

Crossroads

How to arrange 60 paintings in a Fushimi Warehouse

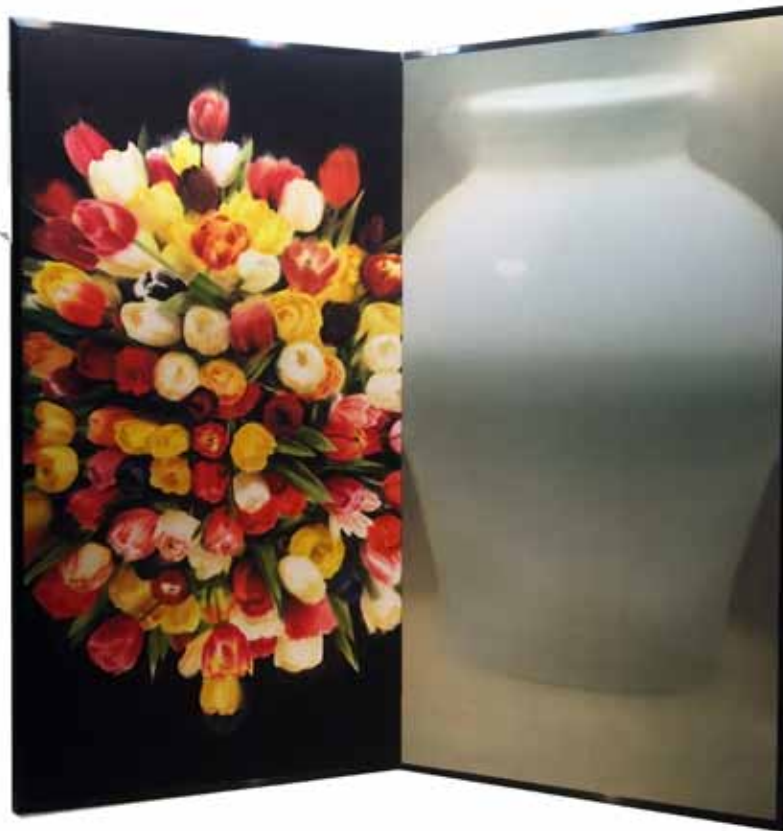
TEXT AND PAINTINGS BY JOEL STEWART



HYOTOKO-LEAF

FOUR YEARS AGO, I began work on an art installation piece that involved painting a broad variety of images ranging from realism to pop forms and abstractions, on door-sized sheets of washi and Western paper; having the paintings mounted onto Japanese folding screens, and then displaying the screens together in various formations. Prior to this project, I had already been working with individual screens

in a somewhat unorthodox way: instead of painting, say, a landscape, connected across several panels, I was treating each screen panel as an individual “canvas,” and combining different images and styles side by side on the screens. This installation, with its emphasis on the effects of combining several screens together, took that concept much further.



TSUBO-TULIP

The idea of juxtaposing screens to make a much larger work came to me by accident actually, when one day my 76 yr. old screen-maker, Fujita Masao, delivered three small-scale screens of mine to the studio. In his usual rush, he pulled them out of their boxes and stood them up in random order together for me to check. All looked well; I paid him and then saw him off. When I walked back into the room, I was struck by what I saw. The kaleidoscopic effect of all the imagery snaking around the room, coupled with the modular, sculptural presence of the three screens playing off each other was an epiphany for me. Not just one screen with varied images, I thought. Many.

I grabbed my camera, took photos, and stood there absorbing it. With the three screens working so well together, it didn't take much to envision ten or even twenty full-scale screens set up in a large space, creating a strange kind of three dimensional/visual world; something with far more impact and range than the individual works



THE 'EPIPHANY MOMENT' SCREENS

I had been making. The seed for the installation "Crossroads" was planted.

A couple of months later, I had photos of the screens in hand. A meeting with a museum curator in the U.S. yielded interest in my installation idea, and a museum floor plan. I calculated that 60 door-sized paintings mounted onto screens would be required for that particular space and also figured, optimistically, that making

them would take around two years. In July, 2010, four years after starting, I finished the 60th painting and had it mounted on the last of the screens by Mr. Fujita (who had graciously delayed his retirement for over a year to allow me to finish). Things take as long as they take, but the screens were finally done.

THE FUSHIMI SESSIONS

In October, 2010, I rented a large warehouse in Fushimi ward, southern Kyoto, for an entire month, with the intention of setting the whole piece up and seeing what it was capable of, testing out my ideas in relative privacy, before sending it (and images of it) out into the world.

“Landscapes”

The U.S. museum gallery had a 3,200 sq.ft floor space with a 20-foot ceiling and these dimensions factored heavily into my choosing the Fushimi warehouse space. I wanted initially to have most of the imagery on the floor, maze-like, but due to concern about screens being easily knocked over

(with a concrete floor, there were no means to secure the screens) I came up with an idea of using pedestals. Playing around with varying pedestal heights, eventually I became interested in using the vertical space as well. I was intrigued by the novel idea of positioning paintings as high up as 20 feet – something I’d never tried before. We built the pedestals using a modular design to stack them to adjust the height. Pedestals in clusters allowed me to create forms resembling abstracted rock formations and, using lower groupings, we created panoramic “landscapes” undulating across the floor space.

