a collaborative group project based on what we discover.

In particular we will to explore wabi sabi not simply through an historical-cultural perspective, but as a way of orienting creative and artistic work for us here today. How, and why, might the aesthetic and philosophical principles of an ancient Eastern tradition be incorporated by contemporary Western artists and thinkers in a meaningful way?

Please note: This is not a Japanese cultural history course. This is not a Japanese philosophy course. This is not a Japanese art history course. This course explores the native and Western perceptions and applications of a Japanese historical, cultural and philosophical practice and tries to understand that practice as it relates to contemporary art practices. Many of the ideas we will discuss are as integrated into the Japanese sense-of-self as “rugged individualism” is in the modern American. We will be tourists; hopefully reasonably well-informed tourists when all is said and done!

IMD 540 (Topics in Intermedia Theory/History) covers diverse, topical considerations of historical forms of Intermedia and related directions, such as Futurism, concrete poetry, installation, artists' books and multiples, Fluxus, sound art and environmental art. Although topics will vary from semester to semester all iterations will focus on giving

students an in depth exposure to historical periods or theoretical aspects of arts creation related to Intermedial forms. Emphasis will be placed on: historical periods, movements, groups and media forms related to Intermedia, an awareness of approaches and methods of historical research, and a consideration of theoretical or philosophical aspects of Intermedia. In addition to the historical subjects, these classes will consider a variety of related production, practical and process explorations that will help form the basis of a praxis model for Intermedia production.

How the grade is constructed:

1. Students will be assigned a series of readings to be completed by the dates indicated on the syllabus. These readings will provide stimulus for classroom discussions that will help us form the foundation for understanding the primary course content. Students will write a brief response (+/-250 words) to a quotation or quotations you have selected from the reading. This can be a response to any part of the week's assigned reading and ideally will provide an opportunity to focus on something intriguing, or perhaps confounding, and "think it through" via the written word. Consider this an opportunity to create a series of mini-essays.
2. Each student will, on several occasions as indicated on the syllabus, bring in objects for the class to observe and discuss. These objects should demonstrate in some significant way the students understanding of wabi sabi. Students will present the object to the class with a brief explanation about why this object was chosen.
3. As this course is at base a forum for the students to exchange observations about what may seem an elusive and inexact set of ideas and perceptions, *class participation is a major part of the class experience*. Each student's individual input into the class discussions will be a significant portion of the grade. Thus, attendance is also a vital part of the grading process.
4. The final project will be created by the group. Each student's robust contribution to that project will be the final component to their grade.
5. The instructor will be the arbiter of these different parts and how they construct the final grade. A letter grade will be assigned but that grade will be accompanied by a written evaluation of the students academic performance which will hopefully illuminate the reasoning behind the letter grade.

Please note: Any missed assignments may or may not be made up, through late submission or alternate assignments, solely at the discretion of the instructor.

About the readings and viewings:

We will read a variety of texts about various aspects of the wabi sabi tradition, its current incarnations, and its relationship with Modernism. We will use these readings to

help orient our discussions and observations about certain aesthetic and philosophical ideas. We will also engage a series of screenings and listening sessions, most of which will document Western artists whose work resonates in some way with the wabi sabi aesthetic and/or tradition.

About creating the final project:

We will, as a class, construct a group presentation resulting from the explorations and ideas pursued in the readings, viewing and discussions. This presentation will be in the guise of an Intermedial Tea Ceremony. The goal is for it to be a celebration of the contemporary manifestations of the wabi sabi aesthetic presented in a public form. We will engage the IMFA community with this Ceremony and share, for at least a brief moment, some of what we have gleaned from the semester.

Academic Honesty

Standards of academic integrity are expected of all students. These require that students never present the work of others as their own. Nor should the same work be turned in for more than one class. Violations will result in failing the class and other disciplinary actions. Academic dishonesty includes cheating, plagiarism and all forms of misrepresentation in academic work, and is unacceptable at The University of Maine. As stated in the University of Maine's online undergraduate "Student Handbook," plagiarism (the submission of another's work without appropriate attribution) and cheating are violations of The University of Maine Student Conduct Code.

Students with a Disabling Condition

Any student who, because of a disabling condition, may require special accommodations in order to meet course requirements should notify the instructor as soon as possible with appropriate documentation and meet with the instructor to clarify and arrange what is needed. If you have a disability for which you may be requesting an accommodation, please contact Disabilities Services, 121 East Annex, 581-2319, as early as possible in the term.

Religious Holy Days

If you expect to miss a class due to the observance of a religious holy day, you must inform the instructor, in writing, by the sixteenth day of the semester in order to make accommodations for exams or assignments.

Sexual Discrimination Reporting

The University of Maine is committed to making campus a safe place for students. Because of this commitment, if you tell a teacher about an experience of sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking, relationship abuse (dating violence and domestic violence), sexual misconduct or any form of gender discrimination involving members of the campus, your teacher is required to report this information to the campus Office of Sexual Assault & Violence Prevention or the Office of Equal Opportunity.

If you want to talk in confidence to someone about an experience of sexual discrimination, please contact these resources:

For confidential resources on campus:

Counseling Center: 207-581-1392 or
Cutler Health Center: at 207-581-4000

For confidential resources off campus:

Rape Response Services: 1-800-310-0000 or
Spruce Run: 1-800-863-9909.

Other resources: The resources listed below can offer support but may have to report the incident to others who can help:

For support services on campus: Office of Sexual Assault & Violence
Prevention: 207-581-1406

Office of Community Standards: 207-581-1409

University of Maine Police: 207-581-4040 or 911

*Or see the OSAVP website for a complete list of services at
<http://www.umaine.edu/osavp/>*

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8/29 Introduction – how this course will work; what's expected; readings, listenings and viewings and viewings; meet & greet: who are and why are we here (in this particular course, and perhaps in the universe at large).

9/5 Zen, Japanese Culture and the Wabi Sabi Tradition – We will discuss the readings and talk about the objects we have brought and how they reflect some of the ideas of wabi sabi.

please read: Zen, Nature, Art (.pdf download)

assignment: bring in an object that reflects wabi sabi *and* bring in a quote from the reading that seems important and be prepared to discuss why you chose to write about it.

9/12 Zen, Japanese Culture and the Wabi Sabi Tradition, con't – We will discuss the reading, and specifically the idea of the Tea Ceremony, and talk about the objects we have brought and how they reflect some of the ideas of wabi sabi.

please read: The Book of Tea by Kakuzo Okakura

assignment: bring in an object that reflects wabi sabi *and* bring in a quote from the reading that seems important and be prepared to discuss why you chose to write about it.

9/19 Wabi Sabi and Modernism - We will discuss the readings and talk about the objects we have brought and how they reflect some of the ideas of wabi sabi.

please read: Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers by Leonard Koren *and All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* by Marshall Berman (.pdf download)

assignment: bring in an object that reflects Modernism *and* bring in a quote from the reading that seems important and be prepared to discuss why you chose to write about it.

9/26 Poetry and Wabi Sabi – We will explore how poetry forms a foundation for the expression of wabi sabi.

please read: **Moment to Moment: Poems of a Mountain Recluse** by David Budbill and **13 Poems of Saigyō** (.pdf download) and **13 Poems of Richard Brautigan** (.pdf download).

assignment: come with a poem from the readings that strikes you and be prepared to discuss why you chose to write about it.

10/3 Music and Wabi Sabi - We will explore how the ideas of wabi sabi are present in some contemporary musics.

please read: **wabi sabi: the Japanese art of impermanence** by Andrew Juniper

assignment: bring in an image that reflects wabi sabi and bring in a quote from the reading that seems important and be prepared to discuss why you chose to write about it.

10/10 Fall Break

10/17 Rivers and Tides – We will watch the documentary about Andy Goldsworthy titled *Rivers and Tides* then discuss it in context of our readings to date.

please read: **In Praise of Shadows** by Jun'ichiro Tanizaki

assignment: bring in an object that reflects wabi sabi and bring in a quote from the reading that seems important and be prepared to discuss why you chose to write about it.

10/24 An Intermedial Tea Ceremony

assignment: Please come to class prepared to present ideas about what might be included in a Tea Ceremony that we will present to the IMFA community at semester's end.

10/31 John Cage and Robert Smithson – We will watch 2 documentaries; one about John Cage's work, *John Cage: A Music Circus*, and one about Robert Smithson's iconic *Spiral Jetty*. We will then discuss them in context of our readings to date.

assignment: Please come to class prepared to present where you are on your portion of the Tea Ceremony

11/7 Circling the Image – We will watch the documentary *Circling the Image* about filmmaker James Benning and discuss his work in the context of the readings to date.

assignment: Please come to class prepared to present where you are on your portion of the Tea Ceremony

11/14 Akira Kurosawa's Dreams – We will watch the great modern Japanese filmmaker's late career self-reflective film, *Dreams*, and discuss his work in the context of the readings to date.

assignment: Please come to class prepared to present where you are on your portion of the Tea Ceremony

11/21 Tea Ceremony Work Session 1

11/28 Tea Ceremony Work Session 2

12/5 Tea Ceremony!