Stacked screens and the “Wall of Sound”

Several months before taking the work into the warehouse, playing around one day with small cutout photos of the screens, I began stacking them vertically into tower-like shapes. Somewhat totem pole-like and elegant, they seemed like visual conundrums to me and, after playing with the idea for a few days, I felt a strong desire to build these forms too. Coming up with a support system was a technical challenge, however. Not wanting to subject the screens to the weight of other screens placed on top of them, I designed a custom welded framework, but in the end budget constraints forced me to search for more economical readymade items. One day, noticing construction scaffolding at a friend’s house, I saw its potential, so I met with the builder and showed him my designs. He was confident that scaffolding could be used and agreed to help with the project.

A few days later it occurred to me that once the towers were complete, it wouldn’t take much more effort to connect the towers into a much larger “wall” shape. The result became nicknamed the “Wall of Sound.” At 60 feet in width, 20 feet high, with 40 door-sized paintings mounted on it, it presented yet another take on the idea of screens as visual structures.



JOEL AND THE FUSHIMI WAREHOUSE



THREE TOWERS



www.joelstewartart.com

TOP TO BOTTOM:
LANDSCAPE 1 – IN PROGRESS
LANDSCAPE 2 – FOREST
WALL OF SOUND





PYRAMID

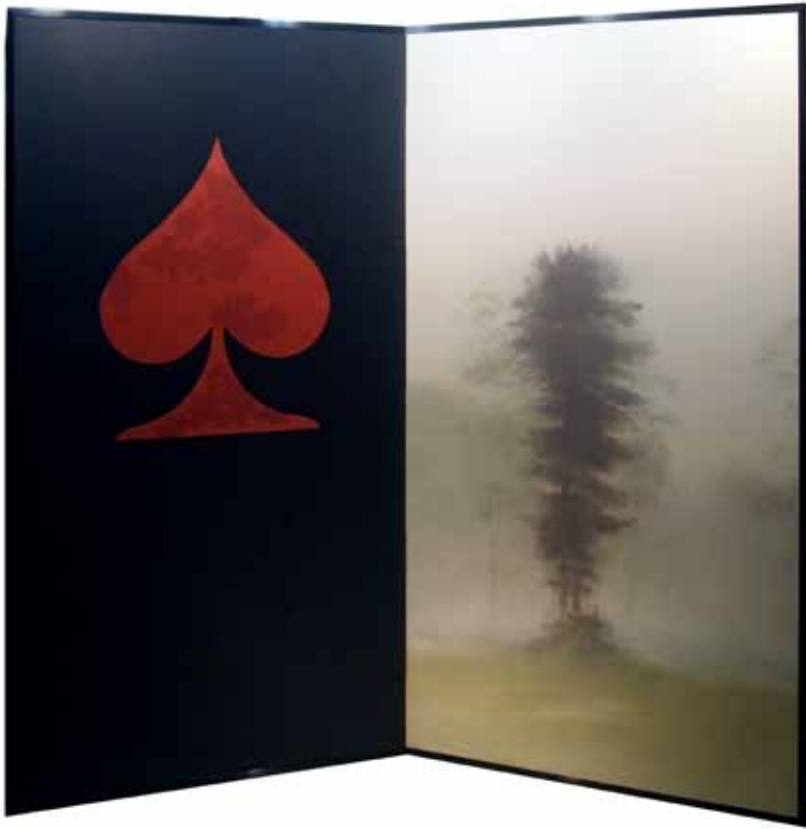
Pallets and the “Pyramid”

Towards the end of my month at the warehouse, the management offered a discounted extension of my rental contract. Having already used all of my resources, I had to decline their offer, with thanks. I was also spent energy-wise and needed to get back to trying to make a living with my art. The next day, while I was packing up, the manager dropped by to tell me that I could have the space gratis for another week. Sweet! I looked around and saw nine screens that weren't packed up, and in fact, I did have one lingering idea: I had noticed stacks of large wooden pallets in daily use at the warehouse. The repetition of form I saw in the stacked pallets attracted me from day one, so I sat down and sketched out a design that would employ the remaining nine screens using the warehouse pallets as my support structure.

The next day I spoke with the forklift drivers, showing them my design, and within an hour, we had two hundred 60+lb wooden pallets stacked in a staggered pyramid-like shape at the far end of the nearly vacant warehouse space. I set up the last nine screens on the pyramid and took the final photos of the Fushimi sessions.



PYRAMID, ANOTHER VIEW



TREE-SPADE

ON COMBINING IMAGERY

One common theme in my work has been the mixing together of visual languages. Abstraction, realism, decorative patterns, etc. all fascinate me and finding ways to combine them has occupied most of my time as an artist. Before I began working with screens, I tended to mix these stylistic elements together within a single painting.

Screens changed how I saw these relationships. The physical “separation” of the individual panels (though still connected by paper hinges) gave me the idea of combining seemingly disparate imagery together side by side. This freed me to combine images together in new ways. I could now develop each painting on a separate, temporary panel, which allowed me to paint freely, only deciding later which works were to be mounted side by side on the screens. Laying several finished paintings out on the studio floor, I would often find unexpected combinations I couldn’t have planned in advance. This method of creating and later assembling my images kept

things interesting and fresh for me throughout the project.

Creating “Crossroads” was an immense experience and hugely gratifying. What I set out to do – taking both the visual as well as the sculptural/architectural aspects of the screens and amplifying these inherent qualities – led to a number of interesting large-scale forms. I don’t think I’ve reached the end of the possibilities either. I’m not sure I know what these forms “mean,” or if there even needs to be “meaning.” My usual way of working is not to question the impulse, but to follow through and just keep going as far as I can. The impulse is what keeps things alive for me. I see now that this is a piece that can contract and expand, depending on where it’s shown and the support materials used, and I look forward to siting future iterations of it in a variety of spaces.

–Joel Stewart



JOEL WITH FUJITA MASAO